

## **Transformative Museology**

### **Rebecca Weldon**

“...we have to take into account the fact that museology and museums are two completely different things.” Martin R. Shärer<sup>1</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, growing populations produced a growing body of heritage. The transmission of this heritage to succeeding generations coalesced into three major modern institutions: universities, library/archives and museums. Traditional systems of social and cultural memory had become overloaded and therefore evolved conceptually. This evolution took place within the primary context of a naturally occurring museology through the process I call *museogenesis*.

The term *museogenesis* refers to the origin and development of museological thought in a specific cultural context. By museological thought, I refer to ideas and theories surrounding the parameters of “the natural and cultural heritage, the activities concerned with the preservation and communication of this heritage, the institutional frame-work, and society as a whole” (Mensch 1992). This broadly inclusive definition relates museology to another broadly defined concept: cultural context. By cultural context, I refer to the “webs of significance and systems of meaning which is the collective property of a group” (Geertz 1973).

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<sup>1</sup> ICOFOM Study Series – ISS 34, 2003, ISS 34\_03.pdf, p.7

The process of museogenesis has structural, descriptive, experiential and linguistic components. Its structure is linked in each context, to ethical and hierarchical conceptions relating to memory, its knowledge and accessibility. The descriptive component is revealed by collection, i.e.: what is preserved. How this preserved heritage is used by its owners speaks to the experiential side of museogenesis and, finally, the process of museogenesis informs this transformation of heritage with linguistic association: new terminology describes the newly created form.

I have described this process in a paper entitled "Museogenesis in Siam"<sup>2</sup>. It is not my intention to reiterate the results of that research, which, I believe, identifies and describes the process. My intention here is to carry this thinking forward and consider the implications that museogenesis has for the field of theoretical museology, working toward a conceptual approach which I name *transformative museology*, based within the human function of memory as expressed by the process of museogenesis. This means the expression, both tangible and intangible, of the structure of heritage, redefined in the primary context and emerging in new forms to which future generations of museologists will develop and apply techniques, continuing and deepening the relationship between museums and society.

The first problem that is posed by this concept is identification of the ongoing process of museogenesis in the current context; one must know where to look in order to find the clues. It is very important, therefore, to look into the past and see how concepts of heritage have been expressed and how they have evolved. In a practical sense, this cannot be separated from the tools available to humankind at any given

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<sup>2</sup> 2004, Final paper, course in Theoretical Museology, Reinwardt Academie, Amsterdam,

time: conceptual thought and technologies. By the same token, the museologist must understand how the use of these tools describe and modify the concept of heritage. Importantly, previous paradigms function as elements in the *museological matrix*<sup>3</sup> within which the process occurs, including the institutional framework. For this reason, the effect of current institutions on museological thought must be evaluated on a regular basis in order to allow for the discernment of both congruence and conflict.

This transformative approach to museology is already evident in many functions of museums today. For example, the communication function offers methodologies to study the visitor. The ontological function of examining the nature of being of the visitor within the museum, however, is often compromised by these same methodologies. The realist approach dominates because it is linked to technical functions of the museum, functions which describe the object of knowledge as having certain properties. The communication process is, therefore, designed to communicate them. Visitor studies, subsequently, investigate the success of the communication. Failure to communicate suggests that underlying realities of heritage imply a much more complex process. Therefore we, as a result of this experience as museologists in the museum context, have moved toward a conceptualist approach that incorporates the culture of the mind and deals with the hazy field between realism and cognition. Science centers, in particular, have been challenged and transformed by dealing with this problem.

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<sup>3</sup> Concept developed by Gabriel Gaytan-Ariza, 2002, unpublished research during fellowship in museology at Rai Mae Fah Luang, a museum operated by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, Under Royal Patronage in Chiang Rai, Thailand. His groundbreaking elaboration of the processes and functions of the museological matrix reflects the cultural context of the museum's particular form.

Where the problem is less evident and more difficult to pinpoint is in the realm of theoretical elucidation of and procedural response to ethical challenges that come into play in a globalized world. Creation of meaning and, by implication, promotion of equity, lay twinned at the heart of this issue, having individual and social ramifications. Because the museological matrix is dynamic, undergoing transformation through the process of museogenesis, the creation of forms that are expressive of meaning is informed by the primary social context. These forms evolve through a series of stages, beginning with an idea linking ethics, value and use of heritage, concretizing with the development of structural, descriptive, expressive and linguistic components and formalized through application upon the museological matrix itself. Herein lays the dynamo that impels transformation.

