

REFLECTIONS ON OUR RESIGNATION FROM THE ICOM MDPP2

Introduction

We have decided to publish this statement in light of recent requests by ICOM members and committees for increased openness and transparency in all aspects of the organization's current practices and decision-making processes. Our effort here is to describe judiciously and fairly, from an institutional vantage point, a significant initiative, the Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials MDPP/MDPP2, both achievements and challenges. Our statement is grounded in specific documents. Should a closer examination by ICOM of minutes and other materials occur, we are very willing to provide references and further relevant documents relating to the internal working processes of the MDPP/MDPP2, to the communication between the MDPP/MDPP2 and the ICOM Executive Board (EB), and, of course, to the financial support received by the MDPP/MDPP2.

July, 2020

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The Mandate and Purpose of the MDPP

After the General Conference of ICOM 2016, the Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) was created with a dual mandate:

(1) of exploring and documenting the role and function of museums in the rapidly-changing societies of our times, and (2) of identifying the museological and epistemological imperatives for revision of ICOM's museum definition, as a shared and international framework that reflects current conditions, potential, and priorities for museums. The members of the MDPP were appointed by the EB.

Participatory Working Methods

The MDPP presented its recommendations to the EB in 2018 after a lengthy process of broad and inclusive discourse and dialogue with ICOM members and other stakeholders. Thematic consultations were conducted by individual members of the MDPP, and approximately 900 people across the globe participated in roundtable dialogues, using a shared methodology and responding to shared questions, organized by the MDPP and ICOM National Committees (NCs) and International Committees (ICs). The consultations discussed challenges facing the museum community and how best to optimize the broader societal contributions museums could make.

The EB adopted the recommendations of the MDPP in December, 2018, including a set of eight parameters. These parameters described both core functions and core societal commitments of museums, both of which would shape the content of a new museum definition.

Hundreds of Proposals from Around the Globe

The EB requested that the MDPP continue the process of developing explicit proposals for a new museum definition. In response the MDPP again initiated an open and highly participatory process, to which all ICOM committees, alliances, and a number of partners were invited, formally in writing, to contribute, framed by the proposed and accepted parameters. Through this process 269 different proposals were uploaded to the ICOM website in 25 different languages from 69 countries.

The diversity, thoughtfulness, and insights of these contributions were remarkable and inspiring, as was the surprisingly high level of participation from regions and countries in which ICOM is underrepresented. The sweep and scope of this process was probably the most inclusive ever initiated by ICOM and was undeniably open, democratic, and mutually engaging – in a word, highly consultative.

A Layered and Iterated Process of Selection

A structured and detailed selection and editing process to distil the 269 proposals into five to be presented to the EB, was discussed and adopted unanimously by all members of the MDPP. The five proposals for a new museum definition forwarded to the EB in June, 2019 thus resulted from a layered and iterated selection method to which all members had agreed. Two members, however, unfortunately did not accept the outcome, despite their earlier agreement with the methodology. All five of these definitions were at that point melded “hybrids,” integrating with care and thought elements from different proposals and elements that aligned them with the given parameters, while still reflecting somewhat different language and cultural and scientific traditions.

These proposals were intentionally fulsome in draft, based on the editing assumption that it would be easier and simpler for the EB to “delete rather than add.” Based in part on the analysis of the basic substantive concepts of the 2007 museum definition, conducted in 2016 by the then ICOM working group on the museum definition, language useage varied somewhat among the five. As illustrative examples, words such as “heritage” or “institution” were used in some, but not others; “education” appeared as “education”, but also was encompassed and signaled in terms and phrases like “learning,” “study,” “explore ideas,” “construct knowledge”, “challenge assumptions,” “critical dialogue,” “enhance understandings,” “communicate knowledge,” “nurturing imagination, curiosity, and empathy.” The five museum definition proposals presented were intentionally diverse, to allow the EB the possibility of choice.

The Five Proposals Presented to the Executive Board

All five proposals shared and appropriately expressed the consistent core points from the MDPP's broad-based consultations among museums, points that had shaped the parameters guiding the process. Specifically, contemporary museums see their unique and traditional core functions of collecting, documenting, preserving, and exhibiting and otherwise communicating as completely consistent, and not in conflict, with their wider social, civic, and humanitarian commitment to serving society and community.

