

***Museu da Abolição*, “The Museum That We Want”**

Adolfo Samyn Nobre

Translated by Ana Cunha

Introduction

Museu da Abolição [Abolition Museum] was inaugurated in 1983 in the city of Recife, one of the largest cities of north-eastern Brazil, located in the state of Pernambuco. This state has a special place in the history of the country: it dates back to the colonization efforts, to the first interactions between Europeans and native peoples and the exploration of sugar cane production. Today, the region embodies not only Brazilian cultural wealth and diversity, but also the great social challenges of contemporary Brazil.

The name of the museum is a reference to the Abolition of black slavery in Brazil at the end of the 19th century. A museum addressing abolition means more than addressing a historic fact. It means dealing with ideas on slavery, freedom, resistance, injustice. There are no museums isolated from society, whatever their social function. For a museum such as this one, which was created with the responsibility for a theme that echoes so strongly in the lives of men and women, the challenge of finding its place in the world has always been present.

The museum's trajectory reflects this adaptation effort extremely well. Conditions imposed by different forces in society have contributed to the institution's rocky biography, both regarding the conceptual approach and its working conditions. The museum was created by a federal decree-law in 1957. However, it was inaugurated only in 1983 with a

temporary exhibition of official documents about the abolitionist process. The inauguration of the museum may be seen as the first proposal of an institution still weakened by lack of staff and structure. At the same time that this first narrative proposal for Abolition was being organized, an attempt was made to delineate a more coherent museological project in the long run.

The temporary exhibition lasted until 1990. In that year the new government imposed a reform which included eliminating the function of the state in the cultural area. Budgets for upkeep and for hiring staff were extinct, making it impossible for services like security and service to the public to continue. The museum was closed to visitors until 1996.

Its reopening, in 1996, introduced a new museum project. The collection, largely on loan, had been returned during the period when the museum had remained closed. Objects on display depicted the daily life of lords and slaves, religious syncretism, the traffic of black people. The temporary exhibition rooms aimed at bringing into the museological context references that were contemporary to the African-Brazilian culture. The goal was that associations between visitor and the narrative took place in the cognitive and in the emotional fields.

At the time, the museum had 2 clerks and one secretary. The attempts to bring the museum closer to society faced two known challenges: the anthropological, social and museological limits of representation strategies; and the institution's lack of structure. As a result of the difficulty in hiring professional services, the museum was once again forced to suspend service to the public in 2005.

The mishaps of the Abolition Museum are representative of other Brazilian museums. In the same way, the museum's biography depicts the effort of its players to deal with society's constraints. These constraints are translated into policies (or lack thereof) but also into society's perception of the museum's function and relevance, into the use (or lack thereof) which is made of the museum as resource and tool.

The Abolition Museum, closed or open, used, misused, or not used, is an institution inserted in society. It bears a legacy and a topical theme, one which has great social weight. It also bears a history of shortages and hardship. This, however, does not mean that it has remained stationary in time. This was certainly not the case in 2005, when a new renovation strategy was begun, which sought directly in society the support and the possibility for the museum to find a new place in the world. This was possible thanks to important changes in Brazil, among which the creation of a museums policy in 2003, which is at the same time recognition and instrument of democratization in the processes of creating and managing museums. The museums policy is, in turn, part of a larger context: that of the multiplication of the use of memory and heritage institutions as social, cultural, political and economic tools in the 21st century.

The movement that began with the Abolition Museum can be seen as a response to the institution's specific needs. It can be seen as a load of difficulties that ended up allowing conditions for transformation to be created. It can also be seen as the will to be relevant, from larger movements in society which pressed and supported the museum's existence and the practice of its functions. To change, the museum resorted to its rightful owners. It sought to involve museum professionals, the population and various social groups in the discussions on its future.

This process of change has been gaining stronger roots in the active and direct participation of society. The following sessions aim to explain the development of this process, translated into the action plan for the Abolition Museum entitled "The Museum That We Want".

"The Museum That We Want"

The first permanent exhibition of the Abolition Museum, inaugurated in the 1990s, had already made an attempt to bring society closer to the discussions regarding the role of the museum. During the planning stage of the exhibition, mail consultations were made to various leading people and

entities connected with the African-Brazilian theme. About 200 letters were sent, and a little over 20 replies were obtained.

