

Collecting with(in) the city

Publication
CAMOC & COMCOL
Conference
09–11 October 2024

AMSTERDAM X MUSEUM

imagine


ICOM International
Council
of museums

MI CAMOC ICOM
International Committee
for the Collections and Activities
of Museums of Cities

MI COMCOL ICOM
International Committee
for Collecting

Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL
Conference
09–11 October 2024**

Collecting with(in) the city
Publication is realized by:

Scientific committee on behalf of CAMOC and COMCOL

Andrea Delaplace	Leen Beyers
Annemarie de Wildt	Njabulo Chipangura
Danielle Kuijten	Rachel Roy
Flora Nguye Mutere	Sandra Vacca
Glenn Perkins	

Imagine IC

Danielle Kuijten	Jules Rijssen
------------------	---------------

Amsterdam Museum

Imara Limon

Project Manager and Final Editor

Roísín Douglas

Layout Design

Bo Gijzen

Special thanks to

All contributors and Patrick de Bruin for the visual identity of the conference.



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Words from the Hosts	8
Keynote lectures	12
Collecting Activism	26
Digital City Experiences	44
Practices of (co)curating	62
Working with artists	116
Decolonial practices	130
City identities and conflict	152
Oral histories revisited	174
City Identities – plural narratives	188
Senses	210
Folk Perspectives	266
Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions	284

Introduction

In October 2024, the international committees CAMOC (International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities) and COMCOL (International Committee for Collecting) joined forces once again to host a joint annual conference in Amsterdam. More than a decade after their first collaboration in Berlin in 2011, on participative strategies, they came together to reflect on the changing practices of collecting, representing, and collaborating with the city. Hosted by the Amsterdam Museum in partnership with Imagine IC, *Collecting with(in) the City* brought together 225 museum professionals, researchers, artists, and community partners from across the world to explore the evolving relationship between the city and its museums.

The conference began on 9 October with city tours that invited participants to encounter Amsterdam in its many layers. From a morning breakfast program at Imagine IC and visits to other cultural institutions in Amsterdam Southeast to afternoon explorations across other parts of the city, the day emphasized the local and lived dimensions of heritage work. In the evening, the Amsterdam Museum welcomed guests for opening drinks, setting the stage for dialogue and exchange. During the opening reception Sites of Memory presented an artistic intervention.

The following two days, 10 and 11 October, were dedicated to conference sessions at Pakhuis de Zwijger. With keynote lectures, dialogue sessions, paper and poster presentations, the program offered a wide-ranging platform to consider what it means for museums to collect “with” and “in” the city today. The questions that framed the conference were both urgent and generative: How can museums capture not only objects but also stories, sounds, and rhythms of urban life? How can institutions work with communities in equitable, reciprocal ways? What power relations shape collections and collecting practices?

The conference focused on five interrelated themes. Power and (in)equalities examined how collections reflect social hierarchies and asymmetries, and how museums can navigate multivocality and claims of ownership. Creative engagements highlighted collaborations with artists and communities in crafting new ways of representing and experiencing the city. Fluid borders between museum and society raised questions about mobility, ownership, and ethics as museums move beyond their walls. Tangible and intangible emphasized the interconnectedness of objects, traditions, and stories. Finally, concepts of care explored how museums can create practices of reciprocity, reflection, and emotional well-being within and beyond their spaces.

Amsterdam—on the eve of its 750th anniversary celebrations—offered a fitting backdrop for these discussions. With its own histories of collecting the city through co-creative programs, the host institutions embodied the very practices under debate. This publication brings together the keynote contributions and selected presentations from the conference, organized as they were presented in the thematic sessions of the conference. We hope they offer insights and reflections that speak to the challenges and possibilities of collecting with(in) the city today.

On behalf of the Scientific committee of CAMOC and COMCOL,

Annemarie de Wildt



Reception and network event at Diaconie
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski

Words from the Hosts

Imara Limon, Amsterdam Museum
& Danielle Kuijten, Imagine IC

Cities are spaces of continuous negotiation: about belonging, identity, and coexistence. What does the city offer, afford and what do we make of it? How much space do we claim for ourselves, and how much do we leave for others? Where does the city begin and end, and which stories, places, and layers do each of us choose to recognize?

These questions were at the heart of the 2024 ICOM CAMOC COMCOL conference *Collecting with(in) the City*, hosted jointly by Imagine IC and the Amsterdam Museum. A natural partnership for this conference as both institutions are deeply rooted in Amsterdam's ongoing dialogue about memory and identities, and both share a long tradition of co-collecting — building collections with communities rather than about them. With colleagues from across the world, we came together to reflect on what it means to collect with and within a city today. How to revisit collecting and (re)presenting in and with the city, by investigating the fluidity of the borders between museums and cities.

Co-Creating the City's Memory

For both Imagine IC and the Amsterdam Museum, co-creation is not just a method — it is a value, an attitude, and an ethical commitment. A city is made up of many voices, many experiences, and many truths. To collect its stories responsibly, we must create space for those voices to shape how the city is remembered and represented.

The Amsterdam Museum sees itself as a platform where the city's residents and visitors become co-authors of its heritage. Through programs such as *Collecting the City*, the museum works in partnership with diverse partners to decide what stories matter, how they are told, and how they enter the collection. This approach ensures that the museum's holdings reflect not just dominant narratives but also those who have been underrepresented.

At Imagine IC, this philosophy is described as “heritage democracy”: the belief that everyone's voice is important in shaping collective memories. For more than two decades, Imagine IC has been experimenting with ways to release, record, tell, and share personal meanings and address overlooked narratives — creating a multi-layered collection of lived experiences from Amsterdam-Zuidoost and beyond.

Imagine IC invites people to become active stewards of their own (hi)stories, ensuring that context, biography, and personal perspectives remain central.

In this shared vision, co-creation strengthens the ethical role of city museums. It challenges institutions to listen deeply, embrace complexity, and acknowledge that no single institution can — or should — define what is valuable on its own. Instead, museums become facilitators of dialogue, enablers of care, and hosts of multiple truths. In doing so, they create living, evolving collections that are richer, more inclusive, and more relevant to the people they serve.

Embracing Complexity

In *City Life* (2018), sociologist Richard Sennett reminds us that although humans are social beings, our encounters are often limited by divisions of power, privilege, and identity. We tend to simplify the complex reality of the metropolis, seeking clarity and control — yet Sennett urges us instead to embrace complexity as the foundation of a healthy, open society.

This is also central to our collaboration. Through dialogue and co-creation, we seek to capture a multi-layered collection of meanings that reflects the diversity and richness of lived experience. Brazilian thinker Ailton Krenak, in *Life Is Not Useful*, highlights how ideas emerge through conversation, reciprocity, and attentive listening — a praxis Imagine IC believes is essential for heritage work today. Listening, for them, is an act of care. Traditionally, heritage institutions have focused on caring for objects, but we believe that caring for people — their stories, relationships, and voices — must come first.

Looking Ahead

City museums are changing. Collaboration, co-creation, and participation are no longer optional; they are central to our practice. But listening and care must extend not only to the communities we as museum professionals work with but also within our institutions, amongst our teams and colleagues.

It is our hope that this conference created a space to connect and reconnect, to inspire and be inspired, and to support one another in our work — work that is often challenging and deeply personal. Together, we practiced new ways of listening, caring, and imagining the future of city museums and heritage work.

May these proceedings capture that spirit and serve as a resource for the steps we take — individually and collectively — toward a more inclusive, multi-voiced understanding of our cities and their stories.

We would like to close with Araf Ahmadali, Director Arts and Culture at City of Amsterdam words he shared during the opening speech: “Inclusive collecting plays an important role in capturing the many stories that reflect who we are today. By building inclusive collections across borders, we not only enrich our museums, but also strengthen the communities that we and the museums serve.”



Breakfast at Imagine IC.
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski



Breakfast at Imagine IC.
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski



Breakfast at Imagine IC.
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Keynote lectures

Power in This Place: Unfinished Conversations

Zandra Yeaman

Biography

Zandra is the Curator of Discomfort and Head of Strategy Development and Implementation based at The Hunterian, University of Glasgow. Curating Discomfort is looking at ways outside of traditional museum authority to explore the interpretation of contested collections and to design and deliver a series of museum interventions that takes the museum out of the institutional comfort zone. As an anti-racist activist, Zandra works with museums to gain an understanding of current social systems and how they are influenced by the legacy of empire, slavery and colonialism. Support them to explore a historical narrative that does not centre or privilege colonisers but re-frames the stories to acknowledge and be representative of our shared histories.



Zandra Yeaman, Keynote Conference Day 3
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Introduction

My career in the museum sector did not begin inside its walls. For decades, I lived only minutes from The Hunterian yet never stepped inside. Museums in my city are deeply civic, yet this particular institution held no cultural capital that felt available or welcoming to someone like me. The fact that I now serve as Curator of Discomfort and Head of Strategy Development speaks to the profound shifts occurring within museums—and to the urgency of continuing that work.

This article reflects on themes I have engaged with as both activist and institutional insider: power, belonging, storytelling, and the emotional and political labour of change. I focus on four interconnected areas: building social and cultural capital, values-based leadership, inclusive curation, and participatory frameworks. Each illustrates how museums can move toward more equitable practices that recognise the complexities of lived experience and the multiplicity of communities we claim to serve.

1. Building Social and Cultural Capital in Museum Practice

1.1 Social Capital as Collective Resource

My presence at international conferences marks a shift in my own social capital. Five years ago, I would not have been invited into these spaces. Today, my visibility grants access—but access is not the endpoint. The value of social capital lies in its redistribution. When people who have historically been excluded gain access, we must not protect the seat; we must change the table, dismantle the table, and create new ones where different voices define the agenda.

Social capital emerges through relationships, networks, solidarity, and shared struggle. It cannot be individualised. In the context of museums, this means embracing the idea that expertise resides beyond the institution and that communities—especially those pushed to the margins—hold knowledge essential to our work.

1.2 Cultural Capital and the Right to Belong

Cultural capital operates differently. It is embedded in spaces, aesthetics, forms of knowledge, and what is deemed valuable. Growing up, the cultural capital of The Hunterian—its architecture, collections, narrative framing—signalled clearly that it was not for me. This is a reality for many communities whose histories and identities have been minimised or erased in cultural institutions.

Museums frequently claim they are “open to everyone,” yet openness does not equate to access, and certainly not to belonging. Cultural capital becomes a gatekeeper when it reflects—and reproduces—racial, class, and gendered hierarchies. To dismantle this, museums must critically examine not only what they display, but how their spaces speak, who their language assumes to belong, and whose stories are centred.

1.3 Intersectionality and Generational Exclusion

My experience as a mixed-heritage Glaswegian woman born in the late 1960s, illustrates the intersection of classism, racism, and sexism that shapes access to cultural and social capital. Intersectionality, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, enables us to understand how structures of oppression interlock and multiply. Museums cannot write feminist programmes without women of colour; cannot write racial justice programmes without disabled participants; cannot treat identity as a single axis.

City museums, especially, sit at the heart of intergenerational inequality. We have a responsibility not to maintain these structures but to disrupt them—through equitable access, power-sharing, and co-created cultural knowledge.

2. Values-Based Leadership: Transforming Internal Culture

2.1 Listening, Communication, and Institutional Courage

Museums excel at producing exhibitions, yet rarely interrogate the internal cultures shaping that work. At The Hunterian, our leadership team has been developing a values-based approach requiring emotional and relational labour:

- Active listening, practiced intentionally rather than performatively
- Non-violent communication, recognising how seemingly small behaviours diminish colleagues
- Transparency about language, expertise, and the limits of our own understanding
- Radical candour with compassion, allowing for honesty without harm

These practices help us confront assumptions we hold about one another and about the communities we engage with. If we carry prejudice internally, it will inevitably surface externally.

2.2 Challenging Saviourism and Reframing Power

A critical part of this leadership approach involves naming and dismantling white saviourism—an insidious dynamic in which marginalised communities are treated as fragile, helpless, or lacking knowledge. In my anti-racist work, I have witnessed extraordinary resilience among women navigating the refugee system. The ways they are sometimes patronised within cultural institutions reveal our failure to recognise their strength and agency.

Values-based leadership requires that we hold communities with respect, recognise their power, and refuse to reproduce harmful dynamics under the guise of inclusion.

2.3 Upskilling Cultural Literacy

Museums devote significant time to museum studies and object care, yet often neglect the study of the societies we inhabit. Staff must deepen their literacy around racism, disability justice, migration policies, queer identities, and more. This literacy is not optional—it is foundational to meaningful engagement.

When we asked staff at The Hunterian whether they had ever experienced exclusion from a venue, only a few could answer. This highlighted a gap between those writing inclusion policies and those living the realities those policies must address. True inclusion requires that communities shape strategy, policy, and institutional direction—not simply programmes.

3. Inclusive Curation: Reinterpreting Collections Through Equity and Justice

3.1 Four Lenses for Re-Reading the Collection

To make our curatorial practice more inclusive, we adopted four interpretive lenses—political, economic, cultural, and equality and social justice, grounded in the legacies of empire and their contemporary impact. Once these lenses were introduced, curators could no longer view the collections through a neutral or apolitical frame. The past became porous, entangled with the present.

3.2 Community Perspectives as Essential Insight

In one project, we invited community curators to reflect on selected objects. Their contributions were not token additions but necessary provocations, illuminating gaps in our institutional framing. Even where engagement was low intensity, the act reshaped curatorial thinking; it forced us to confront our own biases, assumptions, and neutrality.

