

## **The community museum: a space for the exercise of communal power.<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper discusses two key elements in the field of museums: a summary of the concept of the community museum, on the one hand, and, on the other, a proposal as to how this concept is put into practice, especially in the early stages of the creation of the museum, when the social basis for the project is being established. We will discuss how the community museum combines and integrates complex processes aimed at strengthening the community as a collective subject, asserting its identity, improving its quality of life and building alliances between communities. In the second part, which has a methodological focus, we will discuss how the museum is born out of community aspirations to strengthen its identity and integrity, the initial process of consensus-building, the roles of different agents, both internal and external to the community, as well as some factors that foster or prevent community appropriation. To conclude we will emphasize the potential of community museum networks as a strategy to generate a broader field of action, in which communities can exercise greater autonomy, by collectively

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developing and appropriating projects of regional and even international scope.

To begin our reflection on the concept of the community museum, we shall develop a comparison with the idea of 'living history museum' which has been disseminated in various media as similar to the community museum. This starting point will enable us to avoid confusion and highlight the specificity of our proposal.

One first consideration is that the museum is never a direct expression of life itself, a piece of life torn from reality and displayed in a venue. The museum is always an interpretation of life, a specific, meaningful selection of reality. If we do not underline this aspect, we run the danger of hiding the interpretation and the author of the interpretation. One needs to ask, "who 'lived' the history presented in the museum? Who is telling the story?"

The word "living" refers us, on one hand, to what is authentic, to what is part of the living experience of different cultures and societies. But we must recall, as Tony Bennett said, "the museum visitor is never in a relationship of direct, unmediated contact with the 'reality of the artefact', and hence with the 'real stuff' of the past. Indeed, this illusion, this fetishism of the past, is itself an effect of discourse. For the seeming concreteness of the museum artefact derives from its verisimilitude; that is, from the familiarity that results from its being placed in an interpretative context which conforms to a tradition and thus is made to resonate with representations of the past which enjoy a broader social circulation."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, historic representations may seem "alive" or authentic, simply because they render concrete interpretations which we have seen repeatedly, and which have gained legitimacy due to their association with broadly disseminated images about a community or culture.

Nowadays, the aspect of being "alive" may refer to another aspect of cultural representations, namely, to the

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics, New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 146-147.

degree to which they capture movement and animation, and are capable of entrancing all the senses in a high impact, highly spectacular experience. A simulation of life in past times, which uses all the resources of modern technology to recreate sounds, smells and movement, can be considered "living history".

Pine and Gilmore propose that the changes brought about by the processes of globalization have allowed the creation of a new economic form, the "experience economy". In this new economy, almost all great transnational entertainment companies have started projects to develop "destinations of urban entertainment", founded on themed scripts, an aggressive marketing, round-the-clock operations, distance between visitors and place, and a dependency on spectacularity.<sup>3</sup> For example, in Japan there is a multitude of theme parks such as "the village of the Turkish culture", "the Yamaguchi village of New Zealand", and "the Canadian world". Says Hannigan, "in these simulated enclaves of ethnicity, one gets riskless risk: parks do away with nuisances of travel such as paperwork, crowded flights, foreign languages, and, most of all, crime".<sup>4</sup>

For us it is important to clarify: the community museum is not a "living history" museum understood as an enclave of simulated ethnicity, a setting which recreates history, myth and folklore in an antiseptic and safe space for visitors, a space which trivializes the deepest meanings, which decontextualizes the culture from the reality of poverty and exclusion peoples live. But above all it is not a site where the animation of the presentation hides the voice of those who speak, and peoples' right to speak for themselves, about themselves. The idea is not that the object should come to life

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph B. Pine y James H. Gilmore, The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 1999, pp. 11-12, cited by Martin Hall, "The Reappearance of the Authentic" in Museum Frictions, Ivan Karp y Corinne A. Kratz, eds., Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 70-101.

<sup>4</sup> John Hannigan, Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 101.

in the museum, but rather that social subjects, communities and peoples, should project their lives as interpreters and authors of their history.

