

# *A Contribution*

## *to Understanding of Museums: Why Would the Museums Count?*

The experts should know how to anticipate the questions that the users of museums, be it present ones or the future ones, might pose. One should bear in mind that non-users are often in the situation to decide upon the future of museum profession and priorities among its aims. They can do it as taxpayers in different functions in the society, or they can do it as the consumers of our products. Museums fail to explain their role in the contemporary society to their respective communities and, one might claim, have difficulty themselves to understand it. In the situation of the speeding change and implosion of value systems, museums are rarely successful to prove their "rentability". To anticipate questions, answer them, assure quality of services and plan their future, they need a theory. So, museology appeared when first questions about appearing profession started to be posed, i.e. some hundred years ago. The astonishing rate of growth in the museum field in the last fifty years, gave it further importance.

As the part of an established culture, museums are rarely the object of public questioning which allows them in their functioning to rely upon (conservative) traditional public or on the rather arbitrary estimates of what is needed from them. Of course, "the needs" would refer to how they perceive their role in serving their community. The feedback is often lacking or ignored. More often than is thought, museum professionals are inapt to deliver the usable product. That is the consequence of low understanding and motivation in their own profession. Approaching relative autonomy that comprises market logic and competition, museums find themselves in a vulnerable and delicate position. The almighty stale administration is a retreating boss.

# The Usual Misconceptions of the Professionals

## Museums are Scientific Institutions

The best, (the biggest and the greatest by their collections, experts and funds - are. The rest are not. But ~~those~~ have, nevertheless, an obligation to follow ~~the scientific standards and be faithful~~ to the unbiased truth. With ~~the dynamic fluctuation of experts and easy communication due to the new technologies and new channels of collaboration~~ - (the sole obstacle to ~~the museum research activity~~ remains usual lack of finances. But, ~~to be very clear~~, museums as majority are communicational institutions ~~founded upon scientific standards~~.

## Museums are About Past

Yes, ~~but only to bring it into the present and future~~, with some sound reason. In fact, they are always about present and how the present sees ~~the past~~. ~~The advanced museums speak about present using the past~~.

## Museums Should Stay Away from the Problems and Dilemmas of Today

Just the ~~contrary~~. The world of today is burdened with problems, which are extremely dramatic and deal with the issues of survival of human kind. There is no historical distance as the luxury of ~~past~~ functioning of museums. We take risks by ~~getting insight~~ into the present and by ~~comparing it to the inherited experience~~. But we do not give in museums ~~final answers nor we judge options~~: we only honestly talk about ~~them~~. One may apply to ~~their position~~ the modern saying: if you are not part of the solution, you must be part of the problem (which indeed is ~~the case~~, if ~~the museums affirm by their attitude~~ the political and social passivity).

## Museums are not Political Institutions

Yes (they are, if understood properly. The role of social and political outsiders ~~cannot be the position of good~~ (which is inherent in their invention) nor can it help ~~their flourishing~~. Excluded from social, cultural, economical and environmental strategies, museums become irrelevant, therefore unnecessary. The long-lived servitude of museums to the dominant forces of any society is to be blamed for their relatively low profile in the life of community where they exist.

## I Museums are about Positive Values

If they want to be educational or even to be regarded as a source of relevant wisdom, they better be able to speak about the dark side of their objects and themes (oo. Ignoring the existence of evil, they deny it, and join those institutions and individuals in the society whose main aim is ~~manipulation of people's mind~~.

## Museums are There to Tell the Scientific Truth

What is meant, usually, is ~~to tell the final and indisputable truth~~. Well, the name of ~~the one~~ is the Absolute, and ~~whatever that is~~, it does not live either in the museum or in school and, almost as surely, not in the temples. To be more precise: museums are ~~there~~ to pose questions disregarding whether ~~they would endanger any power structure or position~~.