4. Participatory Frameworks: Co-Creating with Intention

4.1 Internal and External Communities

Museums often conceive of “community engagement” exclusively in external terms. Yet institutions have internal communities as well—teams whose relationships determine whether external participatory work can succeed. If we cannot collaborate internally, our external collaborations will be shallow.

4.2 Moving Toward True Co-Production

The Hunterian’s participatory framework spans informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and co-producing. We have begun shifting from consultation toward collaboration, but true co-production remains challenging. It requires beginning with no predetermined outcomes, not titles, not objectives, not funding applications. It requires allowing community partners to define the work from its inception. This level of shared power is rare in museums, but essential to achieve genuine transformation.

4.3 Resourcing Participation

Co-production demands time, money, and training. Without adequate resources, institutions risk exploiting community labour while congratulating themselves for doing “participatory work.” Investment is not optional; it is the ethical cost of shared power.

Conclusion: Discomfort as Catalyst, Not Obstacle

Transforming museums is not easy work. It asks us to embrace discomfort, confront our assumptions, and acknowledge our complicity in systems that marginalise. But discomfort is not a barrier—it is a sign of growth.

People are complex. Institutions are complex. Collaboration is complex. And yet, when museums commit to the redistribution of social and cultural capital, embrace values-based leadership, and co-create with communities, the result is more than institutional change. It is a shift in power—one that opens the possibility for collective power sharing with equity.

The work is ongoing. We are not yet where we hope to be. But we are moving in that direction, rebuilding the table together.

Keynote lectures

Re-calibrating the city museum and our professionalism

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch

Biography

Léontine Meijer-van Mensch is director of Museum Rotterdam. Previously she was director of the State Ethnographical Collections of Saxony, programme-director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, deputy-director of the Museum of European Cultures at Berlin, and lecturer of heritage theory and professional ethics at the Reinwardt Academie, Amsterdam. She is active in the boards of several museum organizations. She was, among others, member of the Executive Board of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and founding president of the International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL). At present, she is chair of the ICOM Ethics Committee and member of the Board of Trustees of the European Museum Forum. She is a frequent speaker at international conferences and a regular guest lecturer at various heritage studies programmes throughout Europe.



Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Keynote Conference Day 3
Photo: Françoise Boleschowski

Introduction

I am happy that COMCOL and CAMOC are having a joint conference again, not in the least because I have such good memories of the 2011 joint conference we had in Berlin, COMCOL's first annual conference!² But, most of all I am happy with this joint conference because I consider these two international committees as natural allies. Both committees share an intrinsic interest in documenting the present through participatory practices and share an interest in re-thinking what collection development and representation mean in a superdiverse society. Both interests are illustrated by many of the contributions to the present conference.

For me personally, the collaboration between COMCOL and CAMOC has an extra dimension. Since eleven days I am the director of a city museum: the city museum of Rotterdam.³ COMCOL and CAMOC thus represent two souls in my body, impossible to separate.

The following input reflects very much my thinking process on the why, the how and the because of city museums. I am taking you with me on this ongoing process. The thinking does not have its definite form yet. I am therefore sorry for the possible incoherences and open ends. But I do know it circles, at least in the present text, around melancholy and hope.

The process of becoming director of the Rotterdam city museum was for me a sort of museological homecoming. In the past I did many projects with city museums in different parts of Europe, and in my most recent work in Saxony (Germany) the similarities between the ethnological museums and the city museums were all too obvious.⁴ But I have come to notice that there are also important differences. I will come back to that later.

The Museum Rotterdam was (and still is) famous for its advanced methodologies and programming. It worked with the concept of 'liquid museum' long before the term was coined by Fiona Cameron.⁵ It organized successful participatory projects with a multitude of communities in different neighbourhoods of the city. As we have seen in the many case studies presented throughout this conference, the discourse on the relevance of city museums is very much dominated by the concepts of community and participation. City museums are successful in giving a voice and a platform to a variety of groups in society. In doing so, they have embraced the participation paradigm.⁶ In fact, the concept of participation in the museum domain emerged first of all in the sphere of neighbourhood- and city museums. However, there are different forms of participation, with different degrees of transferring authority. The more authority is transferred to an external group of people, the more our expertise as professionals is challenged.⁷ This is an important issue will come back to later.

Melancholy

I must admit that, in general, I am a bit melancholic with the rather inflationary use of the term participation and other critical-museological jargon. It is therefore that for a couple of years I try to avoid using lots of terms: not talking the talk but walking the walk. Yes, participation is part of THE toolbox I have been using for the last twenty years, but I more and more feel this toolbox has been hijacked. I sometimes laugh silently when I hear people speak in this museological ‘buzzwordology’. ‘Our’ effective instruments, ‘our’ innovative museological toolboxes have been adopted as standard jargon in third wave money applications and in practices in all sorts of museums and projects but consequently have lost much of their insurgent potential. We may call this – as Marcuse wrote – the effect of repressive tolerance.⁸

Similarly, I have my melancholic problems with the concept of community. It has its utmost importance and usefulness in the attempts to acknowledge the special needs of certain marginalized and other groups, but apart from the question of who has the power to define a community, the concept tends to separate more often, rather than it unites.⁹ For me, as director of a museum in a city consisting of a vibrant mix of over 170 nationalities and many cultures, subcultures and communities, connection is a key concept in how I perceive the role of the museum. A few days ago (9 October 2024) Carola Schouten was sworn in as the new mayor of Rotterdam. It was interesting that the main theme of her speech was connection. Schouten focuses the spotlight on all those unknown Rotterdammers who try to make the city a little more beautiful. She calls those people ‘City Warmers’. ‘Rotterdam has a warm heart,’ she recently said to a large group of volunteers. ‘A heart that is formed by a fine-meshed network of good, nice and well-meaning people.’¹¹

In the context of a city museum, all communities are implicated, as they are all in some way connected with the past, present and future of the city. For a few years I have embraced the concept of implicated communities. This concept, be it in a slightly different way, was introduced by Michael Rothberg and adapted by Erica Lehrer.¹² Lehrer proposed the term ‘to include people who are affected by or can be said to be implicated in certain tangible or intangible cultural products, in ethical terms’.¹³ In the Dutch journal *De Groene Amsterdammer*, the journalist Lotfi El Hamidi argued that the deeply humane tragedy of the Second World War bombardment of the city of Rotterdam can be a point of identification and a joint memory although people themselves may not have historical ties with the city.¹⁴ Refugees from war zones can thus also experience a form of implication with the Rotterdam cultural memory. This notion gives extra contemporary relevance to the narrative of the bombardment and its documentation in the collection. The bombardment, according to El Hamidi, could serve as a uniting force.

We are always in one way or the other implicated. In Dresden, at the beginning of 2021, together with the Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh, I initiated as a museum project a poster intervention in the public domain.¹⁵ Two hundred posters were hung throughout the city of Dresden. The main message of this intervention was that the Benin Bronzes were missing in Benin and that the city of Dresden

and its people were in one way or the other implicated in this missing, but also that as a consequence the people had a stake in the possible restitution. The project created a meaningful dialogue and contributed to a larger debate within German society and politics about the transfer of ownership and the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. At the end of December 2022, I was sitting in the airplane of the German minister of foreign affairs, restituting the first Bronzes back to Nigeria.¹⁶ I have learned that activating an implicated community can indeed create a powerful movement.

City museums have a huge impact on the museological discourse. Just mentioning our hosts for this conference, Imagine IC and the Amsterdam Museum. Both heritage initiatives have an inspiring tradition in critically reflecting on current societal issues of importance. It is regrettable that, in general, bottom-up neighbourhood heritage initiatives and even city museums do not seem to receive the credits from outside our professional ‘bubble’ that they deserve. That too makes me melancholic.

Polarisation

Neighbourhood heritage initiatives and city museums seem to experience an increased pressure of current social, political and economic developments, not just financial pressure as result of municipal policies of austerity. It is my melancholic conviction that we pay far too little attention to recent political developments. As an example, a lot of museums have been engaged in co-creative projects with refugees. When I was working in the Museum of European Cultures (in Berlin) we – together with an artist – made an exhibition in 2016 engaging with a group of refugees living in a nearby Asylum Seekers Centre.¹⁷ We as a museum perceived this project as part of our mission statement where social responsibility played an important role. At that time no critical voices were heard; local media were by and large positive. Nowadays such projects would probably meet huge opposition. I am melancholic since unfortunately in this respect much has changed. How do we deal with the growing societal opposition against refugees? How do we deal with programmes that are in society perceived as expressions of a ‘woke agenda’? Have we perhaps been too naive in this regard? I can say I was.

Many of us, I assume, are as melancholic and as worried as I am, about the present political climate in our respective countries. I recently came back to the Netherlands from Saxony. In this German state, elections were being held on 1 September 2024. On the same day also in the state of Thüringen, and almost one month later in the state of Brandenburg. You may have read that in all three states the extreme right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has won considerable support.¹⁸ About one third of the electorate voted for this party with a shocking revelation that in particular among young people this party was by far the most popular one. Already before the elections, the AfD used its parliamentary position to put pressure on the policy of museums. It is not known yet what the consequences will be in Saxony. But even though the AfD did not succeed in becoming the biggest party in the election and will probably not become part of the government, the impact the elections will have should not be underestimated.¹⁹ Right wing parties don’t like pluralism, they want control.

But this is only part of the problem. We witness an extreme polarisation of our society. A recent survey of 31 European countries showed that populist parties (left and right) have more than doubled their vote share in the last 30 years.²⁰ Where do we find common ground when the middle of society is disappearing? I cannot speak for the whole world, but in the countries I am familiar with, extremist positions make a public debate hardly possible. And again talking about a deep melancholy, the post-October 7th world-wide turmoil and the on-going war in the Ukraine also make that painfully visible.

Not just the polarisation itself makes a public debate hardly possible but also the perception of it. The slightly conservative German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, claiming it represents the middle of society, asked its readers whether left-wing activists do impose their views on society. About 86 % of the respondents agreed with the statement that a small, loud minority is putting pressure on society.²¹ Such perceptions are part of a 'post-truth society' based upon conspiracy theories, fake news, distrust and even hate. There is a lot of what we might call 'populist truth-making' especially in the digital world.

Dutch sociologist Quita Muis has recently argued in her PhD that indeed different groups judge each other's opinions more harshly, but that it is mainly about a perceived polarisation, not about an actual polarisation. "Unfortunately, that incorrect image then becomes the starting point for our actions," concludes Muis: "Social cohesion is diluted because we no longer know each other. And so our assumptions ultimately become reality."²²

It is more than ironic that within this situation, city museums are experiencing extreme difficulties. You might have read in the newspapers about city museums in several countries that were forced to close or are forced to suspend their activities. I strongly believe in the value of city museums – I accepted my present job not for nothing. And, although city museums cannot solve all social problems, of course, I strongly believe that they have an important social role to play.

Hope

So now I want to shift from melancholy to hope. In times of fragmentation, we need to offer the inspiration for connecting; in times of polarisation, we need to offer spaces for dialogue; in times of fake news and conspiracy theories, we need to offer frameworks of critical reflection. Aforementioned Quita Muis argued: "If people exclude others because of their opinion and avoid a conversation, then that is a wrong form of polarisation. What you should want is for people to enter into debate and continue talking to each other. And it may occasionally be abrasive. But in debate you can find each other and make compromises."²³ Because there is no contact anymore, the stereotypical image one has of the other is being reinforced. People end up in a vicious circle, which is very difficult to break.

For the Museum Rotterdam I would like to adopt the notion of the 'village well', a place where people come together to discuss issues of common interest, where people get water to survive, where people gossip, and where sometimes princes and princesses turn into frogs or the other way around.²⁴

This is not far from the concept of 'third place' as advocated by Ray Oldenburg and the concept of 'third space' as introduced by Homi Bhabha.²⁵ In the museum in Leipzig we designed a Bonvenon Space, from the Esperanto word for welcome. Centre piece in the space is a Leipzig pub that we musealized. Among others, the space serves as meeting place at the opening of exhibitions. I was emotionally moved when in the museum pub after an opening, representatives of the queer community of Leipzig and members of the rather conservative so-called Indian hobbyists ('Karl May devotees', a very former GDR thing) had a beer together. Two groups that would hardly meet in everyday life. This is the power of museums as dialogical space.

The museum should respect multivocality, of course, but should in my opinion put a stronger emphasis on connection. In the museum in Leipzig we have adopted Donna Haraway's principle of 'staying with the trouble'.²⁶ In her book the central question is how we deal with the challenges of our time, which, as Haraway writes, is best done collectively and in unfamiliar relationships, which brings me back to the main point I wanted to raise: the issue of connectedness. For a long time, city museums have benefited from theories and methodologies of the field of ethnology. However, traditionally ethnological museums focus on distinction. Communities are defined and, often for an exhibition or a collection project, isolated.

In my view, city museums should focus more on connection, on recalibrating towards a shared middle ground. In addition, from the perspective that the constituent force of a city museum is the city, it is easier to develop programmes on the basis of a shared identity, an identity, I would like to stress, that is in terms of Zygmunt Bauman, 'liquid'.²⁷ Collections in ethnological museums are highly 'toxic' as they are too often products of all sorts of violence and alienation. It is often too painful to speak of 'shared ownership'. From the perspective that the constituent force of a city museum is the city, shared ownership has another dimension. It is the shared ownership of the cultural biography of the city, with its collection(s), with its physical structures, its street names, etc.. It is that binding hopeful potential of city museums that goes from 'them' / 'the other' to 'us and we' that made me move from the ethnological museum domain to the city museum, knowing that the potential of museums in encouraging 'implicated ownership' can only be realised if the museum staff is really reflecting the composition of society. This has been a dream in our professional field for many years, but still far from being a reality. But I am hopeful.

