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**On the concept of the public: the local museums' case\* Fernando  
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**1 – The present day concept of the public**

Globally, the public is understood as the whole of a service's users. In the specific case of the museums, the users are all those who make use of the service offered by the museum institution. Thus, the museum's public corresponds not only to the visitors (people who enter or have entered the museum), but also to the part of those who, in some way, with no relationship of presence within the museum, have enjoyed the services or property made available by it (for instance the ordering of books or other material by catalogue, visit to travelling exhibitions, end users of pedagogical actions carried out in schools...)

On the other hand, when we refer to the public, it is necessary to make another distinction: between the real or effective public and the potential public.

The former is the group of individuals who have visited or have used the museum, while in the second case are included all the people who, due to their specific characteristics, are susceptible to become the real or effective public.

We have thus two fundamental axis to consider when we use the concept of the public: one regards the space (interaction with the museum indoors or outdoors, therefore visitor or non-visitor) and

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\* "The Museums' Public in Portugal: characterisation and motivations (POCTI - 33546 ULHT Sociourbanistic Study Centre [*Centro de estudos de Sociourbanismo da ULHT*]), 2005.

another regards time (interaction already effected or in potency, therefore the real or potential public).

In this document, for reasons of clarity in exposition, we shall refer only to the real or effective public.

## **2 – Considerations on how the current concept of the public has been established**

If we look in closer detail at the concept of real public, it is possible to detect that its genesis derives from the aggregation of two other concepts: the visitor and the user. Or, more correctly, that the current concept of the public was built by the expansion of the idea of the public to the idea of the user.

The issue put forward, then, is to realise what is on the basis of this subtle change that has been under way in the last decades: why user and not simply visitor?

Actually, behind this “small” nuance, we find three dynamics factors linked to the global evolution of the museum institution: the evolution of the passive museum into a proactive one, that is, the process that has transformed the museum institution from a place where people went to worship the beautiful and the uncommon, to an institution that seeks to bring these beautiful and uncommon things to the public; the evolution of the museum as exhibition organiser (permanent, and, later, also temporary) to an institution that offers a widened scope of services, that is, the diversification process of forms of interaction between museum/population; the institutional evolution from a museum with central service to one of offering dispersed services, that is, the passage from the format of a single “big museum”, placed at the top of the urban hierarchy, to a multitude of formats scattered throughout the territory.

These three dynamic factors have contributed, complementarily and simultaneously, to the production of the meaningful changes in the functions attributable to the museum institution, a fact that, among other domains, featured important reflexes on two fundamental levels:

On the level of the deconstruction of the dominant museum paradigm and its social service, motivated, on an initial phase, by the criticisms and positionings originating in new emerging museological models and formats (exo-deconstruction), and, on a second phase, by an effort of adaptation to the new contextualisation realities of the dominant museological institutions (self-deconstruction); on the level of a varied and multifaceted reconstruction of new adapted paradigms not only to new contexts of insertion (national, regional and local), but also adapted to the new demands, values and needs of the potential public.

Thus, in practical terms, we witness a change in the museological context characterised by the emergence of a widened group of new museums, with new concerns and new intervention forms; by the emergence of new concerns and attitudes on the level of the large classical reference museums.

In any case, independent of the specific differences in action fields and in the theoretical framework<sup>[1]</sup>, one thing is certain: the concept of visitor was exhausted, because it manifestly was not adequate and has proved insufficient to encompass the extension of the museum's function on a horizontal bias (new function of traditional museums) and on the vertical bias (new functions of the new museums).

In the first case, though the visit and the visitor continue to be central elements in museological activity, it ceases to be considered as the exclusive form of activity; in the second case, the visit is placed on

an equal footing to (or, even, as an accessory element or a necessary evil) in the face of other forms of museological intervention, considered more efficacious in the fulfilling of the established aims.

Thus, in both situations, the concept of the public comes to incorporate those who use the museums or, above all in the case of the new museums, those who are making use of the museum, independent of the form that this use takes. That is, the concept of the public comes to rest on the central idea of the user.

### **3 – The new generation local museums**

Leaving behind the renovated big museums, we shall restrict our scope to the new museum that, somewhat all over the place, has emerged in the last few decades of the last century. We refer in particular to the so-called local museums, whose massive genesis we have had the opportunity of approaching in another document (c. f. “The creation process of a local museum [*O processo de criação de um museu local*]”).