## Museums are the Institutions of Knowledge

Of course, the knowledge is an ~~ingredient of their rich complexity~~, but far from ~~being~~ their substance. ~~Knowing facts, truths and principles~~ is an obligation of museums. ~~Transferring it is another business~~, that of educating, whereas ~~doing something with the knowledge~~ is still further from ~~the passive knowledge producer~~. As ~~to the knowledge~~, museums can ~~not stand the comparison to any institution from the knowledge industry~~. But, correctly understood, museums are, although knowledge relevant, something else: ~~the active knowledge~~. The abundance of knowledge does ~~no teach men to the wise~~, whereas ~~the teacher should be the ultimate~~ (however seemingly imprecise) purpose of museums.

## The Misconceptions of the Laymen

### Museums are Money Spenders

The truth is (that they earn it. Of course, we talk about correctly conceived and well-run museum. Museums are non-profit institutions which now means (that ~~any direct profit they make in some of their activities~~ must return to ~~the museum working process itself~~, i.e. must serve the quality of ~~the museum output~~. Museums for the majority must depend on ~~the public money~~, as ~~they contribute to the public well being and prosperity~~. They are like any similar service industry: social and health security, ~~public transportation, obligatory education etc~~. In some cases of very ~~effective~~ museums, the new econometric methods show

that revenue they indirectly create in the community exceeds the usual business effects. Some measurements show that museums create almost double number of jobs around them as the consequence of their activity. This public image of money spenders costs museums dearly. The rising neo-liberalism sees them as burden to the respective society.

### Museums are There for Old Things

To be "for museum" means in any western inspired culture to be outdated, outmoded, obsolete, unnecessary, in brief - useless. Therefore, in popular mind, museums are full of things which we keep out of nostalgia for the past times. The scientific interest there is taken as a sort of curiosity of eccentric experts. The next layer is the superlativist: because the things there are rare, the biggest, the best, the most expensive, the most elaborated, the most beautiful, the exceptional in any possible sense and so on. Belonging to the past, all of them are old, i.e. the older the better. But that notion is now lost in the best museums because "old" for them is literally yesterday. We want to document our cultures and civilisation so that at any moment we can study it for the different purposes. Marking the change makes the future more obvious and less frightening, and, besides, enables us to adapt and correct when we believe it does not correspond with what we need. Of course, museums are learning the lesson, with difficulties though, but they are becoming the institutions for today and about today, including its reflections: one in the past and one in the future.

### Museums are Temples of National Pride

All too often they are, and not much more than that. Pride is legitimate ingredient of self-esteem and knowing one's own identity: pride of being different, rich of inherited experiences and cultural practices; pride of quality. But, museums should have been able to impose the realistic picture of the history, and explain it as experience upon which one can learn how to improve human state and its natural dispositions. This was rarely the case, so we have national museums, especially those of so called big nations, as temples of vanity: only domination and superiority over others and over nature: roughly speaking, -an illustrated 3-D encyclopaedia of conquests. All too often, they are not only national but also nationalistic. That is not the way to pave the secure path to national identity; right in front of their museums the very national identity is crumbling under the globalising processes. They watch scrupulously and do nothing and yet, almost any member of the public would understand that museums are there to protect and present the identity they stand for. Those museums jealously dust the picture of past, but the majority of their employed curators know poorly the present.

What is good in past should direct us today by its values. There is nothing wrong in having the dead as guides if their messages are interpreted correctly and according to our specific circumstances.

## The True Nature of Museums

Museum is many things and will become still many more. For the moment being, the profession functions upon a definition, which for a long time satisfies the majority of museum people.

It is an important social function. This is why we have so many mediators and interpreters of the inherited human experience: historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, art historians, curators (all of them and still others if working in a museum), philosophers, scientific researchers, clergymen, politicians, opinion-makers...