The five alternative proposed museum definitions were, as some commentators have pointed out, in no sense "revolutionary" or even "radically new." Indeed they adhered to values and principles that had guided and informed international organizations from the 20th century. The proposed definitions included democracy, human rights and equality, but they did not, for example, address contemporary conflicts or the particular intersecting issues of race, class, gender, solidarity, decolonization, restitution, or repatriation explicitly - issues which did appear among the 269 proposals, albeit with low frequency.

With both textual deletions and additions, the EB ultimately selected one – and one only – of the five proposed definitions to bring to a vote at an Extraordinary General Assembly (EGA) in Kyoto. All relevant documents for the EGA were issued and distributed to all ICOM members by the ICOM Secretariat on behalf of the ICOM President. In addition the MDPP, at the EB's direction, prepared workshops, as well as a more scholarly session for the 25th General Conference in Kyoto.

"Disagreement" becomes "Discrediting"

As indicated above, during the final stage of the MDPP's selection of the five proposals, a regrettable and unfortunate departure from sound institutional process and previously-agreed MDPP procedures took place. Under the adopted voting procedures, certain definitional proposals preferred by two individual members of the MDPP were not among the first five. The response was resignation from the committee by one member and criticisms by another expressed directly to the EB. The narrative, taken to the EB as well as to public media, slipped rapidly from "disagreement on the merits" to "a discrediting of the processes of the MDPP" – notwithstanding the conformity of its actions and decisions with both previously articulated and adopted ICOM mandates and MDPP guidelines and procedures. The MDPP respected, as it felt obliged to do, the time-honored practice and confidentiality of a voting process, and thus was not able to address these accusations publicly. The MDPP indicated then to the EB, and will repeat and emphasize again here, that it was – and remains – entirely open to further scrutiny of the selection process. Finally and regrettably, what had developed into a concerted campaign of opposition to the five proposed definitions, resulted in the museum definition selected by the EB never coming to a vote at the EGA in Kyoto.

Reflections on the EGA

In reflecting on the EGA, numerous important issues and questions need to be addressed to safeguard ICOM's institutional health and effectiveness going forward. They fall into two categories, the first of which is ICOM as an organization and its organizational functionality, including its management practices, procedural discipline and quality of governance. In the context of the MDPP's work, ICOM's considerable shortcomings were laid bare.

They can be summarized as follows:

- **Practices of Good Governance** – During the contested period of discussion leading up to the general conference, as well as during the conference and the EGA, the EB stood mute – a silence that in effect served to distance the EB from the proposed definition it had selected. It was compounded by the EB's failure to explain that it had made all the decisions concerning timing and that the MDPP had not. The EB's presentation and defense of the very definition it had formally adopted was curiously and completely absent, and the critical work of advocacy was left entirely to the MDPP, which, as a standing committee, has no ICOM governance role or authority. The EB was nowhere in sight when the press was asking questions regarding the matter of ICOM's proposed new museum definition. This consistent and total abdication of responsibility was regrettable and remains a complete mystery. What background information, whose advice, and which arguments prompted it?
- **Procedural Rectitude and Best Practice** – With respect to its established procedures for regulating disagreements and conflicts, ICOM neither applied them nor exhibited any discipline in following general best practice. In deference and adherence to statutory democratic processes, a formal proposal that has proceeded successfully through all legitimate and required organizational procedures should not be prevented from coming to a final vote. The derailment was driven by the insistent lobbying of the EB by an alliance of mainly European committees, and appeared to be empowered by vague allusions to "museum withdrawals" and the demand for voting rights according to national membership numbers rather than the system set forth explicitly in ICOM's own Statutes. The ICOM leadership's lack of acknowledgement of or response to the Chair of the MDPP's written inquiry, ahead of the EGA, about possible changes to the EGA agenda, while thereafter, indeed, permitting such changes at the EGA meeting itself, constituted yet another serious and problematical breach of procedure.
- **Resulting Organizational Disruption and Consequences** – As the result of all of the foregoing, ICOM now has in hand – unprecedented in ICOM's history – the resignations of its President, two members of the EB, the Chair of the standing committee MDPP2, and five of its members. The lesson for ICOM's future is that detrimental repercussions and consequences follow an organization's suspension of normal and transparent

procedures, and its legitimization of a conflicted process through obscure and highly strained legal interpretations.

The second subject of reflection focuses on the content of potential disagreement regarding the current roles and responsibilities of museums and what they should be in the future. That exploration and its endpoints are admittedly complicated and complex, but should be and were under the MDPP's deliberations, as open and free of historical and conventional museological presumptions as possible. This approach was signaled concretely during the broad and inclusive consultation process that preceded the MDPP's submission of proposals to the EB.