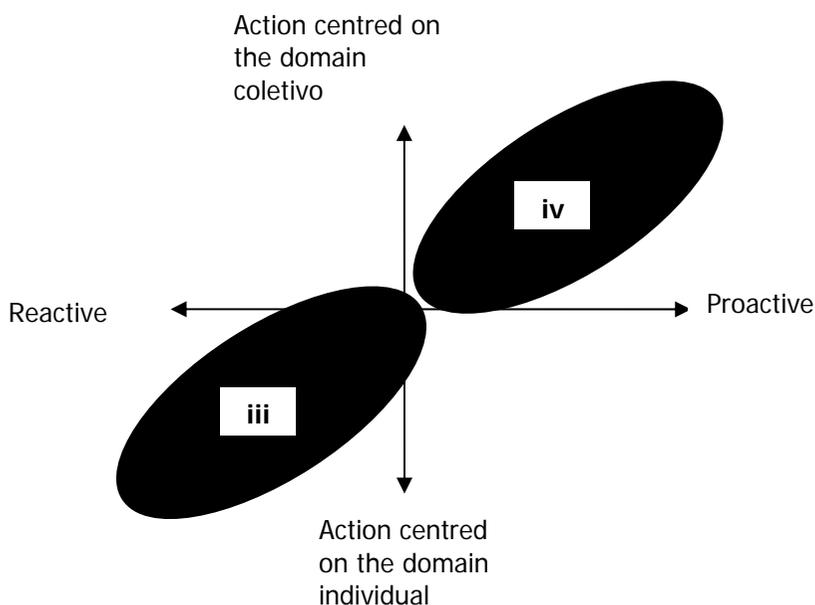
Regarding the latter, there are four distinct situations, related to their fundamental goals, and, clearly, to the practices resulting from that:

The local museum that seeks to imitate the big museums and that, due to the lack of technical and financial means, ends up not fulfilling any function, that is, the true non-museum; the local museum that, loaded with some technical and financial means, seeks to safeguard the local heritage and take up the role of an active intervener in the promotion of the cultural and identity bases at play in their area of influence, that is, a museum whose action is restricted to the cultural domain (although, sometimes against its will, extending it to popular versions), and in whose activities the exhibition language

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takes up centre stage – the politically correct and successful museum, the pride of the president and paradise of the post-modern conservative museologist (the local traditional museum of a new generation); the local museum that takes up the role of a service provider, a museum conceived to be used by populations in consonance with their collective and personal needs, that is, a museum with noble aims but that, due to its character of “do it all”, is seldom taken seriously by the community and regulating institutions – the misunderstood museum or the first-aid museum; the local museum that holds as its fundamental action goal the promotion of local development, a museum open to all popular participation and with varied action fields centred on two main dimensions, the internal (promotion of the immaterial development of the populations – reinforcement of their identities, inclusion of specific sectors of the population, preservation of memory, in other words the dimensions both of specificities-keeping and the maintenance of local differences), and external (promotion of material development – strengthening of local visibility abroad, strengthening of tourist attraction, animation agent, agent of the local handcraft products valorisation by means of the promotion of innovation within tradition, in other words, the dimension of an agent sparking factors of territorial equity regarding other spaces). We speak of a museum whose difference regarding the previous one rests, above all, in the existence of parameters that guide its action (wider goals and specific aims materialised in the existence of action strategies culminating on an action programme – the museum’s strategic and operation plan, elaborated by means of the adoption of effectively participative methodologies) and in the fact of privileging collective actions on a local basis in detriment of actions with more individual aims or outlines – the promoting museum.

## Type (iii) museum and type (iv) museum



Reviewing the concept of real public under the light of the local museums, it is possible to state from the start that, even in its recent connotation of user, the concept provides no answer to the whole of the presented spectrum. If we leave aside the first case, for obvious reasons, one can say that this concept is only efficaciously adjusted to the second (ii) and, partially, to the third (iii).

Effectively, in the context of a museum that centres its activities under the perspective of local development promotion, the promoting museum (iv), the concept of the public only is meaningful when extended from the double dimension visitor/user to a third one, that of the direct or indirect beneficiary of the museum's action.

Let's take as an example the imaginary case of the Camarinhas do Mar Local Museum, which, after an intense and participative process of characterisation and situation diagnosis at the starting point, internal and external to the institution, has developed and established a set of general and specific action goals, unified and developed under a strategic and operational action plan, organising the strategic axis of intervention, means and actions.

