

PATRIMONIO CULTURAL Y SOSTENIBILIDAD

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Patrimonio cultural y sostenibilidad

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CAPÍTULO SEXTO

MUSEUMS NOW. COLLECTIONS AS GOALS OR AS MEANS?

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Artículo de investigación a partir de la conferencia “El arte de olvidar”, impartida en el seminario de debate y profundización “Patrimonio cultural y sostenibilidad”.

RESUMEN

Este capítulo parte de la pregunta sobre cómo integrar en una misma noción los grandes museos como el Louvre y

-
- 1 (La Haya, 1955). Arqueólogo clásico de formación, estudió y vivió en Ámsterdam y Roma (Ph.D. 1987). Trabajó como diseñador gráfico y como productor en televisión pública. Se ocupó en los asuntos públicos nacionales del campo de la arqueología y fue miembro de la junta ejecutiva del Museo Nacional de Antigüedades, que lo inició en su carrera como asesor cultural independiente en 1998 (Gordión), prestando servicios a numerosas instituciones privadas y públicas de patrimonio cultural y del Gobierno, tanto en los Países Bajos como en el extranjero. Desde 2011 es profesor de tiempo parcial de Patrimonio Cultural en la Reinwardt Academie. Además ha sido y es miembro de la junta de varias organizaciones culturales (mediados de los años noventa: presidente del Foro Europeo de Asociaciones Patrimoniales) y movimientos sociales, así como consejero gubernamental municipal, provincial y nacional. Los museos participativos, los estudios de memoria, los movimientos culturales de base y la creación de lugares han sido algunos de los principales temas de sus proyectos de investigación y docencia, también en el extranjero (Moscú, Bangkok y Hangzhou). Le gusta viajar, tocar música clásica y cocinar platos mediterráneos.

los pequeños museos como el Museu da Maré, un museo comunitario de una favela de Río de Janeiro, pues es claro que lo local ha cobrado importancia en la definición y conservación del patrimonio. En efecto, los museos locales cumplen funciones sociales, como el empoderamiento y participación de las comunidades, que muchas veces están por fuera del alcance de los grandes museos. Sin embargo, la tensión universalidad / localidad se mantiene como una fuerza que da vida a los museos y configura un contexto actual en el que estos encaran problemáticas comunes: ser consistentes con la misión museográfica en un entorno donde se instauran también valores e intereses económicos; capturar al público en la era digital; seleccionar dentro de las colecciones piezas con la que se puedan narrar nuevas historias; o revitalizar las colecciones presentándolas de una forma novedosa.

Palabras clave: museo local, empoderamiento, participación.

ABSTRACT

This chapter starts from the question on how to integrate into a single notion the great museums such as the Louvre and small ones such as the Museu da Maré, a community museum in a favela of Rio de Janeiro, because it is clear that the local has gained importance in the definition and conservation of the heritage. Indeed, local museums perform social functions, such as the empowerment and participation of communities, which are often beyond the reach of large museums. However, the tension universality / locality remains a force that gives life to museums and shapes a current context in which they face common problems: be consistent with the museum mission in an environment where economic values and interests are also established; capture the public in the digital age; select within the col-

lections pieces with which new stories can be narrated; and revitalize the collections by presenting them in a novel way.

Keywords: local museum, engagement, participation.

Anyone is familiar with the notion “museum” — yet it encompasses a wide and wild variety of institutions, in form, shape, size and function. How can it be that the Louvre, the undoubted icon of all museums in the world, is as much a museum as a small, activist space in the slums (favela) of Rio de Janeiro, bearing the name of Museu da Maré, one of the city’s largest low-income informal neighborhoods?² This is the theme I wish to explore. I will do so by taking two steps: what are museums nowadays up to and how do they respond? We will see that behind the looking glass, there’s actually two types of museums — we will be discussing what they are and how they interact in terms of the manner in which they negotiate their collections.

The most pressing issues museums are presently facing, worldwide I believe, is how to remain (or become) relevant to today’s society. I distinguish three sides to that question: how to remain true to its mission in an era that is by all means impregnated with economic values; how to deal with new generations which we assume are only interested in things digital —and nothing else; and how to transform from showing entire collections to selecting and contextualizing— thus engaging in the art of storytelling.