With respect to the discussion of content, the following summaries include the most noteworthy points:

- **An Erroneous Definitional Distinction** – Certain critics of the proposed new definition alleged that elements of “mission, aspiration, and vision” did not belong in a “definition” – an erroneous assertion. Those elements are – and fortunately – present in the current ICOM museum definition adopted in 2007. What distinguished the former and the latter was merely the specificity and detailing of the elements. The current definition employs a broad and encompassing clause – museums in the “service of society” – while the proposed definition made the obligations far more concrete.
- **The Roots of Museological and Epistemological Change** - As opposed to the facile and erroneous definitional distinction described above, truly substantive questions and issues do exist and were explored by the MDPP. What are the roots of the real museological and epistemological differences and disagreements that came to the fore in ICOM in 2019? Do they relate to how museums, museum professionals, nation states and cultural communities position themselves with respect, for example, to the explicit values of “human dignity, global equality, and planetary wellbeing”?

The economic, cultural, and social conditions and traditions under which museums work are vastly different as are their obligations. But reducing these values, or dismissing them because they are “fashionable”, “too political”, or “divisive” essentially ignores much meaningful museological discourse regarding 21st century museum definitions and museum practice.

- **The Rejection of Reasoned and Reasonable Middle Path** – Was the MDPP mistaken in its basic position that, as a whole and in the context of a global community, museums were evolving steadily toward a unity between their unique, historical, defining functions and their larger societal commitments? Opposition to the alternative new definition surely must have deeper, more symbolic roots to merit such an absolute deviation from established democratic procedures, as well as the unbending efforts of some to prevent a vote entirely, rather than simply cast a negative vote. Does the core

point of conflict concerning the museum definition turn on this integrated approach to values, purposes and functions? The conflicting positions came to a dramatic and telling intersection at the EGA when ICOM-Australia suggested an epistemological, organizational and political middle ground to follow the original EGA agenda and, in fact, vote on the new definition with the caveat that it would be tested, evaluated, and edited over the coming year. That proposal acknowledged the fact that some NCs and ICs felt they had lacked sufficient time to discuss the proposal before the vote. This proposed middle path was, however, literally pulled from the screen, based upon a highly problematical legal intervention from the dais that puzzled a number of lawyers sitting in the EGA, and declared “invalid according to French legislation”.

The MDPP After Kyoto: Silence and Then MDPP2

After postponement of the vote on a new museum definition at the EGA and as required following the Kyoto conference and the EGA, the MDPP immediately began work on a methodology for a reopened dialogue and further consultation with ICOM’s NCs and ICs. In September, 2019 the MDPP submitted to the EB a comprehensive plan and methodology for further process and work. The response, remarkably, was complete and unexplained silence with neither reaction nor response, and the MDPP’s mandate expired at the end of 2019.

Working within Divergent Viewpoints - In January, 2020 the EB established a new Standing Committee, the so-called MDPP2. The status of the mandate was unclear, but the EB provided a detailed brief and timeline. The MDPP2 was a much larger group than the MDPP, including some 20 people, many of whom were chairs of NCs or ICs who had expressed strong views during the debate on a new museum definition.

Notwithstanding that variance in points of view, the MDPP2, with the exception of a single member who dissented from inception regarding the brief and the timeline given by the EB, decided to acknowledge disagreements, but at the same time to work constructively across its divergent points of view. The purpose of that collaboration would be to facilitate and support members, committees, and decision-making bodies in shaping, selecting, and deciding on a museum definition which, in the EB’s words, reflected the purpose and nature of museums in the 21st century, as well as the views of a large majority even if not necessarily all members. The MDPP2 also agreed overwhelmingly, with dissent from only one or two of its members, to a proposed methodology for continued dialogue with the NCs and ICs and for the selection of proposals to be, in time, submitted to the EB. As required by the brief, this methodology was submitted to the EB on March 15th, 2020.

Protract, Prolong, Delay, and Vacillation - While many NCs and ICs initiated their own meetings, discussions, and surveys regarding the museum definition, the MDPP2, as a standing committee, needed the EB’s approval in order to open formal dialogue with the NCs and ICs. By June 1, 2020, and after three meetings between the MDPP2 Chair and the EB, approval for the

MDPP2 methodology remained in a state of apparent perpetual vacillation between “granted” and “withdrawn.” In similar fashion, the MDPP2’s request in March to ICOM for a required 5,000 euros match to a generous offer of a grant for 55,000 euros negotiated by an MDPP2 member with his national government and national committee for a first in-person meeting to take place in Surinam, foundered on the shoals of ICOM bureaucracy and was rejected.