As the primary context of heritage expands in dynamic interaction with the museological matrix, human diversity comes into play. Knowledge preserved serves the expansion of knowledge and thought. Technological development, in forms from books, to television to the internet ensures that knowledge is increasingly accessible to all. Knowledge accessed enters local realms of thought and experience through an explorative process encouraged by international paradigms of equity inculcated in fundamental structures that govern development in this globalized age. The peculiar identity of museological forms around the world is based in and created by philosophical paradigms that are part of our diverse global cultural heritage from the broad base on the ground to the apex of the museological discourse and derived from concrete implementation of museological thought at all levels of this structure.

### *Ethical imperatives*

Museologists must move out of the schismogenetic context of the current museology discourse and return to the primary context as observers so to record how museological thought is

currently operating within society (and societies), not as a discourse, but rather as a cultural trait identifiable as an essential tool for knowledge exploration, meaning creation and source for the evolution and transformation of models of action in the field. The object of study should be the process of differentiation of museological thought and its outcomes. This differentiation might be said to have three basic outcomes in the museological field:

- Complete fusion with new forms
- Elimination of either old or new forms
- Persistence of differentiation between forms in dynamic equilibrium

Ethical issues will, predictably, focus upon preservation of diversity in the use of heritage by human beings on a global scale. Heretofore embedded at the heart of the museological discourse have been the either/or issues of technique vs. discipline, institution vs. theory, professionalization vs. innovation. In fact, museology has special characteristics precisely because it links the manifestation of material culture with human thought, technology with meaning, scholarship with creativity. Museology is not an either/or discipline; it is inclusive as well as diverse, causing some to question whether it exists at all as a definable area of study. Ironically, preservation of these linkages is an essential professional duty of those committed to the discipline. Not only would the discipline not have evolved without the participation of scholars from all areas of knowledge; the elaboration of fundamental tasks and ethical responsibilities embodied in museum work would have been impossible without them. By the same token, the discipline has been essentially characterized by its attention to the study of all properties of the object, facilitating the incorporation of cognitive and technological insight into the functioning and subsequent definition of museological forms.

To conclude, through this dynamic process, museology has now come into its own as a separate discipline, owing to its creators the same respect each human being owes to its forebears. It is embedded in its cultural context and its identity is created through webs of meaning and significance created by the exploratory fusion of material culture and thought on the part of both museologists and participants in museological forms. This synthetic and dynamic approach requires not only the preservation of what has been learned, but, the continual evaluation and assessment of technique and application within an expanding context.

#### *The meta-museological context*

Global museological differentiation has been mediated in the post-WW2 period by a series complementary relationships producing dependence (Ex.: access to archaeological sites for sharing research, attendance of conferences in return for access to collections), promoting respect and submission (Ex.: legal conformity in the fight against trafficking in antiquities in exchange for recognition) and cooperation (Ex.: application of standard models in return for access to workshops, conferences, research, grants, other funding, etc...). While this approach has been successful for the last 50 years, it contains within the seeds of fragmentation, the appearance of which we can see in the differentiation of contemporary museological forms developed on a global scale that exist outside what we might call the standardized institutional framework.

As a result of this, the museological discourse has been characterized by a huge diversity of views emerging from the reality on the ground. Museological communication, i.e. regular, democratically structured, meetings of international, regional, national agencies within a context of tolerance has, ultimately, concretized diverse perspectives within the discourse, evidenced in the increasingly theoretical nature of narratives within subsets of participation. The above factors

are creating, precisely because of their reciprocity, defensive, competitive relationships, producing schismogenesis around differentiations. While some may view this as divisive, it is more useful to see this as an element in the process of museogenesis, as a fundamental trait of museology, as a tool for the exploration of the museological matrix across cultures.

### *Museogenesis in the global context*

The nature of museogenesis is such that it is operational in the museological matrix based within the primary context. Since the primary context evolves and produces a wide variety of museological thought, it also provides creative energy essential to the functioning of the matrix, facilitating innovation and change in some institutions as well as contributing to the reduction in relevance in others. Knowledge synthesis is based in and essential to the human function of integrating diverse thinking for creative outcomes. The impulse to museological thought is directed in many different directions. Sometimes it gains momentum by being shared by a significant group and sidelines those participating in the so-called “mainstream” museological discourse. This is not to say, by any means, that the achievements of the past in the museological field lose their value; however, they may lose relevancy. Contemporary forms may come to represent significant competition for audiences; models of existing functions may become transformed and integrated into new forms; they may also continue to exist in a stable, unchanged form. Accordingly, they may be discarded as time goes by. By and large, this is determined by their continued relevancy to evolving museological thought in the primary context, of which all, even we museologists, form a part.