The quest for museum relevance was best articulated by Nina Simon, in 2010, with her seminal book *The Participatory Museum*. If anything, it taught the museum sector how important it is to engage with visitors, or rather, have visitors engage with each other, the museum and indeed today’s world. Her second book, from 2016, entitled *The Art*

2 <<https://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-entertainment/favela-museums-museu-da-mare/>>.

of *Relevance*, makes this point even more clearly: it's perhaps not so much the institution as the processes it creates that makes a museum a helpful tool in enabling people to engage in meaningful observations, responses and actions. Thus, a gradual transformation can be noted, for those who watch keenly, from visitor to user to owner (Zahava, 1999). This realization is not unique to museums, but part of a much broader societal trend in the arts, culture, politics and society... towards participation. The many questions and issues this trend raises do not belittle its significance³.

A second landslide development affecting museums is the discovery, since Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2017), of the economic fallout of a successful museum, or any cultural institution. The explosive economic boom of the sleepy coastal harbour of Bilbao, in Basque country (Spain), in the wake of Frank Gehry's spectacular titanium-clad design for a branch of the Guggenheim Museum of modern art (1997), convinced many other sleepy cities, coastal and non-coastal alike, to try their hand. Increasingly, museums are expected to bring in hard cash, to boost regional economic development, and to serve as the catalyst for large-scale revivals of many sorts. The harsh reality, alas, is that what worked in Bilbao does not have to work automatically in, say, Reggio Calabria, where a Saha Hadid museum project 'Regium' is stranded since 2009. Florida himself, to fact, in a post script in the reprint of his 2002 book, regretted his generalization (Florida, 2017). Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. So much for optimism that sexy architecture plus culture will fix things quickly. We are curious to see how the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, opened only last November, will do in this respect⁴. The variables in the equation

3 <<https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/05/11/participatory-practices/>>.

4 <<https://www.stripes.com/lifestyle/as-louvre-abu-dhabi-premieres-many-debate-its-true-purpose-1.499064>>.

are different, now, however. The Emirates are all but sleepy and backward — they just want a new, more sustainable basis for their fossil oil-based industry, and hope to find it in a combination of culture, education and intercontinental transport. But still all eyes are on a trio of Bilbao-like mega museums by international star architects — Guggenheim, Louvre and Zayed National Museum⁵. A slightly different but still well comparable expectation is the one weighing down on many newly opened museums in China's metropolises. Out of the understandable fear that "Thousand Cities show One Face", it is from museums that municipal and provincial authorities expect a sense of place to be generated. Museums should give the anonymous supercities their profile, their DNA. My point is here that I am not so sure that museums are doing well to live up to those economic and marketing expectations. It's difficult enough to take reasonably good care of your collections and at the same to provide your visitors with a satisfying experience — not being bothered by the agendas of much larger stakeholders that have nothing to do with your core business, or not arguably so.

An altogether new development, since the last two decades, has been the advance of the digital. Many museums are struggling with the wish to connect with the new generations in terms of being, or becoming, "digital". If only... all our collections were on line, if only... everyone would have iPads to access our immensely rich background knowledge, if only... all our objects in the exhibition halls could be digitally contextualized so that people would easily understand what they were for... The fact is that opening the digital realm for museums hasn't had the groundbreaking effects everyone hoped for. If anything, the digital revolution im-

5 <<http://www.saadiyat.ae/en/inspiration-details/1/Saadiyat-Cultural-District>>.

pacted on social reality, creating a novel, hugely popular dimension in which the subject became the object —the Age of You⁶— while lining the pockets of tech giants like Google and Facebook. I know of one spectacular exception, where a museum successfully turned to the digital, creating a huge following. The Rijksmuseum (national museum) in Amsterdam opened up its collection by pushing high res images of 325,000 objects on its website Rijks Studio, free of rights and any restriction⁷. Indeed, the website visitor is invited to download, cut, combine, re-use and create at will — much to the shock of many of the Rijksmuseum’s colleagues. It’s a runaway success, following from the museum’s mission “to bring art to as many people as possible as closely as possible”. The logical end is that visitors become users and, ultimately, owners.

To end this quick overview of the changing museum landscape it’s necessary to point to a last important trend: storytelling. Museums have come a long way from being systematic, typochronological showcases of material culture aiming at completeness — a collector’s delight. While some such presentations may still exist, e. g. in archaeology where classifying and dating finds are still paramount, there have been interesting alternative solutions. The refurbishment of one of the world’s oldest public collections, the Capitoline Museums at Rome c. 1470s, led to novel ways of presenting. Mixing ancient marble statuary with recent industrial heritage (in the revitalized Montemartini Power Station) turned out to underscore the classical sculpture in a most surprising way⁸. Obviously, this only worked on condition of a strict selection of works and museographical settings — story telling, in other words. Such “choreo-

6 <<http://time.com/4586842/person-of-the-year-2006-2016/>>.