Paolo Freire states that man is a subject because he is a being of relations, capable of reflection, of critical thought, of historical awareness; a being who can choose, create and transform reality. To be a subject is man's ontological calling, to which he cannot renounce without becoming a mere spectator of events, a passive receptor, an object.<sup>5</sup> As we see it, the community museum is a tool for the construction of collective subjects; communities may appropriate the museum to enrich their relations, to develop awareness of their history, to foster reflection and critical analysis, and to create projects to transform their collective future.

Being a subject involves self-knowledge, and the community museum is a tool for communities to build collective self-knowledge. Multiple forms of participation contribute to this end; all community members who are engaged in the museum by selecting the themes to be studied, by participating in oral history or design workshops, by interviewing or being interviewed, by collecting objects, taking photos, or contributing a drawing, are learning more about himself/herself, and at the same time learning about the community he/she belongs to. They are building a collective interpretation of their reality and their history.

Being a subject likewise implies creativity, and the community museum fosters collective creation as it provides people with an opportunity to participate in processes to express their stories in their own way. The creative person does not accept given solutions, but rather seeks to invent new ways of addressing challenges, and the community museum is a site to promote new proposals and community projects.

Therefore, the community museum is a different option from the "mainstream" or traditional museum. The museum

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<sup>5</sup> Paolo Freire, La educación como práctica de la libertad, México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1975, pp. 28-45.

institution emerged through a history of concentration of power and wealth, and in many cases reflected the ability of dominant groups to exhibit treasures and trophies taken from other peoples. For instance, to Napoleon, Paris was the place where works of art had “their true place, to honour progress and the arts, under the care and in the hands of free men”, and he filled the Louvre with trophies of war from conquered territories.<sup>6</sup> The community museum has a different origin: its collections are not the result of plunder or expensive acquisitions, but rather the consequence of conscious decisions to support a collective initiative. The community museum emerges, not to display the reality of the other, but to tell the community’s own particular story. It develops as community members freely donate heritage objects and elaborate stories of their collective memory.

In the community museum the object is not the dominant value but rather collective memory which is vitalized by the recreation and reinterpretation of meaningful stories. Ansaldi points out “no one can live with a brutal amputation of memory”; in other words, we cannot remember who we are, we cannot be subjects if we do not recreate and elaborate our memory.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the members of a community use the community museum to remember how things were before, to relive events and practices which marked their lives. But the museum is also a tool to analyze memory, to re-interpret the past and identify what has been learned from past experiences.

In the community museum people invent a way of telling their stories, and in this way they participate defining their own identity instead of consuming imposed identities.

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<sup>6</sup> The text quoted comes from the Convention Decree, in Messidor of the year II, cited by Germain Bazin, in “El museo del Louvre”, Museos: Comunicación y Educación, Antología Comentada, ed. Graciela Schmilchuk, México, INBA, 1987, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Waldo Ansaldi, “La memoria, el olvido y el poder”, Seminario das Mercocidades: Cidade e Memoria na Globalizacao [“Memory, forgetting and power”, Seminar of the Mercocities: the City and Memory in Globalization], Porto Alegre, Brasil, 2000, p.23.

They create new knowledge instead of conforming to a dominant view, to the prevailing interpretation of national history, which always excludes them and eliminates them from the record. They struggle against a history of devaluation, by valuing their stories and the daily events of community life. Thus, they appropriate an institution created for the elite to assert and legitimize their own values.

The community museum becomes a tool to manage heritage through grassroots, community organizations in which communal power is asserted. On one hand, it serves to maintain or recover possession of the community's material cultural heritage, and on the other it allows the re-appropriation of intangible heritage by elaborating its meaning in the community's own terms. Through the museum the community strives to exert power over its patrimony, and resist expropriation. This struggle is carried out through its own organizational forms, the communal assembly, or others. In these grassroots organizations, community members determine what to present in the museum, how it should be run, and which priorities it should address.