The red thread in my talk is the increasing polarisation of our world. In the recent past several research projects have shown that people trust museums more than any other medium or government agency. This trust is based upon the expectation that objects tell one objective truth. As professionals we know that this is hardly the case. Trust is a delicate thing, but it is an enormous treasure to work with.²⁸ City museums can use this treasure to underpin the idea of

'village well' in order to be of value to achieve a more just and cohesive society. I would love to start a collaborative research project on this and what it means for our collecting policies.

Who's with me?

Notes

- 1 Between reading the text on 11 October 2024 and writing the present version for publication on March 2025 much has happened in the world with consequences for the views expressed in my keynote. In footnotes reference is made to some of these recent developments, but I want to stress that the text reflects my perceptions as they existed in October 2024.
- 2 Meijer-van Mensch, L., and Tietmeyer, E. (eds) (2013). *Participative Strategies in Collecting the Present*. Berliner Blätter Heft 63. Berlin: Panama Verlag.
- 3 <https://museumrotterdam.nl/>
- 4 As director of the State Ethnographical Collections in Leipzig, Dresden and Herrnhut.
- 5 Cameron, F. (2015). 'The Liquid Museum: New Institutional ontologies for a Complex, Uncertain World'. In: Witcomb, A., and Message, K. (eds) *Museum Theory. The International Handbooks of Museum Studies 1*, pp. 345-361. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- 6 Meijer-van Mensch, L. (2016). 'Partizipation in der Museumsarbeit – zwischen Hobbyismus und Professionalisierung'. In: Walz, M. (ed) *Handbuch Museum. Geschichte, Aufgaben, Perspektiven*, pp 329-332. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag.
- 7 Meijer-van Mensch, L., and Mensch, P. van (2022). 'Hosting and insurgency: post-participatory challenges', *The International Journal of Museum Studies*, 2, 45-54.
- 8 Marcuse, H. (1965). 'Repressive tolerance'. <<https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/publications/1960s/1965-repressive-tolerance-fulltext.html>>, accessed 19 March 2025.
- 9 Waterton, E., and Smith, L. (2010). 'The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16 (1-2), 4-15.
- 10 Bormans, A. (2024). 'Carola Schouten wil verdeeld Rotterdam tot toenadering bewegen', *De Volkskrant*, 10 October.
- 11 My translation. From: Groenendijk, P. (2025). 'De eerste 100 dagen van Carola Schouten: 'Ze brengt een nieuwe energie met zich mee'', *Algemeen Dagblad*, 18 January.
- 12 Rothberg, M. (2013). 'Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge'. In Plate, L., and Smelik, A. (eds), *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, pp. 39-58. (New York-London: Routledge.
- Lehrer, E. (2018). From 'Heritage Communities' to 'Communities of Implication' <<http://www.tracesproject.eu/index.html?p=3595.html>>, accessed 19 March 2025.
- Lehrer, E. (2020). 'Material Kin: 'Communities of Implication' in Post-Colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections'. In Oswald, M. von, and Tinius, J. (eds), *Across Anthropology. Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, pp. 289-322. Leuven: University Press.
- 13 Lehrer 2020: 304.

- 14 Hamidi, L. El (2024). 'Stenen tranen', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 15 May. Also published in *NRC*, 18 May 2024.
- 15 <<https://www.skdmuseum/en/besucherservice/press/2021/vermisst-in-benin-an-artistic-intervention-by-emeka-ogboh/>>, accessed 19 March 2025.
- 16 Sommer, T. (2023). 'Zurück in die Zukunft', *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, February, 48-52.17
- 17 Müller, K. B. (2016). 'Ein kleiner Daumenabdruck aus Blut', *taz*, 21 July.
- 18 In the national (Bundestag) elections of 23 February 2025 the AfD became the second largest party.
- 19 The impact it has had on my work would be a topic of another keynote. The present keynote was written with the East-German election results fresh in mind. In the meantime, the US presidency of Donald Trump has given reasons for serious concerns about the extremist right-wing pressure on universities and museums. See, for example, 'Trump Moves to Dismantle Federal Institute That Support Museums and Libraries', <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/trump-executive-orders-arts-2605142>>, accessed 19 March 2025.
- 20 Henley, J. (2023). 'Revealed: one in three Europeans now vote anti-establishment', *The Guardian*, 21 September.
- 21 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 November 2022.
- 22 My translation. Quotations from: Oostveen, M. (2024). 'Hoger opgeleiden lijken in hun opvattingen meer op elkaar dan mensen die lager zijn opgeleid', *De Volkskrant*, 22 September.
- 23 Idem.
- 24 In hindsight, the 'village well' may not be the most appropriate metaphor for a contemporary city museum. I am still looking for a better catch word.
- 25 Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place*. Boston: Da Capo Press.
- 26 Bhabha, H. (2004). *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- 26 Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- 27 Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- 28 *Museums and Trust*. American Alliance of Museums/Wilkening Consulting, Spring 2021. <<https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Museums-and-Trust-2021.pdf>>, accessed 19 March 2025.

Collecting Activism

From history museum to city museum: Integrating art collection into a project

Xavier de la Selle & Cécile Gotterand

Biography

Xavier de la Selle has been Director of Gadagne (Lyon History Museum and Puppet Arts Museum) since 2015. He is also responsible for Lyon's history and society museums, which include the Musée de l'imprimerie et de la communication graphique and the Musée de l'automobile Henri-Malartre. He began his career in the archive sector. A graduate of the Ecole Nationale des Chartes, he worked as an archivist. In 2008, he took charge of the Rize, centre mémoires et société, a new cultural venue opened in Villeurbanne in 2008. In 2022, he was elected Chairman of the Fédération des écomusées et musées de société.

Cécile Gotterand is curator in charge of the collections of the Lyon city museum, scientific referent for the history of Lyon.

Introduction

The history museum of Lyon opened its doors to the public in 1921. It was part of the city museum movement, and inspired by the example of the Musée Carnavalet, the history museum of Paris. However, the Musée de Lyon subsequently moved away from this model, concentrating its collections on decorative arts, without ever embarking on a contemporary collecting policy.

In the 2000s, the museum underwent a major renovation of both its building and museography before reopening its doors to the public in 2009. During this period, the museum began to undertake a number of collecting projects, mainly in the industrial field, but these were not initially incorporated into the museum's collections on a permanent basis.

More recently, within the framework of a complete overhaul of its permanent exhibition, and more generally of its scientific and cultural project formalised in 2022, the history museum has fully redefined its collecting strategy, so as to enrich its collections by giving greater importance to objects and to the words of witnesses of contemporary urban history, as well as to themes that are rarely present in the museum (Tim Marshall, 2023; Coudroy de Lille, Coquery, 2024).

The process of renewing the permanent tour, spread over five years (2019-2023), has provided an opportunity to move forward with the organisation of this collection, working on a theme basis. The new tour is divided into four thematic exhibitions. The last one, entitled *Lyonnaises, Lyonnais*, deals with the political history of the city, evoking the history of power and militant commitments [See figure 1]. It is a collection dealing with feminist activists, compiled by the museum staff in 2023, which will be used as an example to raise a series of questions of technical and professional nature, as well as ethical and political.



Figure 1: Exhibition view 'Lyonnaises, Lyonnais' (2023). Credits: Paroldi Schwebel

Collecting for an exhibition: a double-edged sword

One might wonder about the singularities of collecting for a permanent exhibition. This is the situation the staff of the Musée d'histoire de Lyon had to deal with when preparing the thematic tour entitled: *Lyonnaises, Lyonnais, pouvoirs et engagements dans la cité (Lyonnais(f/m), powers and commitments in the city)*. Willing to move away from an object-focused museography to reach an idea-focused one, the plan was to create new rooms to show three forms of activism deeply rooted in current social and societal debates: the fight for the living environment and for the climate, the defence of the rights of foreigners and people of immigrant background, and the fight against domination systems, especially by women's rights activists. These three citizens' movements have a long history in Lyon, or at least a long history of local support. [See figure 2]



Figure 2: Exhibition view 'Lyonnaises, Lyonnais' (2023). Credits: Paroldi Schwebel

While many Lyonnais have heard of the *Ovalistes*, silk workers led by Philomène Rozan in 1869 in the first major women's strike in Europe, the museum's collections hold no trace of this history. Nor is there any tangible or intangible evidence of the occupation of the Saint-Nizier church by prostitutes in June 1975 (a landmark in the history of sex workers recognition), or of the actions of the French Women's Liberation Movement (MLF i.e. Mouvement de Libération des Femmes), which was very active in Lyon in the 1970s. There is even fewer elements on contemporary forms of activism.

It was therefore necessary to take a proactive approach and to gather information from those who had witnessed this history. The prospect of exhibiting the results of this collection in the permanent exhibition in the very near future proved particularly stimulating at first, both for the museum teams, the collectors, and for those we collected from: people, groups, associations, individuals – although there were a number of pitfalls and difficulties that we had not necessarily anticipated.

The museum's approach first implied defining the content of the exhibition before going out to meet people so as to collect objects. Therefore it is easy to imagine the different biases induced by this reversed acquisition and exhibition process, all the more so since limits of budget, exhibition space, deadlines and scenography entered the equation.

In order to evoke feminist struggles, finding the 'right' objects was a great temptation: neither too small nor too large and easy to understand, and inevitably corresponding to the representations the members of the museum staff had on what feminist movements are or would be. So posters, leaflets, pins, photos and placards seemed the ideal way to evoke this form of activism, perhaps with the risk of remaining caricatural or incomplete.

During the initial discussions with the associations and groups we met (*Mouvement français pour le Planning Familial du Rhône ie MFPF, Collectif NousToutes Rhône, Cercle Flora Tristan*), the museum staff insisted on presenting the project in full details, without hiding anything about the limits or the museum's guarantees to exhibit the entire collection. The preliminary interview, led in a place chosen by the interviewees, usually their homes, quickly focused on the objects or documents that best embodied their struggles.

Relationships, negotiations or transactions?

During initial discussions with one of the activists from the *NousToutes Rhône* collective, she soon suggested the megaphone used by her collective during their actions: an amplified megaphone, adorned with stickers, enabling the demonstrators to make their voices heard, and therefore an object with a very strong symbolic value.

This item seemed perfect: the collective was prepared to give theirs to the museum, if the museum was able to replace it. The market value of a second-hand megaphone would not have allowed the collective to buy a new one, so it was decided that the museum should buy one to donate in return. It may seem a surprising negotiation, but otherwise such an acquisition to document feminist activism in 21st-century Lyon would not have been possible. But what do you do when the objects do not exist, have disappeared or only ever existed in the minds of the collectors? [See figure 3]



Figure 3: 'Féminisme Lachas', Megaphone, stickers and protest signs by Rhône collective

From the kitchen to the shop window

Any professional who designs exhibitions knows that the profusion of paper documents can seem off-putting to visitors. Set designers and museum staff alike dream of ‘beautiful’ objects which are ‘strong’ and symbolic, and sometimes have very different or even contradictory ideas of what these terms mean. Since the beginning of the project to overhaul our permanent tour, there has already been a number of debates between the design team and members of the museum staff about where to include a particular object in the tour. Should objects with strong aesthetic potential be given priority over less visually appealing ones??

When we met an activist from the *Cercle Flora*, an MLF group in Lyon in the 1970s and 1980s (*Masclat, 2018*), who is also an active supporter of the French Movement for the Liberation of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC ie *Mouvement de Libération de l'avortement et de la contraception*), the question of what could be donated or loaned to the museum came up very quickly. This activist had some paper archives and photographs, which she did not wish to donate, and no other material evidence of her commitment.

This is when the collection manager’s power of suggestion kicked in. We imagined the objects we would like to see in glass cases, those that would conjure up in our collective imagination the struggles for abortion rights: a coat hanger? A catheter? No, this type of medical equipment could offend the viewer and is nowhere to be found anyway. During our discussions, we came up with the idea of a casserole. It is a simple stainless steel pot bought in the 1970s to sterilise the utensils used by MLAC activists during abortions in the flat she lent then. An ordinary stainless steel casserole that she has kept in her kitchen cupboard ever since, without ever revealing anything other than the banality of its use.

This ordinary object, now on display in a showcase, was born from the dialogue between the collector and the collected, and has become both a veritable relic for younger generations of activists and a ‘sordid’ object for the exhibition’s detractors, proving the evocative power of the museum and the exhibition.

‘Wild’ collection: an ethical approach?

Activism is characterised by the ephemeral nature of its actions and resources, sometimes leaving little trace other than photographs or videos if any at all. For instance, this is the case of demonstrations, where wooden or cardboard placards are often destroyed or recycled at the end of the event. Hoping to collect a few examples, the museum staff opted for a ‘live’ collecting action, taking part in the procession on 8th March 2023, International Women’s Rights Day, on *Place Bellecour*, Lyon’s most symbolic landmark and both starting and finishing points for many demonstrations in the city. Of course, it was not possible to collect all the hundreds of placards waved that day, and even a sampling seemed difficult. The museum staff therefore carried out a scouting operation in the middle of a forest of signs raised in front of the statue of Louis XIV. The aim was to find signs with slogans the general public could understand, and with attractive

visuals, all before the demonstration got under way. In retrospect, we may wonder whether there was a form of self-censorship expressed by the collectors, as a certain number of signs were rejected because some slogans or visuals appeared too provocative to be displayed. The next step was to approach the demonstrators and to explain the process, then hoping to obtain the placards while people had not yet started demonstrating.

