

Museums as service providers¹

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The present paper discusses the complex understanding of Museum as an entity that provides services. Indeed we are far from seeing museums fully acting as services since the rationale of the way they operate derives from the permanent concession of grants either from state budgets or from beneficent institutions. In order to do this, we use reflections presented in previous papers, where we considered these issues separately; we now believe they will gain some coherence when articulated with the reflection on museums seen in their possible, albeit inadequately assumed, condition as service providers.

We shall consider some aspects of the introduction in museums of the new information and communication technologies (NICT) as part of this process. On the one hand, these technologies open doors, and some museums take good advantage of that; but on the other hand their being used in a limited way does not enable the realisation of the role they can play, with multiple benefits from the organisational point of view, fostering innovation and creating new service concepts that are more aware of the world we live in.

It is thus a paradox that the institution MUSEUM should not see itself in general terms as a service provider despite defining itself as “a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.” (ICOM 2007).

In this definition we can find several functions that derive from different levels of understanding. Thus in general to acquire (previously, one used to say collect) and to conserve are conceptually different activities from studying and exhibiting. In the

¹ This text is based on our paper **Melhorar o desempenho assumindo os museus como instituições prestadoras de serviços**, presented at the 3rd National Museum Forum, MINC/DEMU, Florianópolis, 2008, and **Os Museus como instituições prestadoras de serviços**, published in *Revista Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias*, nº 12, 2008.

former case, they can be assimilated to the production of goods, while in the latter category we are definitely talking of services.

Therefore, and as a result of this amalgam, museums are missing out on an opportunity to improve and broaden their performance by using the resources and the rationale that are specific of entities that provide services. They are consequently preventing themselves from taking their rightful place in the field of service innovation.

Granted, there isn't a single path that can clarify the nature of innovation in services; in specialised literature, we can distinguish three different approaches: the technologist perspective, which grounds innovation in the introduction of new equipment and new technologies; the servicionist perspective, which emphasises the own resources of services as a source of innovation; and the integrating perspective, which seeks to articulate the two previous approaches.

It isn't easy to find a definition for Services that can comprehend all the aspects and satisfies the possible different approaches. There are, however, some characteristics that can, to some extent, provide some consensus.

It is acknowledged that a service is essentially an intangible product whose production may or may not derive from material goods. This intangible product may not be the object of appropriation for later consumption, and is therefore characterised by being manufactured and consumed simultaneously.

In traditional museums, based on the presentation and enjoyment of collections supported by the existence of material resources such as glass casings or new communication formats (video, sound, immersion ambiances, and so on) for which secure and air-conditioned spaces have been designed using suitable material resources and equipment, the visitor cannot take the exhibition away with him, he must consume it during the visit.

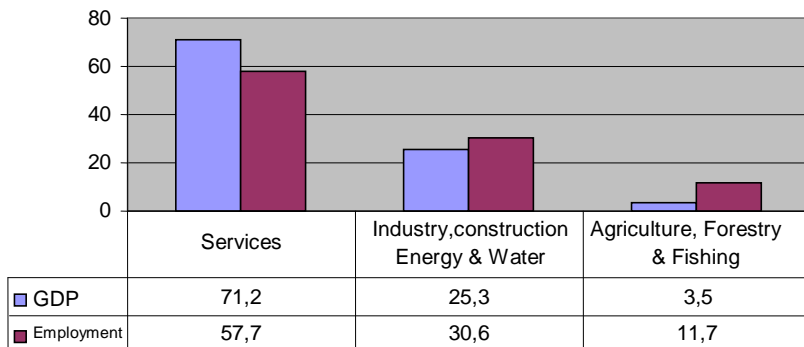
All that the visitor can do is live the experience, register some of its aspects in different formats or collect tangible elements like flyers, catalogues and similar items made available in museum shops, elements which are actually crucial to make the Museum or the exhibition tangible and credible.

Making the exhibition or the museum available on the web has for the time being the same value as perusing the catalogue. A virtual visit or reading does not replace each visitor's experience of

discovering and enjoying the exhibition. The virtual museum in itself, which we will not address in this paper, is to our mind that museum that is made and consumed in cyberspace, which is different from the Museum on the web, which is the transcription for cyberspace of the traditional museum.²

It is important to mention that the services sector represents the staple of the Portuguese economy, both as regards the part it plays in the country's gross added value (GAV) and in terms of employment. According to ICEP, in the past decades Portugal, like its European partners, has developed an economy that is increasingly based on services. Nowadays, this sector represents 57.7% of employment, and 71.2% of the gross added value (GAV), whereas agriculture is responsible for just 11.7% of employment and contributes with only 3.5% to GAV. Services have become the most dynamic and diversified sector; and trade, transportations and communications, tourism and financial services has shown high growth rates.