In 2005, the museum adopted a different strategy. A decision was made to organize a seminar, where the possibility of debate and interaction might provide better and more contributions to the transformation process that was intended. Thus, in March 2005, the museum staff, at the time made up of its director Evelina Grunberg and the technical expert Simone Novaes, organized a seminar “The museum that we want” with the aim of rallying the community of the Pernambuco state so that, together with technicians and experts, a new institution could be rethought.

The seminar had widespread participation of the various sectors of society, mainly social movements and entities connected with black movements. Some of the issues that drove the debates were: should the museum reopen or should its extinction be requested since it did not respond to social demands as regards its discourse and nomenclature? If the understanding was in favour of reopening the Museum, how should it render its services to society? And also, in case it reopened, should it keep the name “Abolition Museum”?

An important issue for future plans related to the occupation of the museum’s building, known as Sobrado Grande da Madalena. From 1976, the Abolition Museum operated in a limited area of the building, sharing the space with the Regional Supervisory Board of the National Historic and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN), which also held the charge of the museum. During the seminar “The Museum that we want”, participants drafted a document which claimed the need to occupy the house integrally, considering that it had been compulsory purchased to house the museum. Occupying the whole *sobrado* would give the museum autonomy to define its working hours, until then subject to the Supervisory Board’s schedules, as well as symbolically attest to the importance of the topic in question.

From the seminar, a taskforce was created with the aim of advancing discussions and define paths for the museum. The taskforce was constituted by representatives of various

segments of society, among which cultural and religious institutions, museum professionals and teachers. They met weekly for four months. During the process, surveys, questionnaires and research were conducted to diagnose demands and make proposals for the future.

In June 2005, the taskforce submitted the reformulation document for the Abolition Museum. The document comprehended a diagnosis of the museum's situation and provided guidelines for the creation of a new museum:

1 – the museum should be reactivated with a new structure and with the full occupation of Sobrado Grande da Madalena;

2 – the museum would continue, with the name “Museu da Abolição” [Abolition Museum];

3 – the Abolition Museum would have a new identity: a new mission, objectives, profile and goals.

The new mission of the museum was defined as:

“To render services to the society by recovering, enhancing, and recognizing the material and immaterial heritage of African descendents, contributing to strengthening the identity and sovereignty of the Brazilian people”.

From then on, the action plan “The Museum that We Want” became the museum's main strategy to implement its mission. At the same time, significant changes were underway within the institution itself. In 2005, the first public selection process was carried out by IPHAN and in 2006 the museum welcomed one more museology professional, which increased its permanent staff to three members. In the same year, elements of the taskforce and other representatives of social movements, political and religious institutions founded the Association of Friends of the Abolition Museum.

In 2007, considering the professionalization actions included in the national museums policy, the Museological Plan for the institution was drawn. This is a strategic management plan, which Brazilian museums have been encouraged to adopt since the implementation of the

museums policy in 2003. The Museological Plan for the Abolition Museum included the diagnosis, surveys and proposals drawn by the museum's taskforce in its reformulation document for the museum. In that same year, an important administrative change took place in museums so far operating under the charge of the regional IPHAN offices, as was the case of the Abolition Museum. The Department of Museums and Cultural Centres was created within the Heritage Institute. The department was then responsible for operational management of regional museums so far directly subordinated to the various regional offices of IPHAN. Its creation was a fundamental step towards establishing the Brazilian Institute of Museums in 2009 and towards strengthening integrated actions which would comprehend various Brazilian museums. For the Abolition Museum, this change represented a huge step in the development of its administrative structure, since it gained some autonomy as regards managing its own resources and processes, and it became part of a wider network of museums.

“What the Abolition did not abolish”

The next step in the process of reformulating the museum was the organization of the campaign exhibition “What the Abolition did not abolish” in March 2008. The goals of this campaign exhibition were: to show the public that the Museum was open to a critical view of the issue slavery/abolition/freedom, at the same time that it brought society closer to the construction of the museum, by requesting visitors that they leave suggestions and proposals for the Abolition Museum. The exhibition lasted six months. It marked the reopening of the museum, closed since 2005. It served as a campaign in favour of society's participation in drawing proposals for the museum and its long-term display¹. The campaign exhibition had the following objectives:

¹ There is a tendency in Brazil today to name permanent exhibitions long-term exhibitions.