After leaving our contact details to the owners of the proposed objects, there was a great risk none of them would follow up, but the museum staff were pleasantly surprised to acquire two placards as a result of this operation. However, the donors did not wish to submit their testimonies along with their creations, explaining their commitment was not long-standing enough and therefore their words did not seem legitimate to be collected by the museum. [See figure 4]

So the museum will need to better document this object before integrating them into its collection. Improving collecting methods will be one of the museum’s priorities in its next scientific and cultural project for the years 2026-2032.

A predatory museum?

Throughout the project, some of the activists we met seemed very interested in the museum’s approach, but a little overwhelmed by the current enthusiasm for feminist struggles, especially



Figure 4: ‘Choulet’, Exhibition View

considering some of them have been active for several decades. Where have museums been previously? What would happen once the trend had passed?

Others had already been approached by other cultural institutions (archives, museums) or by academics recently working on these subjects. Some had even been disappointed by projects for which they had loaned documents and objects that had never been returned.

What could be done to win their trust when deadlines were tight and scenographers were waiting for a list of pieces? How could we avoid giving the impression that we were forcing people's hand, in an asymmetrical relationship between a cultural institution and private individuals and groups? How could we reconcile the respect for individuals, the ethics of acquisitions and the constraints of an exhibition? It is hard not to appear as a 'predatory' institution, especially when most activists we met were reluctant to put themselves forward while neglecting others, or felt illegitimate because of their inexperience. These questions fit well within the context of reflections on ethnographic data collection, such as those of Julien Bondaz on "data collection as a predatory activity" (Bondaz, 2014).

We tried to solve the problem by offering some of them the chance to combine the donation of objects with a personal interview and a film of a discussion between activists of different generations. This video is now on display in the museum's permanent exhibition alongside the objects collected.

The positive experience of this collection on feminism shows the stimulating effect of a short-term exhibition. But under the combined effects of pressure of deadlines, exhibition space and the obligation to achieve results, it also leads to ethical and methodological choices that can raise questions.

The success of this experiment also seems to be closely linked to the targeted group: committed women, keen to have their struggles recognised, well informed about their rights, socially recognised and, for the most part, economically established. Would it have been the same with other types of targeted groups? It is not certain.

Can a museum be neutral?

Just after the opening of the *Lyonnaises Lyonnais: pouvoirs et engagements dans la cité* exhibition in December 2023, the museum was criticised from all sides by several right-wing media journalists. The institution was accused of promoting 'wokist' ideology, and of being instrumentalised by the municipal authorities (an environmentalist municipality was elected in 2020).

One criticism was that the exhibition did not represent right-wing political movements. As we worked with historians specialised in social movements (Mathieu, 2004; Porhel, 2023), we stated that right-wing militancy did not really exist as such, and that right-wing demonstrations were

occasional moments when people expressed their discontent, without being organised activists. Another explanation could be that commitment to right-wing ideas is more commonly expressed through joining a political party, voting during election campaigns or signing petitions, and therefore less in the public space, whereas left-wing activism is easier to collect, perhaps simply because it is more visible outside and produces more material objects (posters, banners...).

The last question the museum asked itself deals with extreme right-wing activists, who are well organised in small groups, with equipment, firearms and so on (Mathieu, 2002). If we would decide to go to a demonstration, we would have to find out who they are. And if we decide to go and meet them to collect traces of their violent actions, this raises the question of the museum's responsibility to give them visibility. It is true that we did not meet activists from the numerous extreme right-wing groups, some of which are based in the area just around the museum; nor did we talk about certain events, such as those organised in Lyon and other cities to demonstrate against the law authorising gay marriage in France. It was quite difficult to clearly respond to these accusations, but in the coming years, the museum plans to update certain rooms in the exhibition and will then be able to incorporate this subject as a supplement.

When we as museum staff and management embarked on a policy of collecting activism, we faced questions that were both methodological and ethical. But the current political context, stressing on polarisation and harsher debates, has led the institution into a political territory that really raises the question of the museum neutrality and the boundary that needs to be drawn between professional stance and civic commitment.

During this turbulent period, the museum was supported by the municipality and the professional community, particularly the City History Museums and Research Network of Europe. The museum team will continue its collecting activities, drawing on the lessons learned from this experience.

References

- François Alfandari, Sophie Béroud, Laure Fleury, Camille Masclet, Lilian Mathieu, Vincent Pohrel, Lucia Valdivia (collectif grande côte), *Lyon en luttés dans les années 68. Lieux et trajectoires de la contestation*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 201
- Julien Bondaz, « Entrer en collection. Pour une ethnographie des gestes et des techniques de collecte. Entering a collection. Towards an ethnography of the gestures and techniques of collecting », *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre Recherches en histoire de l'art, histoire des civilisations, archéologie, anthropologie et muséologie*, n°4, 2014
- Laurent Coudroy de Lille, Natacha Coquery, « La refonte de la muséographie du musée Gadagne (Lyon) », *Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 2024/2, n°70, p. 161-171
- Olivier Fillieule (dir.), Lilian Mathieu (dir.) et Cécile Péchu (dir.), *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Presses de Science Po, 2020
- Tim Marshall, *Some important city museum transformation projects, in European City Museum*,

Collecting Activism

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal Collecting activism and activist films

Bert Dingerink

Biography

Bert Dingerink is a parttime student of Art History at University of Amsterdam. He was an intern and now volunteer at Eye Filmmuseum for the Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (and other politically activating film collectives from the 1960's to 1980's in the Netherlands). Bert contributed to the article Archives for Change: Political Films and the City – The Case of the Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1974–1984), written by the group Political Film Archives (Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives, Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at UvA). (<https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2024/06/archives-for-change/>)

Bert is also a retired sociologist. During his sociology study in the 1970's, he was an intern at Amsterdams Stadsjournaal. His professional career was in occupational rehabilitation in psychiatry and special employment mediation of people with disabilities and social disadvantage.

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, collecting activism and activist films from the seventies

Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal collects, preserves, discloses and presents politically activating films from the 1970s and 1980s in the Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular. Our venture is a collaboration between Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives and the University of Amsterdam. We research and present the work of political film collectives. Sometimes this means rediscovery of (almost) forgotten films on 16 mm. Often we watch audiovisual analyses or comments on social problems and calls for social change. We are collecting and presenting audiovisual material on socio political actions and the desire for change that marked the seventies and eighties. We work in consultation with Sound and Vision (Beeld en Geluid), a major institute in the Netherlands for collecting and disclosing media and media culture.

This contribution focuses on the film collective Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, or Amsterdam City Newsreel. The text is based on the article Archives for Change: *Political Films and the City – The Case of the Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1974–1984)* written by the collective 'Political Film Archives' (2024), with members from Eye Filmmuseum, Amsterdam City Archives, and University of Amsterdam (UvA).

Characteristics of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (Amsterdam City Newsreel)

Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (short ASJ) existed from 1974 until 1984, produced 36 films on 16 mm and one on super 8 (Heijs 1984). They promoted distribution of their films, and stimulated users of the films to organise screenings followed by discussions to activate audiences. This practice was multi-sited, stimulating people who experienced themes first-hand, to become agents of change in their situation. Addressed issues are still relevant, including problems of housing, urban development, gentrification and squatting, feminism and gender, exploitation, unemployment, migration and education. The films have also regained interest because of their modes of production and exhibition, focused on collaboration between filmmakers and the population, as well as activation of the public to propel social change.

Amsterdams Stadsjournaal was a leftist and activist film collective. But unlike most other collectives, its members were professionals educated at the Netherlands Film Academy, who had classic film training, from Russian and German film history, to British workers films and American newsreels. They were proponents of experiments with language, aesthetics and iconography of film.

The collective started by producing a few films analyzing social issues from an explicit Marxist perspective. After these first three more or less experimental and analytical films, the collective found it important during the next four years to aim at reaching so-called 'target groups' within the general public. Some films are militant, e.g. on housing troubles from the perspective of local inhabitants, calling for social action, or from the perspective of migrant workers, fighting for better labour conditions.

Quite a few films ended with film shootings of demonstrations against injustice and for improvement. Target groups were not only victims of the issues the films raised, but also a larger audience, which was to be addressed and activated to tackle the problems. They were also sparring partners for the collective in analysing the social issues at hand, the preparation of production of films, and in proposing desired action for change.

Theories and praxis of political education were other sources of inspiration. A stencilled report (Van Amerongen 1976) has been preserved on film as a means of political education by Amsterdams Stadsjournaal, De Rode Lantaarn (Red Lantern) and the Boerengroep (Farmers Group). Red Lantern was a mainly student driven collective with roots in the then Sociological Institute of the University of Utrecht. The also student run Farmers Group was based at Wageningen University & Research (then Landbouwhogeschool Wageningen) and rooted in advocating farmers interests. Their cooperation was an attempt to implement political education theory in militant film practice, thus aiming at political schooling of farmer audiences.

Bringing film to the people: growth and development of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal

The first seven editions of Amsterdams Stadsjournaal ran as cinema newsreels (film journals) during a month after their premiere in the Amsterdam arthouse The Movies. This was excellent for publicity. Press releases invited film critics, who then published in the national press (Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal 1976).

But this was not the main pursued screening practice. ASJ aimed at bringing film outside traditional cinemas, in education- and community-centres, action committees, screening for audiences who were affected in their daily lives by the problems shown in the films. ASJ wanted to promote discussion and activate the public in these relatively small screening situations.

Early in the history of ASJ, members assisted screenings of the films themselves, especially when in Amsterdam. Some of these screenings and the discussions are documented (Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal 1976), showing how members of the collective with Marxist ideas and new film language sometimes almost clashed with the public. The collective's analyses were assessed to be more or less correct by the public, but the films didn't show any solution or way out. The public didn't so much want to analyse problems as to discuss how to tackle them.

Following this criticism, the production of films for target audiences in cooperation with representatives from these groups came on the agenda. Amsterdams Stadsjournaal number four, *Werkloosheid (Unemployment)*, was made in cooperation with an unemployment committee and presented opinions on the matter and a perspective for targeted audiences to organise themselves to promote actions in their interests.

“ASJ decided to collaborate with residents, and began to make films for specific target groups. It meant important changes in conception, form and approach: film is no longer a tool to educate in an abstract way, but to help people achieve their aims, by showing examples and giving them the opportunity to speak for themselves. It marks the start of the collective's second stage.” (Political Film Archives 2024)

As the collective grew, new members joined, including students. As the number of screenings increased, it was impossible for the collective to attend all of them. Halfway in the 1970s this task was done mostly by interns from study programs for education and political formation, who were interested in the practice of political film.

Early in 1976 Amsterdams Stadsjournaal presented its report *Een poging om film weer onder de mensen te brengen (An attempt to bring film back to the people)*. ASJ didn't only conceive itself as a producer of quality activist films, but also considered distribution, screening and production inseparable. An address file of 9,000 potentially interested film screeners was built, consisting of action groups, community organisations, social movements, schools, political training centres, and so on. All 9,000 were periodically mailed with information on the films and their usage possibilities.

In later years, the films from ASJ became more contemplative, less explicitly focused on socialist perspective, more open, stimulating new insights, reflection and critical thinking on social and cultural themes. But they kept promoting social progress and searching for appropriate forms and film aesthetics. ASJ stood for social change by means of aesthetically innovative film, for a socialist perspective and solutions for dire social problems.

Private Property and Crime

At the session *Collecting Activism* we showed parts of *Private Property and Crime*, an early Marxist example from 1974 [See figure 1]. The collective at that time presented in film political analyses combined with experiments in imagination. It built film images from Marxist concepts on contradictions of capitalist society. The film is about financial speculation with private property, homes and buildings. In the first part we see historical photos on the housing problem and here a spoken text on the role of private property and labour in capital goods. The second part offers a mime play by two actors on the extraction of labour-generated value. The last part is a feature on antisocial acts of owners, who illegally set property on fire in order to raise profits on these pieces of land. The film's conclusion: capital goods produced by labour of all should not benefit solely from speculation by a few capitalist owners.



Figure 1: Overloop - Sloop / Overflow - Demolition (ASJ 1, 1974) Film still: representers of capital divide the city. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum.

For a healthy city

Around 1977, some students who interned with the ASJ carried out and researched screening practices, as a matter of ‘political education’. At that time from September 1977 until 1979, as a student of sociology with a minor in education, I promoted the use of the documentary *Lijf en Leden*, *Gezondheidszorg in de Wijken* (*Body and Limbs: Healthcare in the Neighbourhoods*), ASJ 16. I accompanied screenings for different groups at different locations, in cities and the countryside and moderated and analysed audience discussions.

Although *Lijf and Leden* is considered one of the weaker films of ASJ, it is revealing for how film can be understood in the political context of the mid 1970s, when it served a practical purpose and aimed for social change [See figure 2]. *Lijf en leden* promotes the development of community-based health care centres as opposed to individually operating care workers. The centres promoted multidisciplinary approaches through cooperation, enabled understanding of health issues from different angles in a socioeconomic context, and were sometimes promoted through citizen participation and grassroots initiatives. The film presents a centre in Amsterdam North, as an example of social action in a film, and an example for other neighbourhoods, how to advocate changes in care.

Screening of *Lijf en leden* led to lively and animated discussions among residents, women groups, and even students in architecture concerned with design of care facilities. People were certainly involved in health care and had ideas about how it could be done differently. I wrote an instruction brochure (Dingerink 1979) to accompany the film. This brochure provides background information about the ASJ and primary healthcare. It contains instructions and practical advice on how to use the film effectively, in combination with other communication tools in different situations.



