Museums as common spaces for living together in a context of crisis

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If the traditional mission of museums remains fundamentally centred on the safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage for future generations, these institutions are, nevertheless, increasingly confronted with political, social, economic and cultural issues. During discussions on the new definition of museums within ICOM[1], we have seen the emergence of a debate on the role of museums as safe spaces for critical dialogue and social justice.

While many history museums until now offered a single narrative story, generally based on an official vision (supported by elites and other government institutions), today, multivocality, advocated by social museology since the 70s and 80s, is at the centre of the new exhibitions of numerous history and society museums.

In organising the conference "Museums as common spaces for living together in a context of crisis by - economic, identity, cultural, ecological, political, diplomatic", held on 23 April 2024 at the MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises[2], I wanted to highlight how museums are becoming common spaces for living together (or the concept of *vivre-ensemble*)[3] in our highly polarised contemporary societies. However, this concept remains challenges for museums to integrate the stories often deemed to be those of "others" (e.g. those of indigenous, immigrant populations, etc. – in other words,

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[1] Article published on ICOM's website on 24/08/2022. https://icom.museum/fr/news/licom-approuve-une-nouvelle-definition-de-musee/

[2] The MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises, previously called Centre d'histoire de Montréal, is the local city museum. It reopened to the public in September 2023.

[3] Living together in a city is a dynamic process that all stakeholders put in place to promote inclusion, as well as the feeling of security and belonging. Promoting Living Together means recognizing and respecting all forms of diversity, fighting against discrimination and facilitating harmonious cohabitation. In the implementation of living together, the different stakeholders in the community work together to facilitate the emergence of common values which contribute to peace and social cohesion.

Opening of the conference on April 23rd 2024. © Institut du Patrimoine/UQAM

ethnic, racial and cultural minorities) into the grand national narrative.

In the context of postcolonial thought, and following the various “decolonisation” movements, museums are becoming aware of the diversity of historical stories as well as the different narrative perspectives that can coexist within their museographic discourse. Furthermore, museums must deal with collections that take cultural diversity into account. This is one of the great challenges facing the museum world today. The main objective of this conference is therefore to show how museums approach the question of the representation of “the other” or “otherness” in our contemporary societies.

This “other” can be the immigrant (theme of my PhD research) the indigenous who has historically been relegated to a category of otherness (through interpretations such as the myth of the noble savage) since the “period of discoveries” (since 1492). Reinforced by colonial processes, a system of exclusion, oppression and exploitation of these different indigenous communities throughout the American continents and beyond.

But, if we push our thinking further, processes of exclusion are developing in our contemporary societies polarised, divided and deeply fractured by “culture wars” at an astonishing speed. Exclusion is present whenever there is a divergence in lifestyles or political visions. Issues related to immigration, gender minorities or the recognition of systemic racism have become political and ideological disagreements.

This situation becomes more difficult in the context of the economic fragility that we have observed since the Covid-19 pandemic and the increase in the cost of living around the world caused by inflation, as well as the precariousness of the labour market. The question of housing has also become crucial in several large cities around the world (Montreal, New York City, Paris, London, São Paulo among others).
It is in these perspectives that history and society museums can play a conciliatory and benevolent role by favouring reconciliation in our fractured societies. The museology of reconciliation (Galla, 1995, Guzin-Lukic, 2001) suggests that museums can integrate the idea of reconciling different multicultural and multi-ethnic communities.
The creation of a dialogue between the different communities that make up our contemporary societies is at the centre of numerous exhibitions in Montreal and Quebec museums, as demonstrated by texts on their websites. The McCord Stewart Museum describes its permanent exhibition as “driven by the hope of initiating a dialogue for better mutual understanding”, thus proposing “a real encounter.” Or, the Musée de la civilization which uses the tagline “Experiencing the world…together.” Or the MEM - Center for Montreal Memories: “You are the history of Montreal, together let’s talk about you!” (Websites consulted in November 2023.)

Social museology emphasises the participation of different communities and populations from territories (Brulon Soares, 2015). If we consider this influential museological point of view in Quebec, we can pursue a more in-depth analysis of the concept of living together in history and society museums.

The introductory panel at the conference comprised of three presentations that complemented each other and set, the conceptual frame for the two roundtables:

In a talk entitled "Museums and social issues: what priorities?", Jean-Michel Tobelem (Université Paris 1 Panthéon- Sorbonne) explored how museums are the subject of intense demands, in the educational, social, economic, diplomatic and even environmental fields. Faced with these various injunctions, and while the means at their disposal remain limited by increasing budgetary constraints - with some exceptions - how can we avoid the dispersion of actions, the simple response to fashion movements or the effect of pressure from more active players? or less well intentioned? In the context of cultural rights, DEAI logic, participatory approaches and the rise of digital technology, is there therefore an original path for museums to favour?

In his introduction to the round table, Louis Jacob (UQAM) examined the notion of “cultural citizenship”. This set of practices and discourses, which can first be placed in the extension of fundamental rights, is now an essential element of individual and collective identities, and of the regulatory mechanisms of States which intend to enforce the promotion of cultural pluralism. The call for participation and expression leads to new complications or tensions, as well as notable changes in practices, in cultural and artistic networks, as well as in cultural institutions. He then proposed some avenues for reflection based on recent work which highlights the issues of cultural citizenship at different scales, and which questions the persistence of social inequalities, exclusion and discrimination.