As was the case for the MDPP, the MDPP2 process was challenged, not by internal disagreement, but by the EB taking heed of certain individuals and powerful NCs, who relentlessly and successfully engaged the EB in *ex parte* communications and lobbying which, again, undermined trust and strained good governance practices.

The Resulting Resignations: Conclusion and Coda

The Resignations – On the heels of what is described above, the Chair of the MDPP2 was forced to recognize that the work and processes of the MDPP2 were unlikely to come to fruition and resigned. That resignation was followed closely by an additional five members of the MDPP2 for the same or related reasons.

Speaking in both institutional and personal terms, those who have resigned depart the MDPP2 and this initiative with genuine and abiding sadness. The project has constituted a huge and important commitment of mind and heart for all of us, and we remain proud of the results achieved. We developed new and previously untried methods for democratic dialogue among members of a global organization. Those methods and the direct member contributions generated a forward-looking embrace of museological and epistemological principles that have been described and discussed widely, at the general conference in Kyoto and not the least through the much-read special thematic issue of *Museum International*.

A Pervasive Paralysis and its Roots - But a certain disabling paralysis pervades this effort to strike into the museological future through a ground-breaking initiative. The MDPP2 is blamed by some, through expressions of anger and frustration, that the museum definition process has not advanced since Kyoto. The failure, however, plainly sits elsewhere in ICOM, as the associated and telling resignations by the President and from the EB itself demonstrate with unflinching clarity – namely, a rather catastrophic failure of good governance. The EB’s inability to support the work and institutional place of MDPP/MDPP2 consistently, let alone at especially crucial times such as the EGA, reflects serious dysfunction. The elected and employed ICOM leadership currently seems to lack the capacity to identify, respect and address and resolve their disagreements and divergent points of view. As a standing committee we have experienced this failure in the form of a silent, passive and indecisive EB.

Institutional Consequences - The ultimate victims of such failure are twofold. The first is ICOM itself as a respected global institution for the international museum community.

The very fact of resignations of this numerical range and magnitude cries out for institutional consideration and remedy. Those who resigned are experienced and seasoned ICOM members and senior leaders in the field. None is known for acting emotionally, rashly, or irrationally, nor for deserting or relinquishing responsibility lightly or inexplicably.

These unfortunate and regrettable disjunctures demand serious self-reflection for and within the whole of ICOM, focusing on how we respect, and “systemically” address and resolve disagreements and develop sustainable ways of addressing and containing them. These self-reflections must transcend easy and facile invocations of “transparency” and “democracy” as little more than rhetoric that can just as easily be misused as used appropriately. We need, instead, to ask ourselves and each other, as professionals, as museums, and as a global organization, how we ensure that values such as “democracy”, “equality”, and “transparency” permeate ICOM, museums and ourselves as individuals to the very core of our beings. These values should shape our principles, and define our practices on all levels and in all realms – in other words “systemically”.

Abdication of ICOM’s Role as International Thought Leader – The second and related consequence of all that has been described above is perhaps even more profound, enduring, and damaging to ICOM – the possible relinquishment of ICOM’s role in the global community. ICOM mistakes at its peril the belief that the historical and substantive reference points discussed by the MDPP/MDPP2 and subsequently included in the proposed definitions, were merely matters of the committee’s own creation. The global museum community is now both “North” and “South”, and changed and transformed epistemologies endorse and support proactive collaborations and shared authority between museums and originating communities. “Museums” are highly integrated and relevant components of the communities they serve: they are forums and civic spaces and places. These are museum practices that have been in full motion for the better part of a generation, and what the MDPP/MDPP2 process achieved through its far-flung and lengthy consultation process in substance was, in the end and profoundly, a “reflection” of that which already exists, albeit unevenly, across the world.

Under these circumstances, the issue is whether ICOM chooses to participate meaningfully, with processes that are fair, open, and truly democratic, in this movement as a respected and valued international thought leader. If it continues to resist, let alone fails to move to embrace, the range of important and defining issues confronting museums and their future in the 21st century, the importance of ICOM, regrettably, will be diminished and its impact and relevance at best marginal.