Figure 2: *Lijf en Leden / Body and Limbs* (ASJ 16, 1977) – Recording a meeting of residents about health centres. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum

ASJ through a practice turn towards differentiation

ASJ developed from educational but rather abstract and experimental films, through films to help target groups to articulate and achieve their interests, towards a more free and contemplative form of filming. In these multifarious and creative films not only the political orientation of the collective was apparent, but also the individual style and perspectives of the makers. The collective moved from Marxist films and target groups to freer films. An example of the latter is *Chaos in de Rechtsstaat* (*Chaos in the Rule of Law*), which shows life and actions of a community of young squatters in so called Huize Chaos (House of Chaos) from an inside perspective of the residents, and with the film crew close on their actions.

How can this development towards freer, longer and more nuanced films be explained? In the organisation of *Amsterdams Stadsjournaal* – as well as in other leftist film collectives (Weijers 2024) – there were developments to more professionalisation, specialisation and increased value of individual contributions and perspectives. Secondly there was a development in the leftist movement to loosen strict Marxist ideological frameworks and pass through a ‘practice turn’ (Leezenberg 2017), directed at practical social impact, for ASJ by means of quality films, with a possible multitude of forms and narratives. Last, but maybe not least – the film budgets grew which gave space for time and work on more differentiated films.



Figure 3: *Chaos in de Rechtsstaat / Chaos in the Rule of Law* (ASJ 28, 1981) House of Chaos. Collection: Eye Filmmuseum.

Challenges of collecting and disclosing activist films

How relevant are these activist films today? How can these collections be collected, managed and presented? This poses challenges to heritage institutions like Eye Filmmuseum and Amsterdam City Archives. The films and related records may not have been included in main archives or collections, they may have got dispersed, or neglected altogether. How can these films be retrieved, archived, contextualized, and brought into the present, given their original intention and their 16mm format?

There is a tension between museums, collecting and disclosing on the one hand, and activist practice on the other. Museums are not neutral. They are confronted with their own positioning. Besides historical, aesthetic and artistic considerations, collecting and disclosing activist films and related practices is a political choice.

Political films also need to be understood in the social context of their time, which requires documentation and a special archival approach. Activist films are semi-finished products that only become complete in the activist practice (Political Film Archives 2024). Activation aims and multi-sited circulation demand records on exhibition practices. It is necessary to also collect and disclose the practice and data of distribution and screening. Because of this broad conception of tasks – and because collections and archives are often spread over different places – it is necessary to build cooperation and partnerships.

Activist films are not simply documents from the past. The films and related practices can inform contemporary activist practice, by showing them within debates, and providing references for new film productions and their social applications. A way to recycle old activist films is to screen them today. But contemporary makers may also take knowledge of the past, use and recycle this heritage, and come to new activist products. Through the efforts of *Project Amsterdams Stadsjournaal* contemporary makers may take note of and get inspired by this heritage and old activist films may inform and inspire presentday activism.

References

- Amerongen, Jan van (1976). *Film als vormingsmiddel: een beschouwing over de theorie en praktijk van het Amsterdams stadsjournaal, Filmprojekt boerengroep Wageningen, De rode lantaarn Utrecht oftwel Een poging om wetenschap weer onder de filmers te brengen*. Spanga: s.n. (stencilled report in library of Groningen University).
- Dingerink, Bert (1979). *Begeleidingsbrochure bij 'Lijf en Leden', een film over wijkgezondheidszorg*. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal.
- Heijs, Jan (1984). *10 jaar Amsterdams Stadsjournaal 1974-1984*. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal.
- Leezenberg, Michiel (2017). *Wetenschapsfilosofie voor geesteswetenschappen*. Amsterdam: University Press.
- Political Film Archives Amsterdam (2024). 'Archives for Change: Political Films and the City – The Case of the Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1974–1984)'. *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture* 9, nr. 2 (24 juni 2024).
<https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2024/06/archives-for-change/>
- (Political Film Archives is (in alphabetical order) Rommy Albers (project coordinator, curator at Eye Filmmuseum), Suzan Crommelin (audiovisual archivist at Amsterdam City Archives), Bert Dingerink (sociologist, student of Art History at UvA, volunteer at Eye Filmmuseum), Floris Paalman (coordinator of the MA Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image, UvA), Andrei Vilcov (student MA Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image, UvA), André Waardenburg (film critic NRC and Filmkrant, volunteer at Eye Filmmuseum), Meg Weijers (Eye Filmmuseum).)
- Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal (1976). *Een poging om film weer onder de mensen te brengen*. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Stadsjournaal.
- Weijers, Meg (2024). *De Rode Lantaren: The Individualization of a Film Collective. Meet the Archive presentation 25/05/2024*. Amsterdam: Eye Filmmuseum, 25 mei 2024.

Digital City Experiences

Urban Culture on the Move: Chengdu Museum's Digital Exhibition Practice

Jiayi Xu

Biography

Jiayi Xu is a curator at the Chengdu Museum, China. She completed her MA in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, UK. Before joining the Chengdu Museum, she worked in various roles in the cultural and technology industries, including as a journalist, journalism, documentary director, and digital production project manager. She is particularly interested in exploring new narratives and interpretations through digital methods, exhibitions, and public engagement projects in museums.

Introduction

Chengdu, known as China's happiest city, is located in the southwest part of China, with a history of 3,000 years. Chengdu has thousands of miles of fertile land and developed industries, and in this regard, it has always enjoyed the reputation of the land of abundance. Rich in history and culture, this national city, whose location and name have remained the same for thousands of years, is one of the ten ancient capitals of China.

The Chengdu Museum, located at the heart of Chengdu, has the ambition to provide a comprehensive view of the city's history and culture (See Figure 1). As a city museum, it preserves the city's historical memory, enriches the citizens' life experience, and empowers the development of Chengdu. With 3.3 million visitors in 2024, it is one of the most attractive museums in China. The Chengdu Museum houses nearly 300,000 pieces of the collection, including historical artefacts, shadow puppetry, modern and contemporary paintings and calligraphy. Among them, almost 270,000 shadow puppets are included in the feature collection, making the Chengdu Museum the world's most prominent collector of shadow puppets. Most of these collections are obtained from China and parts from Southeast Asia, dating from the 17th century to the present.

This paper takes the practice of the Chengdu Museum's digital immersive exhibition City Walk as an example to explore how to design and produce a digital exhibition related to Chengdu's urban culture, how to use the digitalised collections to engage audiences, and how to use new technologies to reinterpret urban spaces, customs and people's stories.



Figure 1: The Chengdu Museum. Courtesy of the Chengdu Museum (2024)

It is divided into two parts to discuss reasons and how to interpret and design the in-gallery digital exhibition from a city museum's perspective to establish new interpretations and narratives. In the first part, it will outline this exhibition and analyse how to present the historical urban and folk culture and folks to audiences through collection selection and design. It will also discuss how these digitalised collections construct knowledge and new narratives for the young generation and engage with them. The second part examines why and how the Chengdu Museum employs new technologies to build this exhibition to reinterpret existing collections and construct stories and experiences. These practices are designed to empower city development and to foster a sense of ownership among community members.

1. Chinese shadow puppetry

Chinese shadow puppetry is a form of drama acted by colourful figures made from leather or paper, accompanied by music and singing. Manipulated by performers using rods, the figures create the illusion of moving images on a white screen illuminated from behind. It embodies Chinese traditional performing art, music, literature and fine art. Shadow puppetry is one of China's earliest forms of drama. The shadow plays are performed for entertainment or religious rituals, weddings, funerals, and other special events in people's lives. It passes on cultural history, social beliefs, oral traditions and local customs. With a long history and cultural connection with social and economic changes in China, UNESCO (2011) listed shadow puppetry as a representative of humankind's intangible cultural heritage.

Although shadow play was most people's first choice for leisure and entertainment in China 100 years ago, it has almost disappeared in contemporary times, especially for the younger generation, who can only see shadow puppetry in museum display cases. The Chengdu Museum started collecting, protecting, and researching shadow puppetry 20 years ago. Besides the permanent exhibition, the Chengdu Museum also explores reinterpreting the collections, providing touring exhibitions around China, launching outreach activities to tell stories about the people and history of the city, and employing technologies that construct new narratives for younger generations and engaging with them.

2. City walk: the digital exhibition

Today, in China, the most popular weekend leisure activity among young people is a city walk, which means wandering around the city on foot. People may follow a distinctive urban path, immersing themselves in the surroundings, discovering ancient architectures, browsing boutique shops, and indulging in delicious local snacks. City walk offers a way for young people to interact with a city and a new social circle. Cities may attract more visitors by establishing city walk routes away from famous tourist spots and providing authentic local experiences.

The digital exhibition *City walk* is like a city walk in the virtual, digital world. It creates and combines traditional Chinese shadow puppetry characters and sets from the museum's collection to form new storylines that tell Chengdu's cultural and historical changes from the

late-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. The scenes of this digital exhibition are divided into four chapters: 'Mountain', 'Countryside', 'City Street' and 'Courtyard'. These scenes showcase a traditional Chinese scroll painting in its digital version.

2.1 Collection Selection

To construct the exhibition full of Chengdu's features, I used the images of the Chengdu shadow puppetry collection as the digital element. Chengdu shadow puppetry has complex puppet structures and beautiful images. In this regard, shadow puppetry was influenced by Sichuan opera and inspired from the local crafts such as Shu brocade and Shu embroidery.

In addition to the shadow puppetry collection, I selected artefacts from the City History Gallery to bring historical artefacts into a real context (See figure 2) For example, the 2000-year-old 'Lacquer Figurine Marked with Meridians Systems' is the oldest and the most complete acupuncture model discovered in China. It shows the level of development of ancient traditional Chinese medicine. In this digital exhibition, I have placed the lacquer figurine in the medical centre to bring the historical artefacts into a new narrative context. In the digital exhibition gallery, the visitor may encounter with this AI-generated lacquer figurine in the storyline, not just a single artefact in the showcase.



Lacquer Figurine Marked with Meridians systems
Western Han Dynasty
Chengdu Museum



AI Generated Image
in Chengdu Shadow
Puppetry style



AI Generated Image in the real context

Figure 2: This picture shows how to use the historical artefact in the digital exhibition. Left: The Lacquer Figurine in the gallery. Middle: AI generated image in Chengdu Shadow Puppetry style. Right: The screenshot from the City Walk, the AI generated video (part) shows the lacquer figurine in the video. Courtesy of the Chengdu Museum (2024)

In these scenes, the architecture, flowers, trees and figures present the urban life of Chengdu based on the actual history and people's daily lives. I try to make details as historically accurate as possible. When drawing the ground tiles of the commercial street, I consulted the archives of the early Republic of China and designed the tiles in the video according to the style of the floor tiles of Chengdu at that time. (See figure 3)



Figure 3: The screenshot from the City Walk video (part) shows the city street in Chengdu in the early Republic of China. Courtesy of the Chengdu Museum (2024)

The second creation draws all the elements in this video using the digitized shadow puppetry collection. Some elements that cannot be found in traditional shadow plays are generated through AI. Chengdu Museum collaborated with a technology company, and they input many images of the Chengdu shadow puppetry collections to train a model that produces digital images and videos based on the characteristics of the Chengdu style. Before launching this digital installation, the museum announced on social media to inform the public that some elements in this video would be generated by AI, as a result attracting some visitors to explore.

2.2 Design

The layout and design of the digital exhibition are based on the form and perspective of traditional Chinese scroll painting. The spatial relationship in the digital production is based on Chengdu's historical map and geographical environment at that time - the geographical distribution, the division of the city's farming, commercial and residential functional areas, and the layout of the city's historic buildings. The storyline starts from Mount Qingcheng and the Dujiangyan Irrigation System area. Mount Qingcheng is the birthplace of Taoism, one of the most influential religions in East Asia over a long period. Thanks to the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, built in the third century B.C. and still in use today, the Minjiang River fertilised the Chengdu Plains' farmland, contributing to this city's prosperity and development for 2,300 years. (See figure 4)



Figure 4: The screenshot from the City Walk video (part) shows the mountains and river in Chengdu. Courtesy of the Chengdu Museum (2024)

The plants and animals that characterise the Chengdu area are incorporated into the picture, such as the famous giant panda and the hibiscus flower, which made the Hibiscus City a nickname for Chengdu since ancient times. Up until today, the city is filled with hibiscus flowers at the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. These elements in the exhibition will help the visitors find a connection between the past and the present, the museum and their life, attracting young people to appreciate and explore the city's history.

3. From the virtual to the real

3.1 The reasons for developing this project

Firstly, as a city museum, collecting, protecting, researching, and displaying the city's culture is the core and fundamental work. In addition, the Museum would like to empower the city's development, foster a sense of ownership among community members, care about people's well-being, and take on the social responsibility of a museum. The mission for Chengdu, similar to many cities in the post-pandemic era, is to boost the city's economic development, to create a stable and harmonious atmosphere, to attract domestic and foreign tourists and investment, all contributing to a sustainable development of the city. Some scholars argue that museums have the capacity to improve the liveability, economic potential and global influence of cities.

Secondly, regarding the Chengdu Museum, the Museum wants to provide several different kinds of experiences for the visitors. There is a permanent exhibition on shadow puppetry in the Museum, which was awarded The Top 10 High-Quality Exhibition in China in 2020, the highest national award for a museum exhibition in China. It is more of a traditional, object-centred exhibition. However, we hope that the digital exhibition can be presented in a dynamic and interactive way to provide experiences and new narratives for visitors. The shadow puppetry, as featured in the Museum, has faded from people's memory. However, it can reappear in urban life in a way that meets the contemporary aesthetics of young people.