Museums have an advantage of being all of it at one time and in one place, a sort of easy-to-recognize post-pored invention (if we forget their two odd centuries of institutional experience). The truth is that not many have recognized this potential, but those who have demonstrate an institutional success. They have a major specific difference to all others by the fact of their collections of original artefacts and not less original documentation that accompanies them. We talk, obviously, about literally immense storages of objects. It is a pure guess of experienced professional but I would say that world's museums keep, care and, very partly, expose up to a billion of objects. That is the materialised memory: a curious invention of our civilisation. The more we shall ruin the balance by the virtualisation of our world, the more there would be the same old need to keep the solid material traces behind. Collection of fetishes? Yes, to quite an extent, but also the collection of encoded meanings we like to keep for another mind to come to wonder, experience and research with some new knowledge, some new technique, some new mind and some new needs to guide their interests.

The knowledge being available in such quantities from so many resources and at such an ease (www), makes museums freer to recognize their true nature: that of communication. They are social institutions with multiple tasks so communication should mean many things:

- social space;
- information and orientation in past and present values;
- direct role in promotion and (scrupulous) revival of identities they stand for;
- developmental agency;

As a wise social device working to the advantage of its community, it adapts the community to the changing conditions in its surround-

ings and in itself, creating thus viable preconditions for its prosperity. Envisaged as a cybernetic mechanism attached to the community or society it is supposed to serve, if corrects what may be judged as misleading and wrong helping thus harmony and the common well being. It goes without saying that these functions so described are for the most practical circumstances a mere wishful thinking. It would be also wrong to think that museums are supernatural force able to solve the problems of the society that finances it. Nearer to the truth would be to say that museums so conceived are one of the institutions in modern societies which help them survive in the circumstances of threat. What is at stake is not some nostalgic feature that might disappear under the wheels of the globalisation. It is the variety that makes the substance of the entire richness, active and inherited, that may dramatically disappear in front of our bewildered eyes. So, museums today have the role to play which is very demanding. That role means participation in the destiny of their community, but the participation of an elder which means responsibility and moral commitment. Correctly understood, this role would also give them new importance. The rich world we still know is in peril. Hence the pressure to found ever new museums. (Part of the push comes from tourist industry driven arguments and ever present local chauvinism.) The true impetus is the widespread feeling that we live in a managed world where the viable balance must also be an outcome of our own action. That might be evident in the man-made part of reality. But, that is also true in the natural environment that is unable to re-gain balance without serious effort of institutions we devise for the purpose. To illustrate the point, natural parks and nature conservation policies are just one emanation of the museum idea. Their numbers rise proportionally to the evidence of degradation of the environment.

Evidently, museums are expected to offer usable product that public mind is notable to describe, but instinctively feels that museums are important means of protecting the disappearing values (by which communities continue to be spiritually or even physically alive). Dramatic tones forgotten - there stays however enough arguments to claim that museums were never different in their role of securing or augmenting vitality, or, indeed, returning life to the dying identities. Only now their tasks become conspicuous and practical at the same time.

That, of course, does not mean that museums should forget about traditional duties of collecting, research, care for collections, presentation and education. Their role is only expanding and being in their public part of functions enveloped by the communicational capacity.

## What Should Be the Aim of Museums?

Globalisation forces us into retreat and defend ourselves as all identities are at stake. The one-ness and uniformity of the planet is, presumably, the dream of any multinational corporation, but this prospect is a nightmare of any culture. The state of threat by overwhelming globalisation will give the new impetus to the development of action in the field of heritage. The number, variety and capacity of institutions that will exercise the counter-action will grow accordingly. The front-line must be as far as possible from the "heart-land" of the identities. That is the part of, emphatically saying, the only world war we are left with: global devastation of the inherited richness by the dominating models of managed culture vs. group, local, regional and national identities. The theory of heritage<sup>1</sup> reflects upon strategies needed or possible to protect what is being threaten. The traditional museum did it by securing the documentation of, say, disappearing culture and keeping it in a researched and secure way in museums. The reformed one, i.e. the one that looks at the problem as the situation of cybernetic dichotomy, does it by supporting what is being endangered and by reinforcing the vitality of it. We have a natural reaction of preserving what is specific and different from becoming general and nondescript, be it cultural entity, natural environment or even individual identity. Free, creative energy (and intelligence) stemming from the tradition can only be expected only at the level of some individual, group or community. The global culture or global processes are counter-productive or directly harmful to these fine structures and processes.