Finally, Raymond Montpetit (UQAM) showed how a renewal of museology took place in Quebec, in the wake of the Quiet Revolution and Expo 67, by examining its three

main actors: 1) the interventions of the Ministry of Culture, 2) Parks Canada and the current of interpretation, and 3) French ecomuseology. Without a long museum tradition, Quebec has succeeded, beyond utopian discourse, in implementing an interpretive and social museology, at the service of its visitors and the community, now well embodied in several museums which have been able to contribute and innovate.

The first roundtable was dedicated to the concepts of "otherness and reconciliation": highlighting museums that work in co-creation with communities. This roundtable focused on the representation of otherness and the processes of decolonization and reconciliation in history and society museums. Decolonial thinking, with its increasing emphasis on notions such as intersectionality and intergenerational ethics, introduces new and creative ways to reinterpret this relationship and (re)define museums as proactive agents in quest for social and environmental justice. Such a shift in thinking requires repositioning museum efforts, and the curatorial work carried out within (and through) museums, as a means of preserving the continuity of different epistemologies and worldviews. In this context, co-creation with communities becomes an essential practice. The circulation of knowledge and the exchange of professional practices have helped evolve the processes of exhibition creation. As calls for the "decolonization" of knowledge, collections and the management of heritage organisations multiply, institutions are called to modify their perspectives and participate in conversations around cultural rights, post-colonialism, restitution, appropriation, interreligious dialogue, etc.

This roundtable offered a space for reflection on how to articulate so-called "minority" stories that diverge from "official" stories and interculturality/cultural diversity in museums (collections, temporary and permanent exhibitions), as well as museum-organised cultural events (festivals, mediation activities, partnerships with associative events), in order to consolidate practices of co-collection, co-conservation, co-mediation and co-creation.

Participants reflected on the evolution of institutions and their cultural missions, thus making it possible to renew approaches to cooperation, collaboration, participation and co-production in the field of heritage and museums. What are the new practices that make it possible to make cultural institutions (museums) places of "reconciliation" and intercultural dialogue? The speakers included Catherine Charlebois, head of exhibitions and collections at the MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises; Matthieu Gill-Bougie, indigenous affairs advisor at the Musée de la Civilisation; and Éric Giroux, director of the Écomusée du fier monde. The chair of this roundtable was Nada Lukic Guzin, a professor at the UQO and specialist on the concept of museology of reconciliation and migration studies.

The second roundtable on "living together and citizenship" was moderated by Laurier Turgeon, professor at Laval University. It focused on the concepts of "living together", memory (collecting the memories of city residents) and citizenship. The concept of living together is at the centre of the construction and maintenance of our societies. This key concept is linked to principles which structure our contemporary societies such as democracy and respect for human rights. These principles generate fundamental values such as respect for human dignity, pluralism/multiculturalism, non-discrimination, tolerance, social justice, solidarity, gender equality and economic equity.

In the field of management of heritage sites and events, local, national and international scales are increasingly intertwined, while studies conclude that democratisation and cultural democracy remain a challenge. The speakers thus discussed professional practices which aim at real co-creation work with the different audiences and communities who frequent (or not) the museum as, for example, neighbourhood associations, city residents, etc. The emergence of the construction of knowledge/memories shared by citizens and the search for "alternative" meeting places to heritage institutions, such as, for example, the increased role of cultural events in city spaces like (festivals, live art shows, cultural "Olympics" and cities of culture).

How can the concepts of citizenship and interculturalism (re)define relationships within a rapidly changing heritage and museum sector (in the face of the multiple crises mentioned in the introduction to the conference)? What are the new practices that make it possible to engage cultural institutions as before places for the democratisation of culture? How can the museum be an actor in citizenship education? In what way does the museum participate in learning to "live together" in our fractured and increasingly polarised contemporary societies?

For these discussions, we had the help from the Canadian Museum of history with Sandra M. Zapata, exhibition manager, the Musée de la civilisation with Sophie Giroux, head of cultural mediation and education, the Musée Pointe à Callière with Katy Tari, and Eugénie Forno and Mohamed Fariji: creators od the Citizens museum project of collective city memories. The scientific conclusion of the event was held by professor Yves Bergeron, and director of the Institut du Patrimoine de l'UQAM.

As a conclusion to the discussions of this conference, we can say that today museums are at the heart of processes of co-creation, identity negotiation and the promotion of living together. By evolving from simple guardians of heritage to inclusive and participatory spaces, they

MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises. © Sylvain Légaré, 2024.

play a crucial role in building a more equitable and harmonious society. The challenges are numerous, but so are the opportunities for transformation and growth. By continuing to engage with communities, rethink their practices and promote inclusion, museums can truly become places of positive power and peaceful coexistence for all.

Representation and Inclusion

The transformation of museums into spaces for co-creation, identity negotiation and living together is not without challenges. Museums must navigate complex power dynamics, balance competing interests, and often face financial and institutional constraints.

The representation of different cultures and identities in museums is a political act. The choices of what is exhibited, how it is exhibited, and by whom these decisions are made, reflect power dynamics. By giving a voice to "marginalized communities", museums can play a key role in recognizing and valuing these identities. For example, highlighting non-Western cultures and collaborating with experts and indigenous communities to ensure authentic and respectful representation.

Educational and Community Programs

Educational and community programs play an essential role in promoting living together. By organizing workshops, conferences and cultural events, museums create opportunities for visitors to come together and engage in dialogue on current topics of common interest. These initiatives promote intercultural understanding and strengthen the social fabric. In the coming months, a scientific article reuniting the main discussions of the event will be published.

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