

Evolving Definition of Sociomuseology Proposal for reflection¹

Mário C. Moutinho

Sociomuseology expresses a considerable amount of the effort made to suit museological facilities to the conditions of contemporary society.

The process of opening up the museum, as well as its organic relation with the social context that infuses it with life, has resulted in the need to structure and clarify the relations, notions and concepts that may define this process.

Sociomuseology is thus a scientific field of teaching, research and performance which emphasizes the articulation of museology, in particular, with the areas of knowledge covered by Human Sciences, Development Studies, Services Science, and Urban and Rural Planning.

The multidisciplinary approach of Sociomuseology aims to strengthen the acknowledgement of museology as a resource for the sustainable development of Humanity, based on equal opportunities as well as social and economic inclusion.

Sociomuseology bases its social intervention on mankind's cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

What characterizes Sociomuseology is not so much the nature of its premises and its goals, as is the case with other areas of knowledge, but the interdisciplinary focus which makes it draw on perfectly consolidated areas of knowledge and relate them with Museology itself.

¹ Proposal presented at the 13th MINOM International Workshop, Lisbon – Setúbal October 2007

For a long time, the main concerns of Sociomuseology can be found in numerous documents drawn up within and outside the field of Museology. By way of example, we may mention the Santiago de Chile Declaration, dated 1972, the Quebec Declaration (MINOM), 1984, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO), 2005, the Convention to Safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO) 2003, the World Heritage Convention, Protection of the Cultural and Natural World Heritage, UNESCO – Paris, 1972. In all these documents we can find a line of continuity which clearly indicates the broadening of the traditional functions of museology and the role that they should take on in contemporary society.

1 – Among these concerns, we should mention the global nature (on a planetary scale) of the problems related to the **preservation and protection** of the Cultural and Natural Heritage within the context of a national and international vision, not only due to the nature of the problems but also to the need to design policies that go beyond national boundaries to impact regions and, in many cases, concern the planet itself, globally considered.

This understanding derives in part from the need to involve human, financial, legal, scientific and technical resources that clearly exceed local or national responsibility. (World Heritage Convention, The Protection of the Cultural and Natural World Heritage, UNESCO – Paris, 1972).

2 – The acknowledgement that the **development issues** have also come to be considered at local, national and international levels, due not only to the character of these issues, but also to the broad nature of the sustainability principle that naturally not only transcends borders but also requires globally sustainable solutions.

In this context, solutions imply many-sided approaches based on the participation principle and on individual and collective commitment. Culture and development are increasingly

elements of Social Responsibility, which is where the museum intervention is grounded.

3 – It is also widely acknowledged that all societies are in permanent **change**. For this reason the action of museums must be based on this very change whenever it aims to play a socially intervening role.

That the museum is an institution at the service of society, of which it is a part, and that it possesses in itself the elements that enable it to participate in the shaping of the communities' awareness of its purpose; that it may contribute to the involvement of these communities in action, placing its activities within a historic framework that allows it to clarify present-day problems, in other words, connecting the past to the present, becoming involved in ongoing structural changes and leading to other changes within their respective national realities (Santiago de Chile Roundtable, ICOM, 1972).

4 – More and more, museums are considered to be institutions that provide services, and for this reason they increasingly need to involve knowledge from such areas as innovation management, marketing, design and the new information and communication technologies. These fields of knowledge bring into museums factors that improve the quality of the relationship between Museums and their publics and/or users, regarding which quality management tools can be applied. These essential approaches, although they are carried out piecemeal, have now found a new area of knowledge generally known as the Services Science, Management and Engineering (SSME). This area seeks to gather and articulate in a consistent way the ongoing work in the field of computer science, industrial engineering, business strategy, administration sciences, social and cognitive sciences, and juridical sciences so as to develop those skills required by an economy increasingly based on and oriented towards the

production and use of services. This area of knowledge aims to transversely understand other areas which by themselves have achieved considerable development, but which are seldom the object of articulate and dialectical understanding. More than a really technical function which derives from the understanding of the museum as an institution at the service of museological objects, Museums are increasingly deemed to be institutions that provide services. In this sense, they have to be understood as any other service activity. Museology and museums (within the context of the economy of cultural services) have taken up a salient role in the services economy in general, which today represents 50 to 70% of the Gross Internal Product of the more developed countries and has taken a growing place in the majority of the other countries.

5 – The performance of the human resources involved in the various broad functions of museums increasingly calls for thorough training which goes beyond the traditional technical training that narrows the performance of museums exclusively centred on their collections. The Curricula Guidelines for Professional Development, at present under revision by ICOM, clearly state the multiplicity of training areas so as to cover all the fields where the Museum is involved. In a more concise way, ICTOP's 1994 Lisbon Declaration already announced this new revision process regarding the training of museum workers.

Museological training programmes should provide training opportunities that aim to fulfil the immediate needs and expectations of the museological community so as to endow it with proactive programming rather than reactive instruction; (...),
Museological training programmes should prepare trainees at all levels so that they can take on higher leadership roles, fostering intellectual research, imaginative interaction, and brave solutions to apply to museological practices and activities, as well as

convey a sense of ethical, professional and social responsibility;²

This proposal of a definition for Sociomuseology, rather than being a purely grammatical exercise, in fact seeks to call attention to a vast area of concerns, methods and objectives which increasingly give meaning to a museology whose boundaries keep growing. The restrictive view of museology as a collection-oriented work technique has been replaced by a new museological understanding and new practices directed to the development of mankind.

It is precisely to this reality, borne out of the articulation of areas that have grown sometimes outside museology but which little by little have become unavoidable resources for the development of museology itself, that the definition of sociomuseology can be a contribution that helps understand processes and define limits.

Seen in this manner, sociomuseology becomes a new field of knowledge which results from the articulation of the other areas of knowledge that contribute to the contemporary museological process. Between the paradigm of the Museum at the service of collections and the paradigm of the Museum at the service of society, therein lies the place for Sociomuseology.

About the author:

Mário Moutinho is one of the founders and currently President of MINOM International. Dean of the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technologies in Lisbon and coordinator of the Sociomuseology Research Centre at the same University. Architect, museologist, holds a PhD degree in Anthropology from the Jussieu University – Paris VII

² (Lisbon Declaration, Resolutions of the International Committee for Museum Personnel Training – ICTOP/Universidade Lusófona, 1994)