Thus, the community museum does not respond to decisions of central authorities, either in its contents or in its operation. It is bonded to instances of local government which more directly represent the community, but it does not depend on state or federal institutions. The group that runs the museum is a community-based entity, whether it is connected to local government or constituted as a non-governmental organization. Throughout time, it fosters the development of skills, experiences and social resources that strengthen its ability to be self-regulated and autonomous. It does not promote vertical, dependent relations to authorities but rather horizontal relations between community members and with other communities as well.

As it is a tool to generate awareness, the community museum necessarily brings forth the need for action. It is a site in which consciousness of history leads to initiatives intended to intervene in that history and change it. Projects arise to strengthen traditional culture, to develop new forms of

expression, to assert the value of popular art, to generate community-controlled tourism. The museum propitiates multiple initiatives to address the needs of and empower different community groups. It also develops exchanges with a wide range of similar communities, identifying common interests and forging alliances which enable joint projects to be carried out.

Waldo Ansaldi reminds us of George Orwell's words: "Those who control the past, control the future: those who control the present control the past", and quotes Milan Kundera, when he states: "people want to be masters of the future to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and history rewritten".<sup>8</sup> The community museum is an option that contributes to control communities' future by controlling their past. It is an instrument to enable community decision-making entities to exert power over the memory which feeds their future aspirations.

The community museum is a process, rather than a product. It integrates complex processes of constitution of the collective community subject through reflection, self-knowledge and creativity; processes that consolidate community identity by legitimizing its own histories and values; processes that improve the quality of community life, through multiple projects for the future; and processes that strengthen the community's capacity for action through the creation of networks with similar communities. This is a collective process which comes to life within the community; it is a museum "of" the community, not built from the outside "for" the community. The community museum is a tool to foster self-determination, strengthening communities as collective subjects that create, recreate and make decisions that shape their reality.

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<sup>8</sup> Waldo Ansaldi, "La memoria, el olvido y el poder", Seminario das Mercocidades: Cidade e Memoria na Globalizacao ["Memory, forgetting and power", Seminar of the Mercocities: the City and Memory in Globalization], Porto Alegre, Brasil, 2000, p.1 and p.3.

To address the second issue of this paper, we will now examine the methods to create and develop community museums, which reflect the concept sketched out above, since the processes that community museums generate are more relevant than the product of their exhibitions.

There are three fundamental stages in the development of a community museum: a first stage in which the initiative arises and the first consensus-building processes are carried out; a second stage during which the different community organizations and groups engage in activities to create the museum; and a third stage in which the museum develops its daily activities and projects. In this presentation we will discuss only the first stage, which is of fundamental importance to lay the basis for the museum's connection to the community. In this stage it is possible to observe how the birth of the museum responds to community needs, the bond that is created with decision-making entities, the roles played by the different agents, internal and external to the community, and some conditions that promote or hinder community appropriation.

The project to create a museum springs from deep community interests and concerns, which are related to its disadvantageous position regarding global processes and the need to legitimize its values and experiences. These concerns build up gradually, like an underground current, and become apparent in critical moments, or when certain factors catalyze or trigger their manifestation.

We can point to different examples of this phenomenon, especially of community museums of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, which we know more closely. In them fortuitous archaeological findings and formal archaeological excavations sparked interest in the creation of community museums in Santa Ana del Valle, San José el Mogote, Santiago Suchilquitongo, San Martín Huamelulpan and Cerro Marín. In 1986, the mayor of Santa Ana del Valle stated the issue as follows:

"When the town square was remodelled, that is when these archaeological pieces came to light. When I saw



those pieces I said, these here, they will not go anywhere. These pieces will not go elsewhere, they will remain here. I said that because we will found a museum here and here these works will be displayed, so that Santa Ana can also have what belonged to its ancestors who were totally craftsmen too”.<sup>9</sup>

This testimony helps underline two elements: the catalysing effect of the accidental discovery of heritage objects, and the deep concern aroused to avoid the loss of cultural heritage, the need to assert possession of ancestral objects and keep them in the community. Many community museums have similar histories. The triggering events include archaeological finds and excavations, the loss of documents regarding land tenure (San Miguel del Progreso), the theft of jewellery from the figure of the patron saint (San Juan Mixtepec), the preservation of an extraordinary object (San Miguel Tequixtepec's codex), or the gradual development of archaeological collections (San Pedro and San Pablo Tequixtepec, San Pedro Tututepec, Santa María Cuquila, San José Chichihualtepec).