- 1) To demonstrate to the public that the institution favours and fosters debate and a critical view of its social role and of Abolition as a historic fact, its antecedents and its consequences in shaping present society and in the social imagining on slavery in Brazil;
- 2) To present the topics of slavery, resistance, abolition and freedom in such a way as to demonstrate that the museum can be a dynamic and participating forum for reflection and debate on current issues. The topics involve issues such as prejudice, racism, social exclusion, class fight and forms of resistance. Thus the museum aims to work on society's perception of its past and present, enabling the transformation of present reality;
- 3) To call upon people from various institutions and social movements, besides the initial taskforce, professionals in the museum and in the cultural areas, representatives of public bodies, and representatives of religious institutions, to participate in debates to prepare a long term exhibition for the Abolition Museum.



During the campaign exhibition, suggestions and proposals for the museum were collected. Visitors/participants left suggestions in cards in a “collect area”, an integral part of the exhibition.

(image)

Suggestion collect area of the exhibition “What the Abolition did not abolish”.

The museum team analysed 1,050 cards collected between January and July 2008. This totalled 1,602 submissions, since some cards contained more than one suggestion. Reactions were classified into seven categories: theme, collection, activities, infrastructures, dissemination, criticism, praise and various messages.

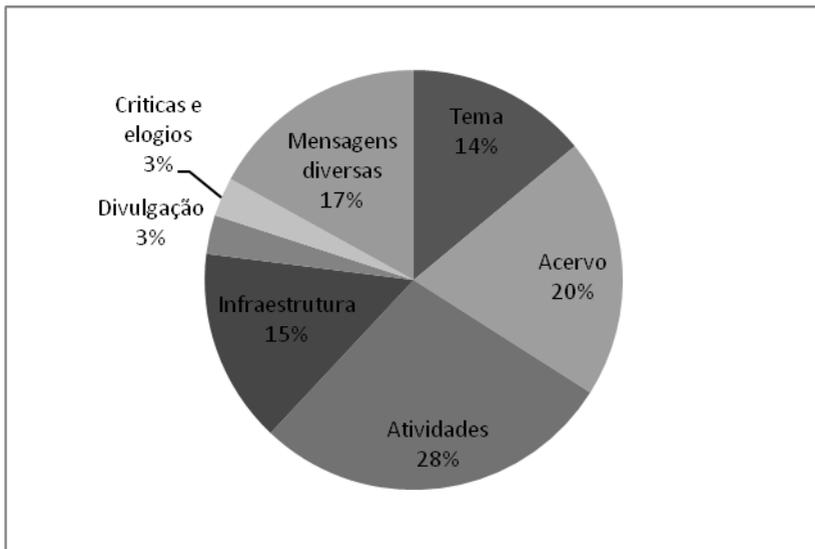


Chart: Distribution of visitors' contributions by categories.

Visitors' responses provided an important source of consultation on society's expectations and wishes vis-à-vis the future Abolition Museum. Various themes were proposed, related with historic and contemporary issues, such as slavery, resistance, racism, religion, dancing and art. The vast quantity of messages that suggested activities for the museum revealed the public's desire for a living, dynamic museum, which promotes cultural events, debates and workshops related to dancing, drama, music, *capoeira*, handicraft, graffiti, cooking, among various other topics. It is interesting to remark

that the set of responses connects the existence of a living museum to the concern with the collection, understood as a resource for various possibilities. A relevant amount of reactions also pointed to the creation of theme rooms related to the contemporary approach of Abolition themes (art, reading, video, literature, computing, etc.) and to the improvement of public services, including educational activities, expansion of the area, cafeteria and library. Most responses classified under “various messages” emphasised the will to fight against prejudice and racial discrimination, against contemporary forms of slavery, against violence, for freedom and for the enhancement of black culture.