This plan, which has guided action and imprinted coherence and rationality to the various annual activity plans, features two strategic intervention plans: strengthening of the immaterial and material conditions of support to the harmonious and sustained development on local basis (an vector directed, above all, to the creation of the internal sustainability conditions for the development process, thus biased towards internal action, specially within the immaterial domains – memory, local identity, social cohesion, struggle against the opacity of space, integration of sectors of the population, reinforcement of citizenship, fostering of direct action, resistance to uniformisation of factors resulting from external integration processes...); reinforcement of the visibility and external competitiveness of property and services on a local basis (axle biased towards the obtaining of surplus values and financial fluxes able to promote the material life quality, therefore biased towards action aiming the exterior, the valorisation of endogenous resources by means of touristic activity, touristic animation, improvement of the quality of handcraft products by means of innovation within tradition,

education of visitors aiming the promotion of responsible tourism and committed to the quality of the hosting place....).

Centring on the second strategic intervention axle (the external component of the museum action), there would be a measure, among others, geared towards the “Support to the improvement of the quality and authenticity of the touristic supply within the domain of the local restorative supply”. In this measure, composed by an already typified widened action options range (but susceptible to being complemented by others that the populations/agents consider pertinent), an action intended to foment the knowledge of local gastronomy composed by a handful of concrete converging initiatives was induced.

i) Having identified as a priority action, it was immediately worked on and developed by the museum *in tandem* with the interested population. As a result of this concrete programming effort, consensus reaching and responsibility allotment, the following initiatives were carried out with notable success:

ii) survey of the main traditional gastronomy dishes, by means of a collecting campaign among the population (meeting carried out and called by the museum, identification of the relevant characters for the job, direct and personal contacts);

iii) joint consideration with the interested population about each one of the recipes/dishes collected, in view of identification of the structuring elements in its elaboration (authenticity of the raw materials, confection process, confection tools used, energy sources...), compare the variants detected, its current viability, as well as the gathering of complementary elements that allow the awarding of an “identity note” to the dish and socially and economically contextualise it within the local history;

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- iv) joint consideration with the main interested parties and a group of regional gastronomy and tourism experts, aiming at the detection of the comparative originality of the recipes obtained, as well as its value in terms of touristic exploitation; selection of the main variants and recipes in view of the various opinions collected;
  - v) promotion and carrying out of a local gastronomy festival aiming to test the dishes' receptivity, as well as the authenticity of the flavours (possible blueprint for a periodical gastronomy event);
  - vi) elaboration of a publication along professional lines about the recipes, aiming its distribution among the sector's professionals;
  - vii) elaboration of a leaflet/catalogue for external diffusion of the local gastronomic panorama;
  - viii) temporary exhibition (aiming future itinerancy) about gastronomy and local agro-alimentary handcraft products;
  - ix) promotion of partnerships between local restaurants and local regulatory organisations regarding the touristic development (or with the museum itself in the lack of such structures), in view of the creation of the figure of the local traditional restaurant (helps in the establishment of dialogue and suggestions on the level of duties of the parties);
  - x) process follow up of and its periodical evaluation.

Type of Local Museum	Exequibility of the Type of Exemplified Initiatives	Conception of Public
<p><b>TYPE I</b> “the non-museum”</p>	<p>It would not be possible to perceive interventions of this breadth, scope and goals in this kind of museum, by force of its nature,</p>	<p>Not pertinent in face of the exemplified initiatives. In general, this kind of museum has an idea of the public that is inherent to it, and that, as is normal, will necessarily be restrictive (even in terms of potential visitors).</p>
<p><b>TYPE II</b> “the traditional local museum of a new generation”</p>	<p>It would be possible for this type of museum to develop some of the initiatives described in the example in question, specially those closer to its privileged scope of action and to the self-defined heritage preserving cultural vocation. Here, an academic survey of the set of recipes, the exhibition and public diffusion publication (catalogue).</p>	<p>Exhibition visitors and, marginally, whoever visited the museum’s venue with collateral aims.</p>
<p><b>TYPE III</b> “the first-aid museums”</p>	<p>These would be a kind of initiatives that would perfectly fit this kind of museum, providing someone from the outside sparked and conducted the process. However, as its genesis would be somewhat forced, neither internal articulation and rationality of the initiative would be secured, nor the necessary complementarities with the other initiatives in the other domains, this would be something gained. In terms of efficaciousness and efficiency these initiatives would always run the risk of featuring low performances.</p>	<p>Visitors and users in a wide sense, i.e., including all of those who, in some way, have directly interacted with the museological action (exhibition visitors, participants in the meetings and fora carried out, readers and addressees of the publications, elements of the populations inquired or interviewed...).</p>
<p><b>TYPE IV</b> “o museu promotor”</p>	<p>Initiatives completely fit this kind of museum. In addition, the museum can imprint the signification in terms of justification and results.</p>	<p>Visitors, users and all of the: remaining population segments who will extract, directly or indirectly, significant surplus values from the museum’s initiatives, that is, all of those who, in one way or another, have been or will be relevant beneficiaries of the museological action.</p>