Services in Portugal -2006 %



Source: <http://a.icep.pt/portugal/economia.asp>

² See, for example, the Museu da Pessoa (the Museum of the Person), discussed by Rosali Henriques. “Memória, Museologia e Virtualidade: Um estudo sobre o Museu da Pessoa”, Master dissertation, Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias, 2004, http://www.museologia-portugal.net/Mestrado_Museologia_2008/texto_integral_PDF.htm

In worldwide terms, the situation is identical. The world economy is going through deep changes derived from global communications and technological innovation, which are apparent in the use of over 50% of labour in the services sector in Brazil, Russia, Japan and Germany, and 75% of labour in the United States and the United Kingdom.

This process has fostered the introduction of ways of organising businesses and not-for-profit organisations, along with growing attention given to issues that derive from the conditions that enable innovation and the introduction of new communication and information technologies.

Understanding services in an integrated way is today the focus of attention of a “new subject” that has been gaining ground in many universities throughout the world and of which a deeper understanding of its manifold elements is expected. We are talking of the “Services Science, Management and Engineering”, SSME, which aims to consistently gather and articulate work in progress in the areas of computer science, industrial engineering, business strategy, administrative sciences, social and cognitive sciences, as well as legal sciences, so as to foster the skills required by an economy increasingly oriented to and based on the production and use of services.³

In this context, it would be necessary to look upon museums from the perspective of entities that provide services, bearing in mind the place that cultural services occupy within services in general, and these within the economy, as a whole.

In a more or less consistent manner, in a sense of social militancy, or how collection museums at the service essentially of those very collections, the fact is that in every case museums are indeed institutions of SERVICES.

Our interrogation can be worded as follows:

Whether we are talking of sleep museums, or of museums that develop their project in the area of social inclusion and development, they both live in a certain way outside the boundaries of the rationalities of the contemporary world.

³ See <http://www.research.ibm.com/ssme/>

No Minister or Mayor would lightly announce as electoral justification the closing of the loss-making museums, not even the IMF would do that directly, although in some way across the planet it has ordered the implementation of politics that have resulted in the closing of hospitals and schools, when the time came to implement structural readjustment policies.

It is within this context that I believe it makes sense to worry about this ambiguity. Indeed, who knows whether, following schools and hospitals, not to mention public services in general, an overwhelming wave of museological cleansing will not come, which will allow the survival of only non-museums of the Guggenheim kind, or the Eurodisney kind, along with isolated cases which, for some reason, are sustainable, whether or not they take on any social role.

This is a double inconsistency, represented by the double paradox: Museums see themselves as service providers, although they do not in fact operate as service institutions.

Museums live unaware of the issues of economic sustainability, believing they can escape neo-liberalism, whether by magic or by miracle.

Let us then discuss the first paradox.

If museums see themselves as institutions that provide services, both museums of things and museums of people, if they started in fact acting as institutions that provide services they might be able to find a rationale that would secure not only their economic future, but also a way of acting that is more in keeping with their role as agents of social change and development.

Obviously, to us the idea of service is not – and we should never tire of repeating it – it is not merely a question of balancing the budget, but above all an approach that is capable of promoting a better performance from museums.

My paper intends therefore to insist on the need to view all museums as if they were indeed service providers, a position that forces us to handle the issue with more thoroughness and derive the conclusions and the consequences that are required.

It is no news that many museums regularly use resources that are characteristic of marketing, modern management systems for human resources, for the management of collections, visitor control, together with new technologies for the sustainability of buildings in terms of energy consumption and for the safety of people and possessions.

It is also true that the NICT – New Information and Communication Technologies – are increasingly being used, applied to the science of exhibitions, in the search for new resources that qualify exhibitions, which are still in our view the main source of communication for museums.

But all this is generally done in a piecemeal way and does not fully take into account in an articulated manner issues that are a substantial part of what is deemed to characterise a service.

Intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability

However, if we see museums in this perspective we quickly realise that there are some disconnections we should reflect upon.