Finally, the Museum hopes to achieve more goals through future development and operations, such as exploring the museum's sustainable development through paid exhibitions, touring exhibitions in shopping centres and urban public spaces, and integrating the museum into urban life.

3.2 From the virtual to the reality

The virtual project will be implemented step by step, with the first phase already completed. It may be developed as an online and offline community-centred practice in the future, when the funding, policy, and other resources are suitable.

The in-gallery digital exhibition will provide richer information on the city's history and culture. It will create multiple narrative lines in order for the audience to deeply explore their area of interest. The museum gallery will become a starting point for citizens and tourists to explore the city. The online mini-programme interaction will broaden the concept of the in-gallery digital exhibition, linking up different city walk routes. In terms of the operation, both the online and offline projects will cooperate with the local government, education institutions, other cultural and tourism sites, commercial and business sectors. It will explore new opportunities for commercialising the museum's digital exhibition and a new model for the sustainable development of exhibition operation and public engagement activities.

At times, the Museum must balance serving the local communities and attracting tourists. Citizens in Chengdu may trace memories of a modern city and find the ancient Chengdu, increasing their sense of identity and belonging to the city. For tourists, the in-gallery digital exhibition is a new way to explore the city, and the offline city walk route will guide them to explore many unprecedented attractions. As Nichola Johnson (1995, 6) states, ‘The best city museums act as a starting-point for the discovery of the city, which can lead people to look with fresh, more informed and more tolerant eyes at the richness of the present urban environment and to imagine beyond it to past and possible future histories.’

4.3 The suggestions for future research and practice

For a digital exhibition, three issues still need to be discussed. The first one is how a museum, as a non-profit institution, could invest in digital projects sustainably. Digital experiences or digital transformations require resources, skills and processes that may not be available to most museums. The second is the lack of digital staffing talent in museums, and, as a result, museums need to find effective ways to work with technology companies to plan, design and produce digital exhibitions. The third concerns the collection in the AI era: Are AI-generated images, audio, video, and other products based on our collections considered as the new collections? And, how does the museum sector define the boundary between digital and the traditional collections? If the audiences generate them, are they considered collections, or do they belong to museums?

Positioning digital technology as an implement rather than an end goal, the Chengdu Museum employs integrated strategies—spanning digital mediation, public engagement, and curatorial reinterpretation—to cultivate youth appreciation for shadow puppetry, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage while anchoring urban identity and collective memory. The intangible cultural heritage contains the wisdom, memories and living habits of human beings and communities over a long period of time. In addition to inheriting, it’s important to draw the content that shares the values of present, in order to foster a sense of ownership among community members, strengthen cultural identity and contribute to the sustainable development of our society. The youth’s participation in intangible cultural heritage is often characterised by a lack of awareness, a low level of engagement, and multiple challenges from social, political and economic perspectives. The Chengdu Museum provides young people with as much content as possible that meets their level of appreciation and cognitive characteristics; provide them with theoretical guidance to engage them in intangible cultural heritage practices; and stimulate youth narratives. The Museum hopes to reconstruct the relationship between the public and intangible cultural heritage.

References

- Johnson, N. (1995). ‘Discovering the City’, *Museum International*, 47(3), 4-6.
UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (2025) ‘Chinese shadow puppetry’, <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/chinese-shadow-puppetry-00421>>, accessed 17 June 2025.

Digital City Experiences

Collecting the City by Engaging with Its Buildings and Landscapes

Kirsten Eghold

Biography

Kirsten Egholk (b. 1970) is the Head of the Modern History, Audience, and Communication department at Museum Nordsjælland (since 2025). Kirsten both holds a degree in European Ethnology from The University of Copenhagen (1998) and in Museology and Museum Management from the University of Aarhus (2007). She has substantial experience in the working areas of cultural history, museum research, collection management, communication and exhibition development. She has considerable museum experience, having worked at Kroppedal Museum (2021-2024), the Bank and Savings Museum (2019-2020), The Museum of Copenhagen (2015-2018), and Greve Museum (1998-2015). She is a dedicated museum professional recognised for her expertise in developing city museums and a commitment to fostering innovation and driving successful projects. She has published books and articles on museum work related to city museums, exhibition and research projects, and co-creation with local communities.

Introduction

“I think the best thing was to come inside and feel the buildings.” This quote comes from a 16-year-old student at Vestskoven Gymnasium in Albertslund, Denmark. Alongside classmates from a Design and Architecture course, they engaged with the buildings in the Copenhagen suburban area of ‘Vestegnen’, a concept initiated in the Danish urban plan ‘The Fingerplan’ from 1947.



Figure 1: Students conducting fieldwork in a single-family housing area at Bredekærs Vænge in Ishøj, Denmark. Photo by Kirsten Egholk. February 2024.

Since its establishment in 2002, Kroppedal Museum has researched, collected, and communicated themes concerning the eight suburbs and municipalities that comprise Vestegnen, which is home to approximately 270,000 residents. The museum’s primary focus has been on the period from the 1960s onwards, although in recent years, it has increasingly turned its attention to the contemporary urban context.

I will present two distinct museum approaches to collecting within the city, examining how Kroppedal Museum in Denmark has developed methods to engage with and represent the city and its architecture. I was the project manager for both museum projects and employed as the communications manager at Kroppedal Museum.

The city from above – a digital approach

The first approach involves drone photography as a means to document the contemporary city. This project and exhibition emerged from Kroppedal Museum’s commitment to Chapter 8 of the Museums Act, which mandates the museum to work with 13 municipalities surrounding Copenhagen to safeguard buildings worthy of preservation. In Albertslund, significant transformations are underway. The city developed around an old prison, Vridsløselille

Statsfængsel, established in 1859, which closed in 2018 and is now at the heart of a substantial urban redevelopment effort. Kroppedal Museum sought to create a novel method of collecting, engaging with, and communicating the evolving landscape of Albertslund and its architecture. The city is particularly renowned for its dense low-rise construction in ‘Albertslund South’, built during the 1960s, which attracted thousands of new residents from Copenhagen seeking new modern living conditions compared to the older housing standards in the capital.



Figure 2: Drone photography of Albertslund South, constructed between 1963 and 1973. The dense low-rise architecture has proven to be highly successful, standing as a notable example of its era. These buildings are among Denmark’s significant and conservation-worthy public structures, representative of the architectural landscape of the welfare state. Photo by Rasmus Petersen, August 2022, Lokalthistorisk Samling Albertslund, Kroppedal Museum.

The drone photography initiative served as a contemporary documentation of the urban development of Albertslund throughout 2022. Collaborating with local drone photographers, this project aimed to celebrate the city’s 50th anniversary from 1973 to 2023 since the city changed its name to Albertslund in 1973. The project was funded by Nordea-fonden with 130,000 DKR (approximately €17,434).

The drone photographs captured the city from various angles and perspectives, encompassing diverse themes. These included oblique shots, details of housing areas, significant companies and institutions, entire neighbourhoods, the city centre, seasonal variations, and urban landscapes during both day and night.

The project culminated in a touring photo exhibition, accompanied by city walks, events, and discussions. Collaborating with the local archive, the museum amassed a substantial and continually growing collection of contemporary drone photographs. This partnership has fostered ongoing cooperation with drone photographers and strengthened ties with various

stakeholders such as residents in the three housing areas, the municipality itself, housing associations, businesses throughout the city.

In summary, the ‘City from above’ project has underscored the importance of relationship-building between the municipality, the museum, and local businesses. The dedicated drone photographers have become ambassadors for both the museum and their city. These drone images have emerged as a vital tool in the museum’s Chapter 8 initiatives, enabling continued documentation of the city’s evolution while enhancing the archive’s photographic collection. The impact of this project manifests in a significantly stronger collaboration between the local archive and the museum, alongside a notable increase in local visitor engagement.



Figure 3: The team of drone photographers worked alongside Kroppedal Museum to document their city. Throughout 2022, they captured images of buildings, infrastructure, public institutions, and natural landscapes. The archive has since received approximately 1,000 drone photographs. Photo by Kirsten Egholk, May 2023. Lokalthistorisk Samling Albertslund, Kroppedal Museum.

Can buildings talk? – an artistic approach

“Some buildings speak, some sing, and some are perhaps mute or something completely different.” This idea, common among architects according to architect Grethe Pontoppidan, was explored, investigated, and challenged by Kroppedal Museum in the project, “Talk with the buildings on the Vestegnen,” which ran for a year from August 2023 until August 2024. We collaborated with 90 high school students studying Design and Architecture, architect Grethe Pontoppidan, creative makers from the association “Art for the People” (Kunst ud til Folket), GoLittle Creative, graphic designer Rikke Jensen, and residents.

We focused on three different residential building types from the 1970s, situated in three suburbs outside of Copenhagen: single-family house, terraced houses, and apartment buildings.



Figure 4: One of the homeowners at Bredekær's Vænge in Ishøj warmly welcomed the students and invited them to explore the interior of the house. Afterwards the students said it was one of the best experiences of the project to engage with the inhabitants. Photo by Kirsten Egholk. February 2024.

The one-family houses on Bredekær's Vænge in Ishøj were built in 1970 as Denmark's largest permanent architect-designed house exhibition, featuring approximately 100 houses conceived by some of Denmark's most esteemed architects (such as Arne Jacobsen, Jan Gudmand-Høyer, Jørn Utzon, Poul and Johannes Ørsted Pedersen, and Knud Friis & Elmar Moltke).

The exhibition allowed potential buyers to view the houses and either purchase the specific model or commission a similar one on another site. This exhibition was overwhelmingly successful, and most of the houses still stand in the neighbourhood today, with some remaining largely unchanged while others have undergone significant alterations.

Galgebakken consists of 700 terraced houses made of concrete in Albertslund that were conceived by a group of architects Hanne Marcussen, Jens Peter Storgaard, Anne and Jørn Ørum-Nielsen, who won a competition for a new non-profit residential development. The architects aimed to create a space that could accommodate both community interaction and intimate areas for privacy, enabling residents to engage with their community on their own terms.

Both the area and the houses' name 'Galgebakken' originates in the 18th century as 'place of execution'. These homes turned out to be a great success and exemplify architecture from their era. They are among Denmark's significant and conservation-worthy public buildings, representative of the welfare state's prime architectural era and are currently undergoing renovation.

The final example is Gadehavegård by the architect Palle Nørholm and constructed in 1977. It is a typical representative of so-called crane track architecture where the building plan is organised based on the reach and lifting capacity of the construction crane. This housing area comprises 17 blocks with 986 homes varying from one to four rooms. The apartments have balconies facing inward towards green spaces, and the ground floor apartments feature small private gardens. The site includes amenities such as laundry facilities, a community centre, playgrounds, bicycle sheds, and playing fields. Gadehavegård is based on the concept of a modern, green landscaped city, drawing inspiration from Le Corbusier's urban planning theories from the early 20th century.



Figure 5: A graphic illustration featuring a QR code linking to one of the podcasts on Spotify. The text in Danish reads, “Listen to Galgebakken: The podcast that gives voice to the residential area.” Graphic design by Rikke Jensen, 2024.

We envisioned a scenario in which it is indeed possible to have a conversation with buildings and hear their unique perspectives regarding their architecture, history, and much more. There is no doubt that buildings have rich stories to tell. Today, so-called smart homes are designed for interaction, allowing homeowners to control heating and lighting remotely. This means you can switch the heating and lights on and off when leaving home or even playfully tease your family by turning on the lights via the Hue app whenever they have turned them off. However, it is still not feasible for a smart home to narrate its own story, architecture, or history. Yet, this could soon be a fascinating feature in a future driven by generative AI.

Kroppedal Museum realised the project “Talk with the buildings...” thanks to financial support from RealDania (200,000 DKR / approximately €26,821), a significant foundation focused on the

built environment. They believed in the museum's vision of integrating the tangible with the intangible. A notable strength of this project was the collaboration with the association Art for the People (Kunst ud til Folket), which developed a method to make sculptures "speak" and was keen to engage with buildings and young people.

The project included the following steps: an architectural crash course led by an expert in 20th-century architecture, guided tours of the three distinct residential areas, workshops focused on creating narratives around the residential buildings, production of podcasts about the buildings in collaboration with GoLittle Creative.

The outcomes from the project were a novel method and approach to interacting with buildings, podcasts on Spotify developed collaboratively with students and a professional sound designer, stunning posters designed by a graphic artist, complete with a QR code.

One participant remarked in her evaluation: "Writing the audio scripts was the most enjoyable part, as it required us to think creatively and outside the box."

Students also created a 'Canon for nine new talking buildings,' whereby they voted on additional buildings they would like to engage with using the same method. Voting results indicated interest in working with an old prison, their own high school, a train station, a large shopping center, an art museum, an industrial building, and a church. These buildings represent, among other things, Danish welfare history, and the Kroppedal Museum hopes to continue exploring this method in relation to the nominated buildings in the future. We hope to secure further funding to continue this valuable work.

Kroppedal Museum and the Museums of Southwest Jutland, now known as Museum VEST, both received financial support from Realdania. The two museums formed a collaborative group that shared knowledge, learned along the way, and provided mutual support and evaluation. This partnership has proven invaluable. Both museums have reached new target audiences and explored innovative ways of disseminating building culture. Consequently, we have been able to assist and support one another in navigating uncharted territory. This collaboration has also ignited new ideas for our ongoing projects. We envision that these projects could be adapted and repurposed to thrive under new conditions, possibly in different forms. For instance, we might leverage the experiences from Esbjerg to create similar building culture courses for children in Vestegnen, while the 'talking buildings' project could be piloted in Esbjerg Municipality.