In the case of San Miguel Tequixtepec, a municipal authority explained why the village decided to display its extraordinary codex in a historic building donated for the museum:

“Our neighbours participated because, more than anything, there had been a long-standing desire, not just recently but for many years, and now the village wanted to give it the place it deserves”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, precipitating events have impact when there is a wide-spread longing, and awareness emerges of community

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<sup>9</sup> Interview of Othón Martínez by Teresa Morales Lersch, Santa Ana del Valle, Tlacolula, Oaxaca, June 2000, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Interview of Alberto López Córdoba by Teresa Morales Lersch, San Miguel Tequixtepec, Coixtlahuaca, Oaxaca, December 1996, p. 2.

member's connection to objects and practices that constitute a common heritage of their ancestral past.

“To the village, [the museum] is a memory of our ancestors. A memory, like an inheritance. Like things that belonged to my mother, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, we treasure them, we never want to sell them. These are things that were useful to our grandparents, our great-grandparents”.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, one of the needs the museum responds to is the wish to honor the bond to one's ancestors, to pay them tribute, to give them the place they deserve. Also, the possession of material cultural heritage affirms the community's capacity to perpetuate itself in the future, because it is perceived as an inheritance which establishes its historical rights. Just as one inherits the collective rights over land, over water, over communal buildings, through cultural heritage one receives a legacy, “a treasure”, from previous generations, which must be defended as a basis of the village's integrity and authority. The museum is a way of protecting this legacy and handing it down to the children and youth of the community.

In community members' perception, there is no separation between tangible and intangible heritage, because the inheritance of material artifacts and the practice of traditions are part of the same ancestral legacy. They aspire to preserve both the grandparents “things” and the grandparents' stories; they strive to protect both the object and the memory.

“We needed the museum to recover our history, to work with our own identity. What to do to strengthen our cultural identity, which is weakening by the impact of emigration. There are people who say, “I am not Zapotec. I am not a member of an indigenous people.”

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<sup>11</sup> Interview of Mateo García by Teresa Morales Lersch, Santa Ana del Valle, Tlacolula, Oaxaca, June 2000, p.6.

Cultural identity is an element we should not underestimate".<sup>12</sup>

It should be stressed that these needs are articulated from within the community, by social agents who are part of the community. Certain individuals give voice to needs that are felt by many, and start a process which engages many community members, rendering more and more collective what began as an individual concern. The response from community groups confirms that the need is shared. As they build on their own initiative, both the first proponents and community groups which join in the effort take responsibility for the development of the project. The relationship of the museum to local needs, the birth of the initiative from within the community, and the expansion of community engagement, are characteristics which make it a community museum.

We have observed that diverse kinds of community leaders may take the original initiative, such as traditional authorities (elders with important roles in their communities), municipal authorities, teachers or young people who develop cultural projects. In some cases individual artisans or organizations of artisans embark on a museum project, or the idea is developed by farmers, retired employees, or emigrants who return to their village with a renewed commitment to their community. The actions they develop at the outset of the project are extremely varied; they seek guidance, organize talks and lectures, develop small temporary exhibitions, collect and exhibit historical photographs, organize many kinds of workshops, and so forth; one group began by organizing presentations of local musicians every Sunday in the town square.

However if the initiative remains confined to the original proponents, it will have difficulty in prospering as a community project. It will be identified by community members as the particular project of a certain individual or group. For

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<sup>12</sup> Interview of Narciso Aquino Juan, by Teresa Morales Lersch, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, November, 2007, p.3.

community ownership to develop, the project must be taken to different community groups for consultation; it must become a general concern, to be decided upon in the decision-making bodies that resolve on matters of collective interest.