1 – Service=Intangibility

In museums in general, based on the presentation and enjoyment of collections supported in the existence of important material resources such as the glass casings and /or new communication supports (video, sound, immersion ambiences, and so on) the visitor may not take the exhibition with him, and must therefore consume it during the visit. Whether it is an exhibition as process, or an exhibitionist exhibition or a questioning exhibition.

All the visitor can do is live the experience and register some of its aspects in different supports or gather tangible elements such as flyers, catalogues and similar items made available in the museum shop, elements which are moreover crucial in the process of making the museum or the exhibition tangible and credible.

Making the exhibition or the museum available on the web has for the time being the same value as perusing the catalogue. The virtual visit or the reading does not replace the experience of discovering and enjoying the exhibition by each visitor. They are phenomena of different natures. Nevertheless, seldom do ideas structure exhibitions; on the contrary, it is the objects that exist in the collections that justify the exhibitions.

Just like an airline which exhibits its planes for their beauty, colour and qualities, but which seldom flies. Thus are collection museums.

2 – Service=Inseparability production and consumption

Every service is realised at the moment when its production and consumption coincide in time and it should be understood as simultaneous and inseparable. Thus in museums the moment when the public sees the exhibition is exactly the time when the exhibition is consumed. In this sense, the consumption of the exhibition is subject to its **own rules which are conditioned by the time of celebration**.

In fact, each museum has a **credit time** to confirm with each visitor that the visit option was correct and that the time/quality ratio is positive. And this, largely beyond the fact that, by means of different mechanisms (subsidies, special programmes, diversified entry fees, and zero-cost tickets) this relation can be to some extent tricked. The zero cost to the users of the service may indeed **lower their level of expectations**, but in the end disenchantment is a penalty that no visitor wishes for and which is the basis of rejection not only of that particular institution but also naturally of all similar institutions. Still, this issue of the time available to correspond to the visitors' expectations does not seem to be a concern of most museums, maybe due to the fact that each museum has been opening regularly each day at the same time for many years. It is possible to repeat the visit but this fact does not eliminate a failed experience. Moreover, it is also reasonable to think that repetition will not bring about anything new that may alter the first sensation.

But how many museums work taking into consideration the credit time that each visitor awards it to show what it can do?

This like a television contest where the competitors would always answer after the bell had rung.

3 – Service=Heterogeneity customisation

We may assume that the exhibitions presented by museums live essentially in the continuous search for the higher common denominator. Although the need to create exhibitions for some publics with some degree of customisation has increasingly been acknowledged, for instance displaying captions in various languages or using audio-guides that allow for a wide range of options, the museum does not look for a customisation determined by the needs of a single visitor. This idea is indeed scandalous to the museum

community all the more so because the paradigm of success for an exhibition is precisely its ability to mobilise in the smallest period the largest number of visitors.

We are therefore speaking of a characteristic that each museum still has a long way to go, especially if we consider that there is a museum context which lives from the exhibition together with another context that is still trying to find its way as a communication resource with open reading codes and capable of pondering on the issues of the world we live in.

Apparently this frustration, which seems reasonable, stops being so if we consider that there is a public that stays away from museums of objects, precisely because they don't express ideas and moreover because they bestow upon this visitor behaviour that for a long time has actually been radically changed.

We are talking of each person's degree of autonomy, which characterises society today and which is increasingly leading individuals not to submit easily to authoritarian and standardised discourses. We are talking about the museums' refusal to acknowledge a new degree of autonomy in the acquisition of information by visitors.

It is a fact that museums such as we know them do not have the ability to renew themselves every day due to the fact that they are conditioned by several factors:

- The idea of permanent renewal is not a part of their self image;
- Traditional exhibition resources are neither sustainable nor renewable;
- Time inside the museum is almost always understood as belonging to the past;
- The museum is not supposed to meddle with what goes on outside its walls.

It is important therefore to consider that sooner or later museums will have to leave aside, at least partially, this obsession for the past and acknowledge the existence of a public that does not require guides, or captions.

A museum where exhibitions may change every day according to the life of each day and where each visitor may read another newspaper or watch another TV channel, which has taken their perception of the world into account.

Or we have museums as a kind of C&A or Zara featuring only one size, one colour and one model.

4 – Service=Perishability

Perishability is a particularly more evident feature in the case of temporary exhibitions where the return on the investment originally made and possibly gained has a limited period of time to be achieved. In this sense, it is not possible to prolong the life of the exhibition and the result is only that which is made during that period. It is also true that the perishability of the service can, on the other hand, support the possibility of renewal and consequently of attracting new consumers. Paradoxically, the idea of perishability does not seem to affect the museum which is exhibited throughout the years and which even without public may continue to wait for a possible visitor and this doesn't seem to exert any pressure over its dormant management. In this case, which is more common than good sense would warrant, the maintenance of the museum is due to external causes but rather to the place it takes in the strategy of the entity that keeps it.