Overall, our collective experiences and insights have encouraged us to seek new collaborative opportunities, allowing us to implement our ideas and projects in various locations, potentially in newly developed formats. We aspire to realise these ideas and secure support from different foundations to expand these initiatives across Denmark.

In conclusion, the museum, in partnership with young participants, has tested and refined a new method to foster local engagement, explore architectural heritage, and present a fresh perspective on architecture that young people often pass by unnoticed. This method has potential for application both locally and nationwide.

References

The city from above – a digital approach:

arkiv.dk | Albertslund set fra oven / Lunden fra oven (Kroppedal Museum udstilling) 2023.

Talk with the buildings:

<https://open.spotify.com/show/4ATnWiuIVuJCnFHTFTKP11>

<https://kroppedal.dk/lyt-til-vestegnens-bygninger/>



Word of welcome by Judikje Kiers, Director Amsterdam Museum. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Breakfast at Imagine IC. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Performance Sites of Memory. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski

Practices of (co)curating

Voices in the city: Case studies from London Transport Museum's contemporary collecting programme

Zeynep Kussan & Ellie Miles

Biography

Zeynep Kussan is Documentary Curator at London Transport Museum. Zeynep worked at the London Museum (previously Museum of London) on exhibitions, including *The Crime Museum Uncovered*, *Fire! Fire!*, *Tunnel: The Archaeology of Crossrail*, *Roman Dead: Death and Burial in Roman London* and the award-winning display *Harry Kane: I Want to Play Football*. Her documentary work has been to record contemporary London, including two major programmes within London Museum: the Documentary Curator Programme and *Curating London*. Zeynep was awarded the Museums Association's Museums Change Lives Radical Changemaker Award in 2023.

Dr Ellie Miles is a curator of contemporary collecting at London Transport Museum. Ellie also worked in interpretation at the British Museum and as a curator at the London Museum (previously Museum of London). She previously designed and led MA modules at the University of Westminster. Ellie is on the acting committee of the UK-based Contemporary Collecting Network, and recently co-edited a book about the ethics of contemporary collecting (Routledge, 2024).

Introduction

This paper introduces the London Transport Museum, outlining its history and evolving approach to contemporary collecting, particularly through the Documentary Curator projects. We will also explore learnings from specific projects, highlighting how we consider and understand the impacts of intersectionality as a museum, to document and capture contemporary London, its people and places on the transport network through co-curating, commissions and collaborations.

Introduction to London Transport Museum

London Transport Museum opened to the public in 1980, in London's Covent Garden. There is also a collections storage facility, the Acton Depot, which is open several times a year to visitors, as well as a programme of tours that operate under the 'Hidden London' brand, which allow visitors to explore disused underground stations.

London Transport Museum is more tightly focused than some city museums, as its remit is around the story of public transport and its history in London. There is a lot to explore by understanding a city through the mobilities that occur within it, as well as the ways it is connected to other places. Through this approach the museum reflects London's growth, economy and social history. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: General view of the interior of London Transport Museum (c) London Transport Museum

The museum was formed from part of the British Transport collection and inherited a substantial amount of material from there and from London's transit authority. These collections have been actively added to and developed ever since. There is a large collection of vehicles, as well as posters, maps, printed ephemera, signage, models, photographs, uniforms and other working and social history materials.

The museum receives offers of materials from transport enthusiasts who know about the existing collection, as well as from parts of the transit authority directly. The contemporary work that we will focus on here is the more proactive kind, where we seek new objects, stories and connections to make the collections more reflective and representative of the city itself.

Today, London's transport authority, Transport for London (TfL), has a workforce of almost 30,000 people. This workforce keeps London moving by carrying out a large scope of work: driving rolling stock; maintaining traffic signals; working on cyber security; working with smart data; providing training, communications, visual services, customer services; design services; maintaining rail networks and other infrastructure; cleaning; urban planning; managing road tunnels; working in procurement and hundreds of other roles. It contains a huge variety of work, with a diversity of people doing it. This is, of course, before you even consider the passengers, and the nearly 3.6 billion public transport journeys that they take every year.

The museum has been working on contemporary collecting activity for many, many years – in fact the collection began over a century ago, when many of our oldest vehicles were not long out of service. It has always been a museum of working history, which has aspired to collect this history in different ways over its own time. In the last twenty years the museum has benefited from a series of contemporary collecting curatorial roles, where individuals have been able to focus time and knowledge on gathering contemporary stories, to enrich the museum's collections and document stories that are representative of the city itself.

The role of the Documentary Curator programme

Arts Council England (ACE), have been funding the Documentary Curator programme since 2018. The programme funds one full-time Documentary Curator position, who delivers three collecting projects a year. The Documentary Curator is part of a team of curators at London Transport Museum, some of whom specialise in vehicles, some in collections management and others in parts of the collection. Many of these colleagues will undertake contemporary collecting too – regularly acquiring new posters from Transport for London, for example, or acquiring one-off objects on an ad-hoc basis. This is a huge advantage for us working today because within the curatorial and collections team there is a supportive environment and experienced team who have a good understanding of what contemporary collecting can do for the museum.

What the Documentary Curator programme provides, and what this paper will now focus on, is the scope to work out new ways to collect and document, which do not depend on collecting more through our existing approaches. The Documentary Curator projects we have delivered and continue to develop have all been, and will continue to be, very different.

Each collecting project asks different questions, some of which are based on:

- Which topic is being addressed?
- Who is participating in the collecting project?
- How does the museum preserve people's experiences?

Therefore, we redesign each of the Documentary Curator projects, learning from each. To do so we draw on a body of knowledge.



Figure 2: The rainbow crossing on display, with the My Journey To Pride video on display alongside it (c) London Transport Museum

As the numbers of workers and passengers suggest, our subject matter feels huge. With a city so large, and a population with so many different personalities, backgrounds, connections and priorities, it is not obvious how to approach our work. Initially we developed our list of projects from desk research: by reviewing the transit authority's business plan, the Mayor's Transport Strategy, and the museum's forward plan. From this research, we sought to identify three collecting projects: to include a museum-output project, an infrastructure-focused project, and a community-participation project. As readers will have realised, this categorisation couldn't work to plan projects and was almost immediately set aside. For story-led collecting you need to listen to people, not corporate documents. We changed our approach to starting different conversations and seeing what would emerge from those. (See Figure 2)

So, having introduced the context of Documentary Curating at London Transport Museum, we will now talk about some recently completed projects and what we learned from them, before looking at work that's underway now, and our aspirations for the future.

'My Journey To Pride' collecting project

A key example of contemporary collecting is the acquisition of London's first rainbow crossing in 2015, which served as a catalyst for exploring the intersection of London's transport and LGBTQ+ experiences. Rainbow crossings are pedestrian crossings set out in Pride rainbow colours. They were used in Taiwan in 2008, on a university campus, and soon the idea of rainbow crossings for pride was adopted internationally across cities such as Sydney and Hollywood, and in 2014, London.

London's first rainbow crossing was proposed by LGBTQ+ transport staff. It was a temporary crossing with the six-colour rainbow and was first used at Pall Mall in London in 2014, next to the route of London's Pride Parade that year. It went on to be used twice more in the city, outside Arsenal station and at Trafalgar Square.

Rainbow crossings are an example of a global local object. One that shows how London is part of a network of global cities, where ideas circulate and are shared. It can also be read as a hyperlocal story which talks about the specifics of the streetscape at different times: about how roads are used for protests and parades, as well as for everyday mobility. It's a six metre long crossing. Its size and physical vulnerability meant that it took a while to figure out how to display it, but it did go on display in 2021.

Examples of corporate pride materials have an interesting role in the LGBTQ+ movement, and a contested presence in Pride events. Objects such as these celebrate representation, and are of course, part of a story, but on their own don't tell you much about what it's like to be at Pride, and what that means for an LGBTQ+ person moving around London on public transport. We sought to revisit this question and extend this area of collecting, to think again about how we could collect people's experiences of Pride events as a transport story, and how we might do that through new means. It was in 2019 that museum freelancer Sasha Coward came to us with an idea. Coward suggested working on a project which explored people's journeys to and from Pride using both video diaries and social media. We benefited from having the flexibility in our planning and the support of other teams in the museum to try a new method with Coward. The resulting film, which documents the journeys people made to and from Pride in London and UK Black Pride events in 2019, is a collections object (London Transport Museum 2019). The video diary format means that it can bring together multiple perspectives and experiences into the exhibit, with people speaking to camera on their own terms about their experiences on the day, and how it was different from other days.

The following year the museum undertook a similar model of collecting – again very much working with people's self-representation and presenting material beyond traditional forms of museum objects.

Windrush Writing collecting project

Windrush Day is an annual commemoration in the UK, honouring the huge contributions that post-war migrants from the Caribbean gave to the UK. The HMT Empire Windrush was a passenger ship that became a symbol of post-war migration to Britain, and the 'Windrush generation' refers to the group of people who were born in the Caribbean and settled in the UK between 1948 and 1971. The UK has not always celebrated this contribution. The Windrush Scandal, during which the UK Home Office wrongly deported, detained, refused entry and denied the rights of citizens who had arrived in the UK from the Commonwealth before 1973, including many Windrush Generation members. An estimated 57,000 Commonwealth migrants were affected, in ways which also included being denied benefits, denied medical care, losing homes and losing jobs due to the wrongful actions of the UK Home Office.

In 2020 the Raising Awareness of Culture and Ethnicity colleague network group at TfL organized an exhibition to mark Windrush Day. The exhibition was crowdsourced from group members, and existed on the TfL staff intranet. The timing was significant, because the exhibition launched on Windrush Day (22 June) 2020, soon after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the USA, and during a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. It was also during the first wave of the Covid pandemic in the UK, when there were disproportionate deaths of people of colour, and transport workers were badly exposed to the first wave of the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The colleague network group curated an intranet exhibition which included photographs, musical performance, recordings of interviews with elders, and pieces of poetry and prose writing, reflecting on the significance of Windrush Day at that point in time.

The Documentary Curator could then work with the group, its leaders, and the exhibition contributors (some of whom were not members of the colleague network group). Through a series of conversations, we found ways for the museum to support the writers in sharing their writing and promoting their work more widely. Firstly, with permission, the museum made preservation copies of the poems and writing, both in text and audio form, with the writers reading their work. Then we put a piece about the exhibition on the museum's website, for the public to read the work. Sadly this couldn't replicate the original exhibition fully: there were issues around the musical performance rights, and tracing interviewees and their families for permissions during the pandemic for the recorded interviews.

The conversations continued beyond this initial phase of publishing work online, and led to the idea of a video installation of the poems, using readings of the words by the writers, and using kinetic typography to focus on the writing. These animations were reviewed throughout the design process by the writers, who shaped the look and feel of the animation of their words and made changes where they wished in rounds of reviews and comments. The resulting videos were installed in a dedicated space in the main visitor route through the museum, and were launched at the museum for Windrush Day 2021.

The videos can also be watched online (London Transport Museum 2021). The discussions and collection of poems also led to the development of a temporary exhibition about the legacies of the direct recruitment campaign that London Transport undertook in the Caribbean. The collecting also led to the formation of an advisory board to shape and inform the exhibition, including its content, marketing, design and surrounding programming. (See figure 3)

These two completed projects were very different in character, approach and delivery but both focused on getting the museum's perspective out of the way, so that people could tell their own stories and histories. They also relied on cooperating with other people – working with people to talk about their experiences or their family history, working with freelancers and group committees. In work like this, the role of the curator is to listen, then to take what they know about how collections are developed and figure out how to make that process work for the people telling the story. We will now turn our focus to projects in progress.



Figure 3: A section of the exhibition about the legacies of Caribbean recruitment, which followed the Windrush Stories collecting project (c) London Transport Museum

'My Story, Your Story, Our Story', documenting people stories

My Story, Your Story, Our Story is a contemporary collecting project, which aims to document individual stories from across Transport for London's workforce, past and present. It will document stories of migration, diaspora, identity and belonging to preserve cultural and employee legacies for future generations. The medium in which participants choose to express their story has been left open, examples include oral histories, voice audio that can be recorded in multiple languages in addition to English, film, paintings, drawings, poetry, textiles, music, photography or a mixture of the above.



Figure 4: Taking the museum outside into the city, during the My Story, Your Story, Our Story project (c) London Transport Museum

The Documentary Curator will support each participant, making sure all tools and materials are available to them as well as supporting them with family research methods and gaining access to archives. Personal stories can involve a lot of emotion and a duty of care as well as trauma-informed practice will be implemented throughout the project. Where necessary, we will always apply a people-first approach, for team members and participants. This project is an example of working closely with participants, for them to be able to tell their authentic story with full support of the curatorial and collections processes. It also allows the museum to showcase the existing creative talents of the workforce.

The project is currently in its first quarter of launch and has already begun working with 60 participants. There is a real sense of excitement of leaving an authentic legacy behind for future generations to access. This will allow a look back to a specific moment in time, to the people of Transport for London in 2025 - to the people behind the network and the people that keep London moving. (See figure 4)

'Accessible Routes', documenting people stories

Accessible Routes is a project in collaboration with an artist with lived experience of disability and London Transport Museum to record oral histories from the Campaign for Accessible Transport (CAT), and the Disabled People's Direct-Action Network (DAN).

This project is currently capturing the story of early disabled campaigners who fought for full access to the transport network and accessible routes for all, drawing attention to the wider issues of exclusion and discrimination of disabled passengers. In the early 1990s the protesters, mainly wheelchair users, handcuffed themselves to buses that at the time were not accessible for wheelchair users. Supported by both the Documentary Curator and a professional Videographer, a series of recorded oral history interviews with campaigners are being produced along with painted portraits of the participants by the commissioned artist.

