

Introduction:**To understand New Museology in the 21st Century**

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When I was doing my bachelor's degree in museology at the University of Rio de Janeiro I heard from a teacher that the new museology was already an "old lady". It was the mid 90's, almost 30 years since the world of museums had been shaken by progressive initiatives that fought for the creation of better conditions for local communities to take control of their future by means of work with heritage. Ecomuseums, community museums and local museums had multiplied in countries such as France, Canada, Spain, Portugal and Mexico. They had their own specificities, but shared a lot in common: the concept of the integral museum adopted in the Round Table of Santiago of 1972; a political view based on grass-root approaches and community development; the spirit of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who advocated for the *conscientization* of men, much before the concept of empowerment was developed in the English speaking world. In 1984, a number of people related to these initiatives met in Quebec, where the Movement for a New Museology (MINOM) was born. Other individuals, such as Hugues de Varine, also played a crucial role in advocating for community museology¹. Various forms of community museology kept growing in the Latin world and elsewhere, as they do today. Some became conservative in their revolution, some carried the name but not

¹ For more information in English about the development of the New Museology see vol. 2 of Sociomuseology

the spirit, others pushed the boundaries of new museology. A complex world took shape as new initiatives and ideas emerged.

My teacher's idea about new museology being an "old lady" meant to me that it had already become a tradition. At the same time, the critical tone in his remark referred to the fact that a number of people who did not align themselves directly with the new museology also shared many of the views and means of the movement. Much had changed since the 70's.

In the last decades there has been a profound change in the world of museums as well as in new museology. In 1992, the Declaration of Caracas called for the acknowledgement of museums as means of communication in the service of communities. It proposed that museums would become social managers, working with communities to transform reality. Three years later, a publication in Brazil² aimed at discussing the impact of meetings such as this one and of others, including the Round Table of Santiago of 1972. It stated that, despite the fact that ideas upon which new museology was based have become influential in museological theory, too few changes had taken place in the daily practice of traditional museums.

I believe that the publication pre-empted the major turning point in relations between museums and society. Towards the end of the 90's, many forces contributed to the opening of a new chapter on participation in museum affairs. The sustainable development agenda, social inclusion policies in the UK, the strengthening of emancipation movements (such as the indigenous movements in North America) and the growing multiculturalism in European countries promoted a new age of transformations in museums. A renewed participation paradigm began to focus on the relations between museums and multiple (some new) stakeholders.

² Araújo, Marcelo and Bruno, Cristina. *A Memória do Pensamento Museológico Contemporâneo Brasileiro*. ICOM Brasil, 1995.

Dealing with stakeholders implied negotiation, influence and sharing of ownership.

These changes meant that the so-called traditional museums (an antagonism introduced by the new museologists themselves) shared many of the preoccupations of the new museology. In different parts of the globe, various ways of interacting with groups in society added further opportunities of using heritage as a resource and as a tool for understanding and transforming the world. In the English-speaking circles in Europe, this is usually labelled new museology too. The term was coined by Peter Vergo in 1989³ and since then has been widely used with reference to critical practice in museums, which involves work with communities.

It is important to note that the “Latin” new museology and the “British” new museology are not the same. Although often mistaken for each other, they have fundamentally different approaches to social development, as explained in the articles that follow this introduction. However, both are part of the same attempt to take museums into an age of increased democratization of museological tools and heritage processes. There is much to learn in dialogue.

In the new millennium changes continue to happen. Social movements, for instance, are appropriating heritage tools. Networked modes of organizing knowledge and action in society deeply influence museums.

The same way, the modes and means of the “Latin” new museology are also developing in time. The increasing human mobility, immigration and cultural hybridization, for example, represent fundamental forces of change. “Classic” types of new museums such as the ecomuseum multiplied in rural areas, not in urban environments. They were focused on the concept of locality-bounded communities, on local development and on the territory. But what happens when societies become more global, when the territory becomes more fragmented and fast-changing? What happens when the

³ Vergo, Peter (ed). *The New Museology*. Reaktion Books, London, 1989.

concept of community and the organization of social action take other forms? What happens when what makes a group of people into a community is not mainly their shared experience in the territory, but their shared condition in society as in the case of minorities? What happens when what drives people to action is mainly the desire to propose a new project of society as is the case with social movements, many times operating in networks?