Many museums are cheerfully some kind of sorbets, past their best-by date and reheated.

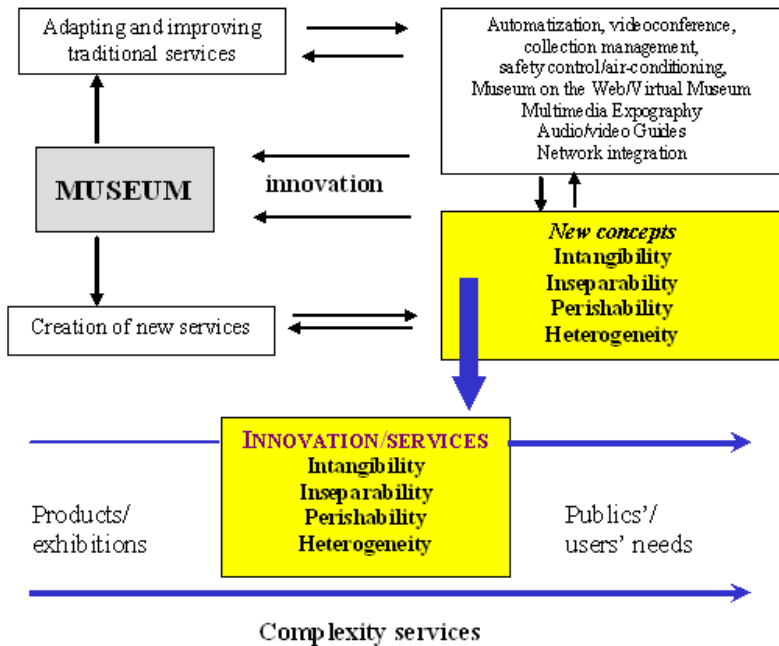
Thus, to summarise the four issues that should be the focal point of all museums for the sake of their own well-being and above all for the well-being of their “publics”

Intangibility – more ideas, more ephemeral, fewer objects
Inseparability - limited time to show what they're worth
Perishability – a best-by date of the exhibition/museum
Heterogeneity – each visitor is a unique being

Thus, the legitimacy of museums does not derive from their exercise but from the expectations of society, which also expects museums to act in a more consistent manner. The museum, between memory, identity, diversification, cultural hybridization, power, change and development needs to be rethought on a daily basis searching for new forms, concepts and practices that may bring it closer to what in fact gives it legitimacy.

In a text by Abdelillah Hamdouch and Esther Samuelides⁴, the authors characterise the attitude of many service companies regarding the new information and communication technologies (NICT), emphasising to some extent the gap between companies and the possibilities they could have access to should they position themselves more consistently regarding the NICT, regarding their involvement in technological research, the ability to adopt new forms of work organisation, predicting and anticipating the needs of their clients.

This approach seems to us to be crucial as regards museums.



Museums – Innovation and services

Adapted from Nouvelle Économie des services et innovation,

⁴ Innovation, concurrence et strategies d'attraction de la demande dans les secteurs de services liés aux NTIC, Abdelillah Hamdouch, Esther Samuelides, in La nouvelle économie des services et innovation, Coord. Djellal, Faridah, Gallouj Faïz, ed. l'Harmattan, Paris, 2002.

Faridahy Djellal, Faïz Gallouj, l'Harmattan, Paris, 2002

The analysis of the relations between technological, organizational and commercial innovations, and the role each one of these innovations plays in the performance of museums allows us to understand how museums can establish the continuous innovation dynamics that is necessary to their survival if they position themselves regarding NICT in a more consistent manner and with a greater involvement in technological research.

This reading implies, on the one hand, the long path that museums will have to tread so that a favourable attitude to the service rationale and to the introduction of new technologies can be created in them. This will then be achieved not as a result of the simple modernization of the various museums sectors, but rather as a resource that will enable the transformation of museums from their present situation of permanent “grant-dependent” and “techno-dependent” into institutions that produce services for which there are users / clients / publics willing to acquire in different ways not only the traditional services, but especially new cultural services resulting from processes where innovation and qualities that characterise SERVICES have become a central element.

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