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Editorial

The Dynamics of the Museum Concept

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The main point of reference when trying to better understand the concept of ***museum*** is the definition provided by ICOM (International Council of Museums): "*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing*." (ICOM, 2022). This definition was validated, and adopted by the museum world, in August 2022, at the end of a long process of extensive consultations, started in 2019. In this process participated ICOM committees from more than 80 countries and several regional committees, following a complex methodology (ICOM, 2021 a, b).

The consultation process leading to the 2022 definition highlighted several dynamic aspects related to the profile of the museum, which were differently perceived and interpreted by the participants – museums' representatives, that are considered vital for this concept: education, inclusiveness, sustainability, community, and open to public/ society (ICOM, 2021a, p. 59). Some of these approaches are new additions to the previous ICOM museum definition, dating from 2007, which stated that "*a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment*" (Reyes Bellmunt, 2021). Also, the consultation process revealed seven different dimensions that together characterize the museum: entity – what a museum is, qualifier – what qualifies a museum, social values – what values shape museums, function – what a museum does, target & relationship – whom museums work for and the nature of their relationships, experience – what do people experience at a museum, and object/subject – what are the museums' objects/subjects (ICOM, 2021b, p. 48). Although the consultation process was lengthy and consistent, we observe an update of the previous definition, a more precise highlight of the way museums operate in contemporary society, without going too far away from the point of departure (i.e. the previous definition). One might observe that this is in the spirit of earlier updates of the ICOM museum definitions, which have built on the past definitions from 1951, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, and 2001 (Nitulescu, 2019; Reyes Bellmunt, 2021).

We observe a quite frequent update of the ICOM's museum definition between 1989 and 2007, corresponding to the increased dynamics and diversification of museums' approaches and relationships with their missions and communities. It seems paradoxical that for the past 15 years, no update was assumed by ICOM although the discussions in the professional and academic environments were quite strong concerning the changes in museums around the world and their role/impact as change agents (some of these works are Ellis, 1995; Sandell, 1998; Freedman, 2000; Casey, 2007; Simon, 2010; Barrett, 2012; Black, 2012; McCall, & Gray, 2014; Simon, 2016; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Silverman, 2009; Pedretti & Iannini, 2020; Chipangura & Mataga, 2021). We note that the Report for the ICOM Executive Board, issued in December 2018, stressed the need for a new museum definition to fill the "ethical vacuum" and "paradigm shifts" in terms of museums' offer and cooperation, public participation, or responsibility (Sandahl, 2019). The report concludes: "*A museum definition needs to recognise these paradigmatic shifts towards a relational framework, in a conceptual language of involvement, of mutuality and reciprocity, exchange, equal partnership, outreach and inreach, cooperation, collaboration,*

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shared responsibility, shared purposes and collective authority. (...) While a language that transcends the binary hierarchy between the museum and its constituents, communities or audiences is not readily at hand, a future museum definition must, inevitably, define, reflect and support these broad democratic purposes as an overarching framework for museums, their purposes and functions as well as for their professions and governance" (Sandahl, 2019).

These dynamic aspects, maybe, determined ICOM to propose in the first instance, in 2019, a quite new approach: "*Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing*" (ICOM, 2019). The General Assembly in Kyoto voted strongly against it after intense and even hot debates (Nitulescu, 2019). This is probably a main reason for the decision to design a new definition following the complex consultation process described previously, which determined the present-day definition.

Encompassing the museums' diversity and complexity is not an easy task. We can indicate several types of museums that are already well-established and well-appreciated organizations that are not quite conventional in the sense that they do not generally collect, conserve, or research heritage: children's museums, discovery/science centers, and heritage/interpretation/visitor centers. Some organizations, including companies operating for profits, are named "museums" even if they do not have collections such as the Museums of Illusions/Senses. A new extremely popular approach is the immersive experience with arts and culture, such as the Van Gogh Exhibit: The Immersive Experience. Therefore, we observe a high dynamism in museums' approaches. Museums have been compared with living organisms (Pripon & Kiss, 2019), with crossword puzzles or baseball games (Smith, 2014, pp.44-48), with theme parks (Zbuchea, 2015), malls (Zbuchea, 2015), or with a "hub for agents of change throughout our community" (as exemplified by Nina Simon during an interview with Moss, 2016). The general idea of museums as *cultural hubs* seems to be quite appealing (Chung, 2019; Constantinescu, 2019; Lu, 2019; Simpson, Fukuno, & Minami, 2019; Thebele, 2019; Spring, Schimanski, & Aarbakke, 2021; Hu, 2022), maybe also in connection with the popularity of business and creative hubs in cities all over the world.

These evolutions are connected with the dynamics and polyvalence of museums. They are increasingly more active agents in society, they are partners for different stakeholders, from traditional ones – such as visitors and teachers – to stakeholders far away from the museum's walls – such as policymakers and NGOs. Sustainability, well-being, and community development are key perspectives for museum management nowadays. Museums not only document transformations in society, not only protect the cultural assets of communities. They are/could be powerful voices, protectors of values, and advocates for rights and values. Nevertheless, the "old" roles of educators and guardians of culture and heritage, are valid today as they were significant when museums opened largely their doors to visitors. Not only have the roles of museums diversified, especially in the past decades, but also their approaches.

Some of these transformations are presented and debated in the articles included in the present issue of *Culture. Society. Economy. Politics*. We invite you to read them attentively, reflect on them, and continue discussions in your museums and communities.

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