Since there is an inherent relationship between museological thought and the concrete forms it takes and, given that many of the currently accepted templates developed in the West are now spreading through the rest of the world in a global

process of cultural change, I take up hypothesized elements necessary for identification of the process of museogenesis in the global context:

- A structural aspect of unity: museogenesis is classificatory, descriptive and reflective of the hierarchical values and social relationships in a particular society. These values and relationships change through time and may represent fusion with, rejection of or synthesis with accepted forms.
- The affective aspects of unity: meaning is created in the new form producing affective behavior which characterizes its experiential aspect. Everything from architecture and management to communication and preservation reflect these affective aspects and are rooted in cultural identity.
- Chronological and spatial unity: museogenesis produces structural, descriptive, affective and linguistic elements in sequence and within the confines of the new form.
- Sociological unity: museogenesis produces forms that are either integrated into or discarded within the sociological context over a period of time. In other words, their continued existence is related to categories of social meaning and relevance.

### *Legitimation*

The evolving nature of museological thought is exemplified in its relative position in legal and political structures. While worldwide, international, initiatives exist to define and organize the conceptual manifestation of the museum, there is something unique about the museological collection and its use in contemporary life. Evolving toward a consensus of preservation, it takes some time before it is even considered worthy of attention from the legal and political perspective. Perhaps this has some relation to the fact that, while in the

private field it is somehow respected for what it is, in reciprocal relationship to what it is not yet, but, may become in the future.

In this sense, the legitimating process in the case of museological forms is linked to that of creativity and governed by issues of equity, from the protection of freedom of thought and expression to the prosecution of antiquities dealers and copyright infringers. By the same token, moving through the diverse list of existing forms, those linked to structures of national or international political and social power are more exhaustively identified and regulated according to generally accepted standards. Legitimation, therefore, is an important indicator of relevancy, whether for elimination, persistence and/or integration and, as such, may be used as a predictor.

#### *Where do we go from here?*

- What is the nature and description of the problem? The object of study for transformative museology is the process of differentiation in museological forms and attendant outcomes in the museological discourse.
- Identify and define museological forms developed by participants in the museological discourse through a brief historical overview and survey of current developments
- Definition of the currently evolving meta-museological context. Describe congruence between global paradigms of cultural change, development and recent narratives of museological experience within the context of the museological discourse.
- Relate this to values given to and use of museological thought in diverse cultural contexts. Focus upon the evolution of institutions for heritage preservation, cultural centers, commercial uses of heritage for tourism, incorporation of cultural studies in educational curricula.
- Identification of structural, descriptive, expressive and linguistic elements.

- Systematize the relationship between primary context, museological thought, museogenesis and emergence of museological forms.
- Identify elements of transformative museology that are operative within the museological discipline. Identify structural, descriptive, expressive and linguistic aspects of the discipline.
- Show how the linkage between the museological discourse, museologists and professional application within museums provides a window upon the functions of the museological matrix.
- Show how diversity of views within evolving global paradigms accounts for the functions and the evolution of the discipline itself.
- Discuss the import of this and how the dynamic interaction between theory and application has created the field, accounting for, first, its development within the museum, secondly, its linkage to heritage preservation and, thirdly, its developing relationship with technology, cognitive science and questions of being.
- Propose steps and procedures to implement transformative museology as a professional analytic and predictive tool for museologists.

### **About the author**

Formerly curator for the Mae Fah Luang Foundation, Under Royal Patronage, I work as a museologist in Chiang Rai, Thailand. My current projects include organizing and training an entirely volunteer staff at a local temple museum and the conceptual design of a museological cooperative based in hill area villages.

### **Statement:**

Someone once said that if one were required to write a job description for what I do, it would be impossible. Working in museums within the Golden Triangle has fostered resourcefulness, based upon the task at hand and the available means for a successful outcome. My perspective upon museology is practical, for the forms with which we are familiar in the West are not always what work in the East. I base my optimistic attitude in the belief that

every culture has a methodology for management, documentation, preservation and communication, methods that can be reconciled with global standards and justified in the realm of ethical behavior. They contribute to the ongoing transformation of the present into the future and are fundamentally linked to the creation of culture.

Mae Fah Luang Foundation, Under Royal Patronage  
Rai Mae Fah Luang Museum (1998-2008)

[http://www.maefahluang.org/mfl\\_art\\_cultural\\_park.php](http://www.maefahluang.org/mfl_art_cultural_park.php)

Also on Virtual Collection of Masterpieces: under Museums/Thailand

<http://masterpieces.asemus.museum/>

The temple museum project (Wat Phra Kaew 2008-Present):

<http://www.watphrakaew-chiangrai.com/eng/museum.php>