Just as importantly, or maybe even more so, the participation of a diversified public – of students, parents, teachers, activists, professionals, producers and practitioners of culture – reinforced the conviction of the Abolition Museum’s players that it is possible to reflect upon the future of the institution from an active culture of participation and appropriation of the museum by society. With the collection it was possible to feed new processes.

Reflecting collectively on an exhibition

After the campaign exhibition “What the Abolition did not abolish” was closed, another project was started, the Participative Organization for the Long Term Exhibition of the Abolition Museum. The goal of the project was to think and define the proposal for the museum’s new exhibition collectively.

From August to November 2008, about 30 people participated in 10 group discussions. The rounds included debates and conversations with specialists on topics related to the Abolition theme and to museums. The meetings were video recorded and registered in minutes available on the Internet², where they could also be read and commented. On

² <http://www.museuabolicao.blogspot.com> (10 June 2010). In Portuguese.

12/11/2008, a plenary session approved the macro plan for the long term exhibition of the museum.³

During the same period that the debates on the exhibition already advanced the symbolic occupation of the whole Sobrado Grande da Madalena, the actual removal from the house of the Regional Supervisory Board of IPHAN was agreed upon. This move was scheduled for end of 2008; however, the final move from the Supervisory Board occurred only at the beginning of 2010.

Located between two important landmarks (the definition of the macro plan for the exhibition and the removal from the house of the Supervisory Board of IPHAN), the year 2009 was crucial to the course of the reformulation project for the Abolition Museum. In January 2009, the Brazilian Museums Institute (IBRAM) was created. The institute was then charged with the administration of the museums from the old department of Museums and Cultural Centres of IPHAN. The creation of IBRAM strengthened the National Museums Policy, consolidating the measures to organize the museological field in Brazil.

Despite the progress implied in the creation of IBRAM, working conditions at the Abolition Museum, as well as in other museums of the new institute, still faced serious challenges. The Museums Institute undergoes an important period of internal organization. The possibilities brought about by the revolution in the field of museums in the past years generated a huge demand for the implementation of projects. The fruits of the National Museums Policy impose an overload on the working of the new institute and this is reflected in the management of its museums. Besides, institutions similar to the Abolition Museum face the difficulties of breaking away from IPHAN's administrative structure.

After defining the macro plan for the long term exhibition, the museum's team submitted two large scale projects to IBRAM: one for setting up the long term exhibition

³ <http://www.museuabolicao.blogspot.com>. In Portuguese.

and another to reform and adapt Sobrado Grande da Madalena, which was now the full property of the Abolition Museum. The exhibition project included hiring professional services to prepare it in detail, respecting the macro plan and considering the continuation of the participative process. The tender on the project fell through due to technical-administrative problems and it was not possible to hire any company for this purpose. The project to reform the building was started in April 2010 and still faces some legal obstacles to its implementation.

The period is also one of significant changes in the museum staff. After the former director retired, the institution has again 2 permanent workers. Cleaning and security services are outsourced and for the most part managed by IPHAN's Supervisory Board. The work of interns and volunteers is crucial to manage service to the public⁴, to implement exhibition plans and other projects in which the museum participates together with other Recife museums.

Despite the hardships, the inauguration of the new long term exhibition is scheduled for 20 November 2010, National Black Awareness Day.

It is a huge challenge and it tests the museum's ability as well as the ability of the Museums Institute, of the Association of Friends and of all its partners, to rally the necessary strength to carry out this endeavour. The response to this challenge comes from the management of a cooperative venture, which aims to carry out the organization of the exhibition in a participative spirit increasingly rooted in the museum's life.

Creating an exhibition cooperatively

The project which started in 2005 faces today its greatest ordeal: the organization of a long term exhibition which can attest to a process that aims to congregate society

⁴ Since its reopening in 2008, the museum has kept an operating temporary exhibition room.

around the debates on the construction of memory and heritage in the Abolition Museum.

The practical difficulties which the museum faces need to be shared with various partners. Not only with the professional team, with the Association of Friends and with the Museums Institute; but also with the participants in the group discussions, with other museums, with the university, with social and religious movements, with schools and teachers. In the same way, the intention is that solutions be shared and negotiated during the organization of the exhibition and, why not say it, of the museum itself.