7 <<https://mw18.mwconf.org/paper/rijksmuseum-mobile-first-redesign-rijksstudio-the-new-rijksmuseum-app/>>.

8 <<http://heritagetimes.eu/centrale-montemartini-machines-meet-gods/>>.

graphed" presentations are principally different from their "complete" forerunners, not a gradual variation⁹. It's about narratives, not about just showing.

Two more examples may help to better understand the impact of these trends. Relevance is being created whenever a museum's subject connects with its location. "Located-ness" is a quality that gives an institution a *raison d'être*, urgency and logic. A neighbourhood museum dedicated to urban architect Van Eesteren, recently opened in a post-war city extension of Amsterdam, offers a good example¹⁰. It shows and recreates the early 1950s design and layout of a suburb that was developed using utopian, modernist principles of light, space, air and green. For some time housed in an authentic 1950s former school, it takes visitors on city walks: the suburb itself is the museum. Another example of creating relevance is the idea of inviting members of the public to bring in their *DIY*, home-made art works, in the The Hague Municipal Museum (Gemeentemuseum). It announced each year a different theme and sought out home-grown artists across the nation. Various lay and expert juries decide, in many rounds, on the selection of 10 percent of the over 3,000 works of art submitted. Since 2010, it makes every year an extremely interesting exhibition during the summer period when there is no other scheduled show. ZomerExpo, as this new participatory practice has been named, has been a widely followed exemplar of dissolving boundaries between formal and informal, institutions and society, layman and expert, amateur and professional¹¹. In a different way, the Palazzo Strozzi museum in Florence, Italy, crossed a similar boundary in search of relevance. In 2007, in a show on Impressionism, it decided to not

9 <<http://www.kossmanndejong.nl/en/project/de-narratieve-ruimte/>>.

10 <<http://vaneesterenmuseum.nl/en/home-en/>>.

11 <<http://zomerexpo.nl/en/>>.

only give factual information in the labels explaining the works of art ("Paul Cézanne, *Bathers*, 1894, oil on canvas, 50-60 cm"), but to also focus on their social and emotional impact by adding, in the label, selected visitors' comments ("What a sad man, on the right", girl, 11 years old). What makes art worthwhile is its human significance, which is social, personal, societal, emotional. In our age of You, it's a good idea to make that visible, if only to be able to reflect on it. Otherwise museums are bound to quickly lose their significance.

The notion of museums' relevance in terms of "located-ness" is nothing new. In the 1970s, a museum revolution occurred. Amongst many other things it was the result of reassessing the importance a museum could have in terms of the services it delivered to its immediate context. The écomusée, as it was called, a brainchild of famous ICOM president Hugues de Varine, turned out to be an inspiring idea: "focussed on the identity of a place, based on local participation and aiming to enhance the welfare and development of local communities" (Wikipedia). It quickly spread, especially in France, Spain, Italy, Portugal and South America. Reinwardt Academy's first Master student, the later prof. An Laishun, wrote his thesis on it and brought the concept to China¹². Opposed to this localized notion of a museum's significance there is the idea of a universal museum. Having disappeared from public discourse, it was spectacularly reborn in 2002. In a letter to the editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, 18 museum directors presented a manifesto on the "importance and value of universal museums"¹³. Among them were the Big Five (Louvre, British Museum, Metropolitan, Berlin, Hermitage). The context

12 See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23339812?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents>.

13 <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1039660114241762793>>.

was a renewed appeal, by the Greek ministry of culture, for the return of the Elgin/ Acropolis marbles. The declaration comprised an important line of thought, mostly covert but now articulated in all its blatant neo-colonial logic. In its briefest form:

We took care of many foreign objects for a long time, which entitles us now, since they have become local. Isn't it true that it was museums that caused ancient civilizations to be preserved? In this way, we have served Progress and we intend to keep doing so. The reason was and the result is that we are about excellence, which can best be appreciated by comparing many works of art with one another. This makes us universal, and this is our strength. Returning objects would make our collections less diverse, and would harm our visitors.