Is new museology relevant today? Yes. Ecomuseums and community museums grow and multiply. In some cases, as said before, they carry the name but not the spirit. But in many places they continue to strive for community empowerment and for local development. They are not frozen in time and new approaches are being developed in order to adapt to the imperatives of the 21st Century. Also, other means of working with heritage and development continue to be tested.

A very important movement is the conceptualization of sociomuseology, a field of research and practice, which draws from the experiences and principles of the “Latin” new museology. Sociomuseology can be seen as the result of new museology’s maturity. It concerns the study of the social role of museums and heritage as well as of the changing conditions in society that frame their trajectories. Sociomuseology is a way of understanding museums and heritage and a way of acting upon the world. One could say it bears the philosophy of new museology and brings it into a broader context. This is possible because we believe that the solutions proposed by new museology have been above all attempts to respond to existing problems and conditions. It means that its forms and methods are secondary to its goals and principles. In other words: society changes new museology changes.

Today, the idea of sociomuseology is expanding geographically. Three important gateways are the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technology in Portugal, MINOM International and the Brazilian Institute of Museums. Also the

Reinwardt Academy⁴, faculty of Cultural Heritage of the Amsterdam School of the Arts, is having a role in thinking of the “Latin” new museology and sociomuseology in connection with other practices and approaches. The Reinwardt Academy is a fertile environment for this since it has always seen itself as a meeting point of different traditions in the field of museology. This is in great part thanks to the active participation of lecturers in the international field and to the exchange with international scholars and practitioners contributing to our programmes. Besides the bachelors degree in cultural heritage, the Reinwardt Academy offers an international masters degree programme in museology.

At the Reinwardt Academy, we have the conviction that an increasing globalized world calls for exchange of knowledge and for the creation of new knowledge that can fulfil new demands in society. New museology(ies), sociomuseology, social inclusion and ideas on participation have their own specificities and specialities. They can learn from each other. Perhaps with this we can think of tailor-made understandings and alternatives to different and new conditions of working with heritage, people and development that are increasingly intercultural, hybrid and globalized.

For this reason, in the academic year 2009-2010, the master’s degree programme offered two workshops which explored the dialogue between new museology and other practices and ideas. They aimed at experimenting and testing the limits of this dialogue.

The 4-week workshop on Professionalism focused on theoretical connections. It explored the meanings of grass-root participation in museological (heritage) processes and the implications for the role of the heritage professional. The workshop focused on the process of participation, which covered different underlying principles, motivations, and historical and theoretical frameworks. Discussions included the historical development and contents of the “Latin” new

⁴ www.reinwardtacademy.nl

museology, the new participation paradigm of the 90's, and the role of social movements. The students were asked to write a final paper on the theme of "Grass-root participation and professional development in the heritage field- possibilities and challenges for the 21st Century". An important reference was the work of Manuel Castells about the power of identity in the network society⁵.

In the 10-week workshop Project Management focused on practical experiment. The students were asked to work in a real project in cooperation with the Amsterdam Historical Museum. The museum wanted to test the possibility of working with inhabitants of the Dapperbuurt, the neighbourhood of the Reinwardt Academy in an exhibition project about neighbourhood shops. We started from a theoretical framework that combined principles of new museology and grass-root participation, work with stakeholders and communities of practice (CoPs). The aim was to propose a framework for two stakeholders (the Amsterdam Historical Museum and the Reinwardt Academy) to engage in a conversation and hopefully cooperation with other stakeholders in the neighbourhood. The students wrote advice for the museum about the possibilities and implications of working with local communities of practice. For that, they talked with organizations and individuals of the Dapperbuurt by means of interviews, meetings and even working from a market stall.

Three of the theoretical papers were selected for this publication. They were chosen for the quality of their information and for providing new and creative views. Each in their own way reflects the experimental character of the workshops in their proposal to create a dialogue of ideas. For various reasons, the language barrier being a very important one, these different approaches to grass-root participation still remain rather isolated from each other. Therefore, these

⁵ Castells, Manuel. *The Power of Identity (The information age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. 2)*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.

essays are also speculative... and perhaps somewhat provocative.

In addition, five students were also asked to write an essay about their views and experience in the project with the Amsterdam Historical Museum. They looked at the subject from a stakeholders perspective. They explored the idea of negotiating among different epistemological traditions and among different interests when it comes to acting in the city of Amsterdam.

These essays are the result of intellectual experimentation and of speculative minds. They offer valuable information and ways of experimenting with connections. I hope they will also serve as stimulus to further dialogue.

About the author:

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