The new stage of the project is not limited to a consultation. The Abolition Museum invites the players in the process to create the contents and the form of the exhibition together. The themes of the six rooms of the long term exhibition are based on the macro plan approved at the end of 2008. The proposed methodology comprises two rounds for installing the exhibition:

- 1- First round: each week will focus on one exhibition room. The week will begin with a group discussion to define the contents of the room, based on the macro plan and with the participation of specialist and guest consultants. On the following days, two work groups, one on exhibitions and the other on education, will develop their proposals for the rooms. Each group will be coordinated by a professional in the area and will have the active participation of any interested person. At the end of the week one model of the exhibition will be assembled in the room, using simple techniques and low-cost materials. The model of each room will be open to visitors, so that everyone may intervene and suggest improvements and changes. Moreover, as each new room is considered, the previous room can be changed so that little by little a sketch of the exhibition can be built.
- 2- Second round: from the complete sketch, a second passage on the exhibition aims to refine contents

and build the definitive modules using high quality materials. The proposal is that this be done by a small group of experts in the themes of exhibition, museologists, designers and representatives of the various sectors of society which participated in the process.

The proposal is pioneering in the sense that it aims to openly face the power relations that exist inside and outside the museum. Seen in this way, the process of assembling the exhibition seeks to serve as a museological experiment, in which the exhibition's function is neither to represent a closed discourse nor to raise queries. The proposal is that the exhibition works as an open communication channel and is able to display part of the conflicts in real life.

One piece of evidence of these conflicts can be seen in the exhibition's macro plan itself, which mentions the historic and present relation of the African continent with Brazil, as well as the black struggles and resistance movements. Reflecting teachers' ample participation during the discussion groups organized in 2008, the macro plan follows a rather didactic approach and it is clear that many of the participants imagined the museum as an instrument that could complement school work. During the development of the contents of the rooms, the goal is that the macro plan be adopted as a starting point. Nevertheless, this does not reject the possibility that the participants, many with different views on Abolition themes and on the museum, criticise and re-interpret the themes indicated in 2008.

Rather than bring the museum closer to its public, the process aims to make all those interested in the themes addressed by the Abolition Museum participate in the creation of this new narrative for the museum in an active manner. This narrative, related with essential topics for the practice of citizenship in a dynamic complex metropolis such as Recife, now represents the conflicts and disputes inherent to the

creation of memories that permeate daily life and can now be made explicit in the museum.

In order for this to happen, it is necessary that the very logic of exhibitions provides the necessary opening to avoid reifying issues and the need to reach a consensus. An exhibition, rather than be the documentation of a conflict, has the ability to be an open window into the dynamic of representations and discourses that exist in society. The project will attempt to do that by bringing this debate to the field of museological representation, allowing the players to be the active builders of the exhibition.

On 20 November 2010, the unfinished final version of the long term exhibition of the Abolition Museum will be inaugurated. It is understood as unfinished because we see it as being in permanent transformation. For this to be possible, in exhibition workshops we aim to propose solutions for the exhibition that allow the public to intervene constantly, artistic interventions, and other channels that enable constant renewal and bring to light the dynamics and conflicts in the construction of memories on Abolition.

We aim that the control over exhibition production processes be shared as well. Besides funding from the Museums Institute, the Abolition Museum looks to its local partners for support to put together parts of the exhibition. The museum aims to work in favour of strengthening a culture of solidarity, which enables the museum's appropriation by society.

In a museum where the concept of participation is not limited to consumption, challenges take on a new dimension. Yet we believe that it is thanks to this dynamic that the museum has been able to face most of its challenges. Transforming hindrances into opportunities, this is the museum's proposal. And understanding the demands and possibilities in the field of heritage, today the Abolition Museum is committed to the strength of cooperative experimentation.

About the author:

Museologist, BA in Museology by the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro – Uni-Rio (1999) and MA in Social Memory and Document by the same university (2003) with the dissertation “Darning the web of memory: study on the construction of identities in Bairro Maré [Maré Neighbourhood]”. Today he holds the position of director (since 2009) of the Abolition Museum/IBRAM/Ministry for Culture, chairs the Consulting Board of the Brazilian Museology Association (ABM) and the Pernambuco Museums Forum (FMP).