How consensus is generated is different in each community, according to its history, culture, and specific decision-making procedures. In many indigenous villages in America, the communities hold general meetings with broad participation in which communal projects are debated and agreed upon. This is the case of many villages in Oaxaca, where the general assembly is the highest authority and fundamental decision-making body. The general assembly usually brings together all the adult men in the town, who are considered family representatives, and increasingly includes women. This assembly elects the highest authorities of the village, discusses and approves community projects and resolves important conflicts. It is somewhat similar in the Comarca Kuna of Panama, where the kuna villages decide on all collective matters in community assemblies or congresses. In indigenous communities of America we find diverse complex traditions which enable them to solve daily conflicts and develop collective initiatives.

It is also possible to build consensus through a process of consultation with a broad range of associations and organized community groups. An illustrative example is Santiago Matatlán, in Oaxaca. Here the project was initiated by a group of young adults, who requested that the municipal authorities call a meeting of the various communal organizations: the body of villagers who use communal lands, associations created to administrate communal wells, and parent committees for the local schools. This meeting included 184 citizens, who approved the project to create the museum. Another significant example is the town of Rabinal in Guatemala. The initiator of the project was the Association for the Integral Development of the Victims of Verapaces Maya-Achi of Rabinal (ADIVIMA), created to support the victims of violence during the armed conflict of the 1980s. ADIVIMA invited a group of non-governmental organizations to support

the project, including the School Maya Jun Tok, the Academy of the Mayan Language, the Association for the Defence of Women and an association for Legal Advice on Human Rights. By organizing temporary exhibitions, representatives of these organizations were able to establish relations with the municipal authorities and the town's elementary and secondary schools. Nowadays, an executive board representing the various organizations runs the museum, carrying out several projects with adults and young people of the community in a building ceded by the municipality.

Although in this paper we cannot analyze the conditions that enable consensus to be reached in different cases, we mention these two examples to stress the feasibility of reaching agreements with broad community participation in various contexts. In this process, the initial proponents of the project do not remain isolated; instead they develop relationships with a variety of community groups, each of which contributes their own voice to the collective enterprise. In the intense effort of creating networks with multiple groups, the original proponents of the project must raise a series of fundamental issues: is it important to create a community museum or not? Who should be elected to the museum committee? Which themes should the museum research and present? By considering these issues diverse community organizations become involved in taking an active stance towards their cultural heritage.

In the initial consensus-building process, so significant to lay the groundwork for the project, it is very important to establish the team of community representatives which will coordinate the effort to create and develop the museum. Community appropriation will be generated both by broad community consultation and the creation of operative teams which can implement the decisions taken. In this way the coordination of the project will be carried out by community representatives who can receive advice and guidance from all kinds of specialists and institutions, but cannot be replaced by them in their directive functions. These community representatives, whom we shall call museum committee, have

the capacity to call on community members to collaborate, since they were appointed to organize the museum as a collective effort. The museum committee has the responsibility to plan, manage, involve local groups and periodically consult the community with regards to the development of the museum.

The approval of the project to create the community museum will be the first step towards the creation of a site of memory and collective cultural expression, whether it is a product of a traditional decision-making process that is clearly in place or of a consultation with a broad network of local organizations, groups and individuals. The foundation is the process of building consensus, although each community will create its particular path towards this end. In the cases where there are no established procedures for coming to consensus, the museum project (like many others) can contribute to the development of new relations and collaborations which strengthen or re-create the very sense of community.

In this initial consensus-building stage, it is important to include a community consultation on the topics to be researched and represented in the museum's exhibitions. This step is crucial for the museum to become a site of self-reflection and development of community voice. By discussing which themes to study and explore, community members reconsider their historical experience, their traditions, their challenges and their daily life. The topics they choose are not seen as folkloric manifestations of the "other", who in mainstream museums are often represented by exotic objects, strange but still susceptible of being consumed by individuals of western cultures. In this case community members struggle to present the meaning of their cultural manifestations from within, creating their own voice and interpretation, as those who have received a heritage which they re-create and elaborate as dynamic participants of contemporary society.

Often the initiators of the museum project or the museum committees seek guidance and support from

specialists and institutions. At this point, those of us who participate as specialists have the responsibility to reflect on the focus and limitations of our role. First, our participation should be guided by community interests and needs, rather than institutional interests or the possibility of subsuming community efforts in official programs. Community interests may coincide with interests of various institutions, but if the former are subordinated to the latter the project is no longer grounded in the community. Our role should be to listen carefully to the concerns being articulated and offer guidance in terms of their own priorities, without forcing them to conform to rigid, pre-determined programs.