It's not difficult to plot opposing qualities of both types of museums, with a bit of rhetoric even bringing them back to the classical controversy between Plato and his pupil Aristotle, on being versus becoming. The list, in fact, is a fair echo of Gail Anderson's famous juxtaposition of the Traditional vs. the Reinvented museum (Anderson, 2004, 2012). These are building blocks of an awareness that characterize, since the 1970s, the need to innovate the museum as a social institution.

When thinking about which museums belong where, it is curious to note that not all universal museums are necessarily very big, nor all "localized" museums small. Teylers Museum, a small Enlightenment institution (1774) in the Dutch city of Haarlem, is a true universal museum: when founded, it was meant to collect "the world". On the other hand, the largest ethnographic museum in greater London, the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill, as well as the Brooklyn Museum in New York, both show and interpret their collections strictly in terms of relevance to local populations and communities. It's not what you have that makes you

behave in a certain way. It's what you chose to do: being predominantly defined and focused either on your collection or on the processes, that is on what you do through them with your audiences. The point here is also that not many institution are always exclusively one or the other — in various respects they may show different faces at the same time.

COMPARATIVE CHART 1.

Universal	Localized
encyclopedic	single / few purpose(s)
can be anywhere	localized
representing the world	about context
art + science + (cultural) history	people, places, genius loci
high culture, the best, canon	the everyday, common, heritage
objects	process
transmission	participation
power	empowering
being	becoming
what you have	what you do

Bibliographic source: own elaboration.

This twofold nature of museums, with the challenge of striking a balance between being collections based and process based, was the subject of the latest Unesco deliberation in the field of culture. After a relatively short period of gestation, it adopted in 2015 a Recommendation to all 196 UN member states, on the protection and promotion of museums and collections¹⁴. Against the background precisely of a fierce discussion on (neo)colonialism in culture and the

14 <<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/>>.

“theft of history”, the Unesco members were able to stress the fact, surprisingly on (intra)governmental levels after the professional community had adopted such a stance decades earlier with the Santiago de Chile Declaration (1972)¹⁵, that it is important to acknowledge the social role of museums. Their aim can never be only to amass objects, but they have to apply them in term of de development of society — to enable social change, in the direction of a more inclusive, just and sustainable society. The interesting fact is that with this Recommendation (one step short of a Convention), a previous exclusively cultural subject —museums— is liberated from its disciplinary bounds and entered into an unmitigated political arena. Where, I think, it sits well.

I hope to have made it understandable and appropriate to call both the Louvre and the Museu da Maré in Rio de Janeiro “museum”. The former may still appear unadulteratedly universal, without any care but for high culture, but its UK brother, the British Museum, now addresses gender and sexual diversity in an LGBTQ history trail as part of its permanent expositions¹⁶. It takes its visitors seriously, thereby committing itself also to the process, not only to the collection. Likewise, the Museu da Maré, focused on having visitors engage with representatives of the favela who use the premises as an action space, is slowly also forming a collection, as a residue of its own history, short as it may be (2006).

In this light it is interesting to note that outside ICOM and Unesco there are many “para-museal” developments that do not fit in well with a strict European conceptual museum framing. Outside Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, I recently visited Wat Kantra Prieska, a Buddhist temple

15 <file:///C:/Users/Riemer/Downloads/1640-1-5707-1-10-20101026.pdf>.

16 <http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/July_2018_Desire_Love_identity.pdf>.

in Mae Kampong village¹⁷. People donate objects to the temple that are out of use, but also for borrowing. An open storage exhibiting both art objects and everyday life objects turns them into collective community belongings. Such interdependency is thought to be auspicious for the community. A perfect example of flipping around an often asked question “How to establish community groups to support a museum?” into “How to use museum functions to support community groups?”.

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17 <https://mychiangmaitour.com/baan_mae_kampong/>.

Este libro aborda —a partir de estudios de caso— problemáticas propias de la sostenibilidad de las instituciones culturales, para identificar oportunidades de mejora, reconocer que el sector genera bienestar y contribuir en temas cruciales como la innovación, la libertad de expresión y la preservación de la memoria. Con este propósito, todos los capítulos sitúan a las instituciones culturales dentro de un marco especial que reconoce el valor simbólico, educativo y retributivo de las propuestas productivas (de servicios) que ellas generan para la sociedad en general.

En conjunto, esta publicación presenta avances y resultados de investigación que buscan fortalecer el campo académico y disciplinario de la museología en la región e incidir en el ámbito profesional dedicado a la gestión del patrimonio cultural.

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