

ECOMUSEUM OR COMMUNITY MUSEUM ? 25 years of applied research in museology and development

Hugues de Varine - 1996

Ce texte contient mon intervention au colloque organisé par l'Ecomusée de Bergslagen (Suède) à l'occasion de son vingtième anniversaire, qui coïncidait aussi avec le vingt-cinquième anniversaire de l'invention du mot écomusée et de la naissance du mouvement de la Nouvelle Muséologie. Il a été publié dans les actes de cette rencontre.

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Let me say first of all that this applied research was not done by me personally. It was the result of years of practice and innovation by dozens of imaginative professionals, working in the field, with limited means, fighting against the misunderstandings, or even the hostility of the authorities. I was then only an observer, even during my Icom days. If now I keep in touch, it is because I am interested in the new museology as a tool for local and community development, which is my current occupation.

The origins in the 60s

New museology wasn't born from nothing. It is the result of a long evolution, during the 60s. I want to recall a number of places and cases which, in my opinion, did lay the foundations of a new approach to museums, with a strong link to the politics of development.

The 60s were the time of a great prosperity among the countries of the "first world", of stagnation, both cultural and economic, in the second world, of liberation and self-assessment in the third world. It is also a period of social and cultural struggle on the part of minorities and oppressed groups and people everywhere. So it was not abnormal that, even in the traditionally stable and conservative museum world, a number of original minds would look for solutions outside of the established standards. Icom, where I worked at the time, was an ideal observation point of these attempts.

* In Mexico, during the same week of September 1964, seven major National Museums were inaugurated, as symbols of a multicultural nation and as educational instruments for the most marginalized sectors of the population. Mario Vasquez was both the museologist and the museographer who masterminded this programme.

* In Niger, the President of the Republic, Hamani Diori, and the Chairman of the National Assembly, Boubou Hama, asked a Catalan refugee, Pablo Toucet, to create a National Museum geared toward the building up of the national unity in a former French colony which had become independent only a few years before.

* In the United States, as part of the fight for the civil rights of the ethnic minorities and of a network of community museums in Los Angeles, New-York, Chicago, Washington, a protestant preacher, John Kinard, mobilized his african-american brethren for the creation of the "Anacostia Neighborhood Museum" in a recycled former cinema theater.

* In India, Amalendu Bose founded with private funds the Birla Museum of Science and Industry in Calcutta, and a fleet of travelling exhibitions on Land-Rovers and lorries, for the education of the masses in basic technologies.

* In Sweden, following the State commissioned report MUS'65, Riksställningar was established, an innovation which changed in depth the language and practice of exhibitions. Under Gunnar Westin, helped by Ulla Olofsson and others, it had a considerable influence, well outside the Scandinavian borders.

All these examples had a strong political component: they tried to serve and to adapt to a common objective of development, and to give it a cultural response as well as to offer a communication media based on the object and on the heritage of the communities concerned.

1971-1972 : a turning point

It is at this point that Icom was invited to discuss the political role of museums, at its general conference held in France in the summer of 1971. Several ministers or former ministers from USSR, Germany, Dahomey, France, and Mario Vasquez from Mexico were the keynote speakers. In the mean time, a reform of Icom and its statutes was launched. And it was decided to give more attention to the role of museums in the study and protection of the environment. This Icom conference helped mobilize the innovators among the museum profession around the world, a new word, "ecomuseum", was coined and many controversial ideas were raised.

One year later, in May 1972, a Seminar was organized in Santiago de Chile, jointly by Unesco and Icom, on the role of museums in contemporary Latin-America. Among the speakers, all Latin-American and non-museologists, was Jorge-Enrique Hardoy, Argentinian, historian of the urban development, who convincingly demonstrated the potential use of museums for meeting the major challenge of the urban explosion on the American continent. As a result, the participants adopted the celebrated "Santiago Declaration" which proposed the notion of an "Integral Museum" and stated the moral obligation of the museum professionals to contribute to the development policies and programmes of their respective countries.

It was also during the early 70s that Icom launched its first campaign against the illegal traffics in cultural property, one of the major threats to the cultural heritage of the emerging nations.

From the Museum of Man and Industry (Le Creusot) to the Ecomuseum of the Urban Community Le Creusot-Montceau (1972-1980)

As all these events were happening on the world museum scene, I got involved by sheer chance in a concrete museum problem in the small industrial region of Le Creusot and Montceau, in my own province of Burgundy. Asked to cooperate in the planning of a local museum in Le Creusot, I took part, together with a small group of local community leaders, in the invention of a museum concept apt to answer two very political questions: how to help a population of 100 000 pass from a totally paternalistic era to a more modern and capitalistic industrial development, on one hand, and from a loose network of sixteen independent and sometimes conflicting municipalities to an urban complex with a common planning, development and investment policy.

It was the beginning of ten years of exciting community work, mobilizing the energies and capacities of many local leaders, associations, institutions, recruiting young people to fulfill museum tasks (study, collecting, research, education, museography) for which they were eager but not prepared, etc. This museum, which became later known as an "ecomuseum" (for purely opportunistic reasons too long to explain here), was visited by many colleagues from all over the world and came to be, unwillingly, a sort of "model" (although the original concept of ecomuseum was oriented toward the environment and interpretation of nature), first for the creation of similar projects in France and then elsewhere.