Furthermore, the guidance we offer should be oriented towards the expansion of community ownership. With the initiators of the project, we develop a plan to involve a wide range of local organizations and community groups in the development of the museum. If we are not careful in this respect, the project may remain limited to those who first articulated the initiative, and the museum would thus become their private project.

Rendering the proposal a collective endeavour is a complex process, in which it is not enough to generate community participation in some specific tasks. Appropriation requires the power to decide over fundamental aspects of a project. As we mentioned above, it involves consensus-building, the participation of decision-making bodies and the local power structure. External experts cannot provide guidance to develop this process if they are not aware of local procedures and customs, and the current state of affairs in the community. As well as being aware of these conditions, they should be respectful of community norms and specific local cultural practices.

External consultants should also share and transfer their own skills. Their expertise should be placed in service of

the community, so that its members can acquire the necessary tools to plan, research, design and manage their museum.

In the power relationship which necessarily exists, the power of the expert is based on greater knowledge of the field and capacity to access sources of support. The power of the community is based on its collective action, and its capacity to claim rights over its heritage. Community representatives and external consultants can collaborate through a common commitment to the community project. In this collaboration the expert does not use his knowledge to claim a certain field of action, but rather shares it and offers support to build capacity within the community, including the capacity to develop projects and raise funds. These skills are not transferred to specific individuals as private persons, but to groups of community members and representatives, in the perspective of providing support for collective participation and ownership. Furthermore, this transfer of skills is inspired by the expert's commitment to support the community in its struggle against conditions of subordination and exploitation, in which it may create a common vision to improve its quality of life, defining priorities according to its own particular values.

Building community consensus establishes the social basis for the community museum. It signifies that a new initiative has taken shape, through the consultation and explicit approval of the project, through the establishment of a community team to move it forward, and through the collective discussion to define the subjects to be addressed. Decision making implies a process of empowerment. Through these concrete decisions the museum becomes a site to exercise communal power. By approving the project to create the museum, the community acknowledges the importance of taking action to protect its heritage and its memory. By choosing the subjects to present, the community begins to reflect and decide upon the stories it wishes to tell about itself. By electing a committee, the community creates the conditions to develop self-direction and management of the museum. By



making these decisions the community acts as a collective subject with capacity for self-determination. Thus the museum becomes a vehicle to mobilize the community's potential to take action with regards to its own collective memory and material heritage.

To conclude this reflection on the methods to establish community museums, we would like to comment on the importance of community museum networks. Just as the relationship of the museum with a network of local groups and organizations enables the development of community appropriation, so the creation of networks between different communities makes possible community management of regional projects. In 1991, the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca (UMCO) was founded, which today comprises 15 communities. UMCO participated in the creation of the National Union of Community Museums and Ecomuseums of Mexico in 1994, and in 2000 it fostered the formation of the Network of Community Museums of America, which brings together grassroots representatives of communities and organizations in Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico.

The networks of community museums have strengthened the participating communities. Exchanges provide points of reference for each one to contrast and analyze their specific situation, while they clarify and enrich their vision of the museum. Each participant learns from the others, is inspired by the best examples and develops ties of mutual support and solidarity. Through the network multiple relationships can be expanded, establishing collaborations and alliances with other organizations and institutions, of regional, national and even international scope. Negotiations can be carried out in more favourable terms, as communities are capable of proposing and executing increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated projects. Collective projects can address the needs of all the communities involved, and

approach these needs from their own resources as an organized network. Thus networks generate a broader field of action and greater autonomy.

In sum, networks help transform relationships of subordination and disempowerment in non-hegemonic communities. They allow explosions of discontent to be substituted by creative efforts of communities to transform their own conditions. They project the capacity for community self-governance to higher levels, expanding the reach of their organized action. In this sense, both community museums and their networks are tools that local communities can appropriate to help them face the future.

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