Museums nowadays use any business technique and skill to perform better. One of the reasons is the competitive environment and the other is, as stipulated, the need to become problem-solving institution. Who wants the objectives, wants also the means (as J. J. Rousseau suggested). One of the means is the marketing. As it maybe obvious, marketing is part of any management, and by its logic strange to the nature of museums. Any ambitious museum will take it up, but not without dangers. This is why the marketing has to be tamed for the cultural purposes, i.e. the notion of product and profit must be differently understood.

Marketing, instead of serving as an important means of the advance of museum mission, can become its master. (Ames 1989:9)

1. In 1982 I have proposed the provocative term of "herilology"; nowadays it is part of the curriculum of the Chair of Museology at the University of Zagreb.

2. ICOM (International Council of Museums, Unesco's NGO).

"Between a museum and any commercial enterprise the boundary is clear" (Le nouveau... 1990: 23), or maybe it is, theoretically speaking. In the valid definition of museums<sup>2</sup> it is only claimed that museums are non-profit institutions. Avoiding negation in the definition would prob-

ably lead to assert it as charitable status, which is nearer to its public commitment. At the same time it might suggest that the material "profit" they may generate serves the same set of charitable, pious purposes enveloped into the mission statements. When about marketing techniques, it serves the purpose well to define the product as quality set of services, and the profit as beneficial effects upon the society.

Museums are the invention of Western civilization<sup>3</sup> But, there are differences: the culturally different English-speaking North America understands museums, to an extent, differently than Europe. Their museums are also oriented on community and visitors, and quite a few claim to be visitor-friendly or even customer friendly. The orientation is there mostly induced by the argument of serving fairly the taxpayers who finance them. The impression is that the motivation is more humanist in Europe and can be explained as:

- the need to influence the community/society with an aim to assist its (sustainable) development;
- the need to understand the identity (the museum takes care of) as ethical obligation of the community and its individuals.

The first case, is about economical and environmental survival, whereas the second is concerned with spiritual continuation. Both motives are, indeed, about quality of life. The notion of inherited values weights less in North America than the notion of management, so the management of those values is preferred order of priorities so well obvious in American invention of heritage industry." As a whole, European museums tend to be more socially concerned and more sensitive to the fine tissue of inherited values, but are probably managed with less efficiency.

Museums decide upon many facets of their own existence, but rarely propose a clear, convincing set of arguments about their final objectives. Most of their decisions are framed by conventions, political and social preconceptions and immanent reticence to function with the real-time circumstances. Anchored in the ocean of scientific, political or cultural truths, they can hardly react to any problem of their users, let alone those to come. Trough whose eyes will they look at the world? Which world will they look at: that of the past, or that of the present, only using past to understand it better? Whose museum will that be, and whose interests should it serve? If local museums interpret the place, whose sense of place do they interpret (Le nouveau... 1990)? Will they position themselves as an institution that only cares for certain heritage (collecting, researching, caring, presenting) or will they go further than that? Do they understand themselves as carers or sharers; is their job prevalently conservationist or communicational?

To make those dilemma even hauler, one has to know that most of

3.

The export of their model to other area of the world is sometimes itself an attack on local identity.

Of course, these assertions are simplifications which only make things more obvious, because one might argue that more of it was actually started in Great Britain, the only European country where heritage industry is recognised as a system of importance.

the public consists of conformists when it comes to the traditional museum values. They simply obey the authority of institution, the same way they do it with other societal institutions. When proposed a different museum, they often reiterate in embarrassment. For some museums this is the way to loose authority. They are conditioned beyond being a usable ally. The worrying fact is that some 50-70% of population consists of non-museum goers. Of course, they pay museums and have definite needs for identity and problems that stem from the lack of understanding not only their past but also their present. Can museums help? Well the question should be, why don't they, for the most part? Educating population to use museums is a good conclusion that has many answers in practice. But the best way to attract new audiences is to offer museum that is fell useful in many obvious and subtle ways. Museums should achieve this by knowing the needs of the population and respecting some of their wishes.