Keeping in mind the above, the question that legitimately can be raised at this point is the following: considering only this handful of initiatives developed by the local museum, who is the public? The exhibition visitors? These and those who have read or will read the written material produced? All of the above and, additionally, the local restaurant owners? This universe plus those who have benefited or will benefit from the development of the local touristic sector?

The answer to such interrogation leads us, again, to the very typological evolution of the concept of local museum. Remembering the four types previously presented and the initiatives described above, the publics will surely be different.

Local museum type *versus* actions and publics

#### **4- Consequences of the extension of the notion of public**

The successive extensions of the concept of the public in local museums, if, on the one hand, have derived from a group of changes emerged from many quadrants (change in the concept of development, changes regarding the role of the local level in global development, changes in the very concept of local development, emergence of new valorisations of resources as development factors, new roles attributed to local institutions, new local regulation mechanisms...), which in turn reflected on deep reformulations of museological theories; on the other, these extensions are bearers of dynamics factors that act upon these very theories. Something that, being simultaneously effect and cause, remits to the field of dialectics.

Among many of these effects that express and induce the opening of the museum's action field, one of them merits particular attention: that which is attached to the evaluation/reading of the local

museums activities, that is, with the issue of the grid to be used to evaluate and read the museum's action within its contextualisation geographic milieu.

Effectively, if we allot to the traditional reading and evaluation grids, a lot of what goes on in the activity of the museological network escapes us. In truth, thinking of the most advanced museum types (Type IV and, partially, Type III), it precisely escapes us the core and deeper and noble substratum of its activity, its actions in different "boards" that exceed that of a mere cultural agent (or, considering it is the same, taking to the ultimate consequences this heritage/cultural vocation), taking up the role of active promoter and committed to the life quality of the place and places, which, hopefully in a more scientifically correct language, we finally designate sustained local development.

Thus, to the reading and evaluation grids that incorporate in practice only the number of visitors and of activities of exhibition and pedagogical nature, it is necessary to add, not only the number of people who, in some way, have directly interacted with the museum and the results taken from there, but also all of those who have benefited, in some way, from its action (even indirectly) and the kind of benefits produced. That is, it is necessary to extend the evaluation to the domain of the beneficiaries and the benefits related to the museum (which encompasses, *nota bene*, all other more traditional reading grids, since both visitor and user are also themselves beneficiaries).

Within this framework and in a more systematic way, the evaluation/reading of a new generation local museum should be guided by three great guidelines: the evaluation/reading centred on the public, understood within a widened perspective (visitors, user and beneficiaries), the evaluation/reading centred on the operations carried

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out (immaterial actions and material actions carried out) and the evaluation/reading centred on the impacts (the effects, initial and of long term, in the community, resulting from the museum's action).

The formal evaluation of the museological action is not the core of what we intend to develop, but instead we hope to bring attention to the need of incorporating new analysis dimensions in view of apprehending all the richness and complexity of the avant-garde museums' activities in terms of social intervention (that is, to understand the new museological formats in their totality). We thus take leave of more detailed considerations about the aims, timings and methods inherent to the process of formal evaluation.

In practical terms, the aims of such guidelines will have been fulfilled if, in some way, they have contributed not only to put away the obstacle-concept of the "small local museum, where the recesses of great traditional character cross with the fumes of a new ill-digested and worse assimilated new museology", but also to place a group of questions inherent to the socially committed new generation museums. How to apply the concept of the public was one of them, and how to undertake a reading of this new museological reality was another.

Both, in our understandings, are crucial for action and the evaluation within and of the local new generation museums. Not to understand this fact is to, as if digging sand, an endless battle: the more we make an effort to understand, by the accumulation of what is accessory, the more we part from the potential and the reality of the local base museological action.

**Notes**

<sup>[1]</sup> All in all, after an initial phase of a living confrontation of ideas and museological perspectives, save honourable exceptions, in a phase of uniformisation and mutual approximation.