I have to say right now that this Ecomuseum underwent a crisis in the mid-80s, due to the aging of its main leaders and actors and a change in generation: the founding fathers were by then at retirement age, while a new active population was faced more with economic difficulties and unemployment than with the recognition and salvage of a collapsed industrial past. This illustration of the "generation gap" should be emphasized and studied, in order to illuminate the museum process which is at the heart of new museology.

International "New Museology" movement in the 80s

It took almost ten years to integrate the principles of new museology, established in Santiago, Le Creusot, and elsewhere, into practical museum projects in various countries. In the 80s, suddenly, a whole family of new museums, often but not always called ecomuseums, blossomed: "museos locales" and "museos escolares" in Mexico, "Ecomusée de la Haute Beauce" et "Ecomusée du Fier Monde" (Montréal) in Québec, "Ecomuseu do Seixal" in Portugal, "Toten Museum" in Norway, "Ekomuseum Bergslagen" in Sweden, "Ecomusée de Fourmies" in France, etc. An international group, affiliated with Icom, was created by

Canadians and Europeans under the name of MINOM (Mouvement International pour la Nouvelle Muséologie), under the chairmanship of Pierre Mayrand.

There was a great number of international workshops held in Quebec, Portugal, Spain, Norway, etc. The notion of the social role of museums was developed, discussed, studied, particularly in Portugal and Spain. In the North, it was more the question of community mobilization and strengthening which was debated. In France, the new museology was applied to problems like the conversion of industrial sites in crisis, the salvage of rural areas in the process of desertification, cultural tourism, etc. In 1986, in Jokmokk, a forum of the world oppressed minorities discussed the question of the possible role of museums in helping these populations to liberate themselves by reinforcing their identities and defending their values.

At the same time, museology courses and publications began to include new museology into their programmes. Some Icom International committees took it as topics for international seminars. **The new type of museum could be described as essentially a cultural process, identified with a community (population), on a territory, using the common heritage as a resource for development**, as opposed to the more classical museum, an institution characterized by a collection, in a building, for a public of visitors.

But other divergent evolutions appeared in several countries. In France: the word "ecomuseum" became fashionable and was used for all kinds of technical, ethnographical, touristic so-called museums, as being more "modern", and potentially more attractive to visitors. This is why I, personally, refuse to talk anymore of ecomuseums as representing the new museums. I prefer to speak of "community museums".

On the contrary, in Spain (Parque Cultural de Molinos), the word "museum" or "ecomuseum" has been avoided to create a similar kind of process, more based on the variety of resources existing on a given territory, not only to present them, but also to exploit them and draw from them social, cultural and economic benefits for the community.

Community museums, the Brazilian experience of the 90s

There are nowadays several countries where new museology has recently taken a new turn, on a more permanent, if not to say institutional, basis. Mexico is one of them, Quebec is another. I have been fortunate to witness, in the past four years, such an evolution in various parts of Brazil.

There, in local communities, rural (Silveira Martins in Rio Grande do Sul), urban (Novo Hamburgo, also in Rio Grande do Sul), in underprivileged areas (Santa Cruz, a neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro), on the sites of major public works like hydro-electric power plants (Itaipu, Ita), the people themselves discover a sort of popular museology (but not always under the name of museums), which is based on the total use of the cultural and natural heritage as development assets.

They are poor, sometimes to the point of mere survival, but they don't wait for public subsidies to come to them. They invent their own solutions and they are slowly establishing a solidarity network between them. I counted more than twelve such experiments, at various stages of evolution. Even classical museums are transforming themselves to cater more to their local communities, whose members are considered no more as visitors, or museum public, but as actors and subjects of the museum.

The museology courses, the professional seminars and magazines are officially open to these ideas, which will help defining a specific museology for the future. I hope to be able to follow closely this evolution, for which I am preparing with my Brazilian friends a book to be published simultaneously in Brazil and in Europe, on "Heritage, Museums and Development".

Liberation, development, new missions for the museums of to-morrow

Two years ago, I received a very moving letter from an old acquaintance of my Icom times, retired professor of Museology at the University of Baroda (India), Prof. Bedekar. He wrote that a recent study by the very official "Anthropological Survey of India" showed that more than 4 000 different cultural groups existed in the country, which were not recognized by the political establishment and had their cultures and values slowly destroyed by the growing standardization of the Indian society. And Prof. Bedekar asked me if New Museology could be one way of reinforcing these cultures and helping them to resist, or even possibly liberate themselves from this situation.

Last month, he published a comprehensive book on "New Museology for India", and a seminar was being held in New Delhi at this occasion at the end of March.

To me it is a clear demonstration that museums, at least in some crisis situations, are able to adapt to the new parameters of a changing society and to accept being used as development tools. A Museology of Liberation is emerging in places which were not, until now, on the museological maps, places where museums in the ordinary sense would not have been considered possible or accepted, only years ago.

Such museums are different, because they concentrate, not on institutionalization, but on processes.

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