In the double natured developmental paradigm, where we have, forces of change on one side and forces of culture on the other, museums should join the later. By the immense capacity hidden or partly communicated in their storages and galleries, they can extract impulses of wisdom into the process where culture acts as conscience of science. This way they would sometimes be offering adaptation to the changing world (closing the gap of fear and misunderstanding) and sometimes corrective impulses with an aim to balance what is often carried away by the profit or uncontrolled globalising forces. The aims are many but reduced to one, may mean that museums are there to help us retain the inherited richness of diversity we have inherited - be it plants, animals, languages, or concepts. Museums are not different from well understood schools by their effort to create free citizens, individuals conscientious of the collective solidarity, tolerant towards any difference be it other fellow beings, other animals, or plants - able and willing to seek the eternity in any of them and not in metastased self.

All museums are different. Some are so much part of the identity themselves that they should remain as they are. The new ones should be new, but all should reflect the character of the identity they stand for. The profit they make should be more than mercantilist, should be the difference in quality of life, the material prosperity included.

- Can it influence the increase of economic wealth of the community?
- Can it raise the employment?
- Can it influence the quality of information?
- Can it be useful in developmental strategies of the community?
- How far can it be useful in the complex promotion of the community/society, in its political and cultural maturing and in the amelioration of its image?

- Can the museum create a clear and effective sensibility for the values of the heritage, so that, ideally speaking there would be a widening circle of the outer "barefoot" curators to further improve its mission?

The result of the museum activity should be the changed behaviour, some more noble juxtaposition of life priorities, some adjusted or even change of value system, a certain embellishment of soul. It should be aim of art museums to elevate the level of aesthetic experience and aesthetic needs of the society in which they act. The usual factographic proliferation of museums may easily look more convincing than this general call. No wonder this is so because we live in the knowledge civilisation. Yet, is certainly more difficult and curiously outside of the mental reach of curators. It is quite curious that art museums see no role for themselves in education public how to shop and buy well designed, even simple and accessible objects. How to dress or decorate the living environment stays mysteriously outside their interest. Lot of people live in desperately faceless and derelict environment and there is literally nobody to help them. After having aestheticized pop-art, art museums proclaimed graffiti yet another form of plastic expression, whereas it is, first of all, an outcry for the crisis of identity and sense. Only at the end of this long alley of human strive for harmony lie the masterpieces of artistic creation that museums expose to the uninitiated visitors. Likewise, the museum of natural history is good only if it can generate love and understanding for the natural world. Only then it can tell us details about geological ages or propose us long Latin names of the exposed dead animals. An ethnographic museum becomes good if it helps vanishing rural culture gain momentum and dignity, and serve as precious experience in the multiple dilemma of today. Located in cities, those museums, whether they speak about their own country or distant colonies, expose only the trophies of conquest.

Any activity of a museum should be based upon the needs and wishes of its visitors (Šola 1998). Wishes should be known but relevant ones are only those which do not contradict the needs of the users. Of course it is a touchy subject, because museum professionals should make an effort to understand the needs of their community better than its members: to know and to act. The wishes of this sort differ from the needs only by the imprecision and length and are fully accountable unlike the ones merely concerned with amusement. The latter is the basis of entire heritage industry.

The museum must offer what people today like, but not what they like, because a museum must be the stabilising element of society's cultural life. (Caya 1992)

From obvious wishes to usable gains, there is arrange of the needs that visitors are rarely able to rationalise and formulate. So it remains the permanent task of museum professionals to understand the time in which museums operate, to know the present and potential users and, of course, to provide scientific basis to serving their community. The goal is simple if understood in its noblest dimension: the good.

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