The project will also include oral histories from Transport for London's own Disability Colleague Network Group to draw attention to internal action for inclusion. This is an important documentary project to highlight the work and commitment of early campaigners and the sacrifices they made for wider inclusion that has led to a lot of the changes in transport accessibility we see today. (See figure 5)



Figure 5: Recording interviews and oral histories for the Accessible Routes project (c) London Transport Museum

Other projects currently in progress include Transport for London's Sporting Heritage, which will look at TfL's sports and social clubs which impressively spans over 100 years; Transport for London and Popular Culture, which will include how the iconic roundel and station locations are used in film, letting spectators instantly recognise London as the city location; and finally working closely with a community center that is part of a large residential estate in the city, to capture passenger stories from families and residents. This aims at creating a situation where the museum is taken outside, which includes gaining access to the collections on display at London Transport Museum and museum's stored collections at its Acton Depot site, with behind the scenes initiatives.

To conclude

Turning to the future, we will continue to adapt and evolve to capture and document collaborative work, in order to bring truly authentic stories into the collection. We will do so by combining the expertise of all people and their insights, with the skills within the collections and curatorial teams in the museum. We are working towards and using current methods in contemporary collecting to create an experience which is supportive, caring and accommodates emotion. This is with and for participants, community groups, collaborators and internal teams within the museum, to safeguard and maintain capacity to be supportive to others and continue our people-first led work. In return, we are making our collections accessible and relatable so that audiences can utilise the museum and its collections as a public resource - one that is representative of the cultural and public life of the city. The ongoing work is to continue to develop ways to balance the effort of contemporary collecting; rather than having the museum take control, we are working together equally to form and enrich a collection within the museum, which is truly representative of the past, the present and continues into the future.

References

- London Transport Museum. (2019). My Journey To Pride. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtQypTL7sKw%3Fhl%3Den>>, accessed 5 March 2025.
- London Transport Museum. (2021). Windrush Poems. <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKLSolnrWgHxv5pfc0_r15CpL8kNkxsT1&si=MzlykOFwkbLb7fvf>, accessed 6 March 2025.
- Office for National Statistics. (2023). 'Updating ethnic and religious contrasts in deaths involving coronavirus (COVID-19): 24 January 2020 to 23 November 2022', ONS website, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/updatingethniccontrastsindeathsinvolvingthecoronaviruscovid19englandandwales/24january2020to23november2022>>, accessed 5 March 2025.

Practices of (co)curating

Beyond Objects: Creating community at the Kalamaja Museum, Tallinn City museum, Kalamaja museum

Kristi Paatsi

Biography

Kristi Paatsi has been working in the museum world for over 15 years. She holds an MA in Estonian History from Tartu University. Her experience includes the Head of Educational Departments at both the Estonian History Museum and Tallinn City Museum.

Kristi is actively involved in professional organizations, serving on the board of the Estonian Museum Association and as a member of ICOM (ICOM-CAMOC). Her contributions to the field have been recognized with multiple awards, including the prestigious Silletto Prize for Kalamaja museum for Community Participation and Engagement at the European Museum Forum (EMYA) in 2024.

Introduction

Imagine stepping into a space where every artifact tells a story, and every story is a thread in the vibrant tapestry of a community. This is the Kalamaja Museum, a cozy gathering place that opened in September 2021, welcoming both locals and visitors to explore the rich history and culture of the Kalamaja neighbourhood in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia. The idea to create a community museum in Kalamaja was initiated by the Tallinn City Museum. As a branch of the City Museum, a building already existed in Kalamaja, and they were looking for a new and distinctive purpose for it. It was decided to hand over the decision-making process to the local community, allowing people to choose whether they wanted a museum in the area at all, what kind of museum it should be, and what content it should reflect — a very bold step taken by the Tallinn City Museum Kalamaja, translating to ‘Fish House,’ history dates back to the medieval era. The majority of its mostly wooden buildings were constructed in the first decades of the 20th century, as earlier structures were lost to wars and fires. Historically, Kalamaja was a working-class area with scanty conditions, where, until the early 2000s, many residents desired to relocate. However, a shift occurred, and the neighborhood became a sought-after residence for many. The Kalamaja Museum addresses this colorful past through its exhibitions, public programs, and diverse community projects. Welcoming both locals and visitors, it allows for exploration of the local history, present, and future. The museum encapsulates a fragment of the area’s vivid essence, having been created from the outset in collaboration with the people of the Kalamaja neighbourhood.

This method of establishing a museum is unique across Estonia. The museum’s inception in spring 2018 began with a survey among the locals, followed by brainstorming sessions and meeting nights where community members’ opinions and suggestions for creating the museum were gathered at every stage. Many former and current residents of Kalamaja have participated in creating the permanent exhibition by donating items and sharing memories of life in the Kalamaja district. This community museum allows people to actively participate in its daily operations through cooking nights, community-led tours, exhibitions, and more. The creation of the museum was an engaging journey, but as a community museum, we recreate ourselves every day — there is no final moment of completion.

By extensively involving community members, offering them opportunities, and working together, we have become the best community museum in Europe by 2024 - the Kalamaja Museum won the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) Silletto Prize for community engagement. I will delve deeper into some of the museum’s activities where the community has been involved.

Stories and Artifacts: The Backbone of the Kalamaja Museum

In early 2019, we began interviewing Kalamaja residents and collecting photos and objects (See figure 1). As the same questionnaire was administered to people born in both 1992 and 1932, it was general, but additional questions were added according to age. It was heartwarming to see how older residents' attitudes toward their memories changed. Initially, some elderly individuals questioned the value of discussing their lives, but after several meetings and explanations of the importance of their knowledge and life experience, their self-awareness and confidence grew. Many stories are tied to life in Kalamaja, with many older people's memories revolving around past lifestyles, vanished places, and memories. Many questions were also linked to local flavours, smells, and sounds characteristic of the area. Thus, we have collected information and thoughts on the intangible story of the region, resulting in various projects and exhibitions. In addition to the museum's exhibition, locals donated items significant to them and their stories. The museum did not specify which items to donate; people brought what was important to them, and these items now tell the community's story in the museum. We fully handed over the power to the locals and waited to see which items would be donated and then collaborated with the community to compose the museum. This process was unprecedented in Estonia and very innovative for creating a museum whose result and content were unpredictable.



Figure 1: Kalamaja Museum interviewing the local art community. Meeli Küttem. Tallinn City Museum

The Museum with You Every Day

In creating the Kalamaja Museum and even today, we strive to quickly return the entrusted materials to people and share them more broadly with interested parties. Based on community information, we have created several outdoor exhibitions in urban spaces closest to the people. Alongside outdoor exhibitions, we have also organized city tours and excursions to introduce the collected material and spread the word about the Kalamaja Museum. It has been important for us that information coming from people goes back to their community in the urban space, where everyone has access to it without buying a ticket or visiting the museum.

The most extensive involvement of Kalamaja residents came in creating the 2021 outdoor exhibition "Kalamaja's Lost Fragments: Snapshots from Family Albums." Photo stands featuring memories from interviews and photos from local residents' family albums were placed in front of houses where the photos were originally taken. Securing permission from apartment associations to install photo stands brought many new friends and enthusiasts who have become repeat visitors to the museum. Residents were proud that their building was chosen, and some neighbours became interested in their own building's history. As part of the outdoor exhibition, walk-along interviews were conducted. Mati (born 1938) and Heda Ursula (born 1938), who moved from Kalamaja to Mustamäe, a Soviet-era district known for its panel buildings, came to their old neighbourhood to see photo stands related to their family stories. Walking along their childhood paths and answering thematic questions reminded them of moments that would have remained unreachable if they had been sitting at a table indoors.

Kalamaja Ears

Sometimes a well-phrased question can reveal an entire world. One such question was, "What sounds are characteristic of Kalamaja?" For Helle (born 1947) and many others, the soundscape of Kalamaja is marked by audibility: the wooden houses of Kalamaja and their thin walls inevitably make residents part of their neighbors' lives. This motif led to the exhibition "Kalamaja Ears." To spark interest, inventive participation opportunities were devised. One of Estonia's most well-known contemporary artists, Flo Kasearu, took plaster casts of Kalamaja residents' ears during the collection campaign and later mounted them on the museum walls. The unique call resulted in about 40 ears from people aged 3 to 82. In the empty museum building, segments of memories from Kalamaja people and sounds characteristic of the area's urban space were also played. Visitors could draw and write on the museum walls about interesting things heard through the walls. The exhibition lives on in Wikipedia, and the ears and memory segments are part of today's permanent exhibition at the Kalamaja Museum, "A Village in the City: Stories of Kalamaja." This project was an excellent example of how to blend tangible and intangible history and engage the community in a very surprising way.

Local Main Street Created with the Community

In the autumn of 2023, the renovated Old Kalamaja Street, which connects the Old Town, passes through Kalamaja, and reaches the sea, was opened. Before the new street was introduced, a lengthy process took place during which the street was completely dug up, and the entire communication network on the street was updated. In addition, archaeological excavations were conducted on the street. We were able to immediately display the archaeological finds in the museum following the excavations, thanks to the cooperative archaeologists who were so accommodating that even the cleaning of the finds was done in the museum for the locals to see right after the items were discovered. Interest in the exhibition was high, and locals were keen to learn about the archaeological finds discovered in front of their houses.



Figure 2: Opening of the phone booth exhibition with stories from local people. Tallinn City Museum Meeli Küttim.

The architectural firm KavaKava Architects, which designed the renovation of Old Kalamaja Street, involved the community in the renovation process from the very beginning. Together with the architects and community member Andres, we preserved the historical sewer covers on the street. Additionally, the museum created an 18th-century suburban citizen's garden in one of the street-side planter boxes, which we maintain together with the basic school next to the museum. In the winter of 2024, we prepared and opened a telephone booth audio exhibition in Kalamaja in front of Tallinn's oldest sauna, the Kalma Sauna, in the spring (See figure 2). Jokingly, it can be said that the telephone booth is Estonia's smallest museum branch. From the old payphone, you can hear stories about Kalamaja and Old Kalamaja Street, narrated by

community members themselves. Once again, we involved some community members who had already participated with us and some completely new ones who joined in this project. The museum brought people together, and with the help of the architects who designed the Old Kalamaja Street renovation project, a telephone booth was installed in the street space. In this way—open 24 hours a day—the telephone booth is part of the historical layer of the street and is present in the urban space through the stories of the local people.

Kalamaja Flavours, Uniting the Community Through Food

The Kalamaja Museum was designed with an open kitchen from the outset, as food and cooking unite every community and make it stronger. One of the most successful event series has been “Kalamaja Flavours,” which welcomes all who are interested to cook timeless recipes under the guidance of former and current local residents, to spend time together comfortably, and to taste the fruits of their labour. “Kalamaja Flavours” has included dishes from traditional cold tables to Brazilian and Mexican delicacies. It has been a pleasure to see that the event has become popular among both long-time Kalamaja residents and those who have moved to the area more recently from other parts of Estonia and abroad, as well as a diverse age group of participants. We are always delighted to welcome visitors from near and far who want to experience Kalamaja life by getting their hands floury. Inspired by the cooking evenings, from February to April 2023, the Kalamaja Museum, together with local people, organized an outdoor exhibition at Balti Jaam Market called “How Does Kalamaja Taste?” where visitors could explore recipes collected from Kalamaja residents printed on nostalgic calico aprons and take them home from the apron pockets to try out. This exhibition eventually led to the idea of compiling a local cookbook, which captures a slice of Kalamaja's flavour (See figure 3).



See figure 3: Opening of the exhibition at the local market. Vahur Lõhmus. Tallinn City Museum.

In late 2024, a cookbook was published containing 27 recipes from 17 different people and groups. These recipes are remembered even by those whose lives have taken them away from Kalamaja, and their flavours still bring back warm childhood memories, such as Grandma Bertha Marie's peppermint cookies and pickled eel. There are dishes that have been made in Kalamaja for several generations and are still being prepared today, like Napoleon cake and spinach soup. There are also brand-new recipes, like fully plant-based cheese pancakes with apples and salted caramel sauce, and recipes that have been brought to Kalamaja from further afield—like oatmeal porridge from Võrumaa in South Estonia, chilaquiles from Mexico, and borsch from Ukraine—and that have now become part of the Kalamaja flavour, like barley porridge. All recipes were written by the people themselves, and uniquely, locals opened their home doors to the museum for the cookbook illustrations. We mostly photographed in people's homes, some of which are still in Kalamaja, and others further away, where Kalamaja-inspired dishes still create coziness. Some photos also feature family tableware that has been used to set tables for decades. Other photos were taken in the Kalamaja Museum: in the summer garden, the living room, and of course, the kitchen. The book begins with a historical overview that opens the broader history of the area's food culture and serves as an excellent introduction to the recipes shared by the residents, helping to understand their context and background.

The Kalamaja Museum was created together with the community and operates daily with the community. At the museum, people can participate in various ways every day, and as a museum, we continually think about how to further involve people in the museum's daily operations and activities. How to collect tangible and intangible history, place it in a museum, an exhibition, or some other project that speaks to the community, preserves identity, and carries forward our cultural heritage.

Practices of (co)curating

Participatory curatorship for social impact: Amplifying marginalised voices in museums

Elif Çiğdem Artan

Biography

Elif Çiğdem Artan is a researcher, curator and sociologist with a professional and scholarly background in museology, urban studies, digital culture, migration, and gender. She received her Ph.D. at TU Berlin as a DFG-doctoral fellow of IGK – Center for Metropolitan Studies Berlin-New York-Toronto. In her doctoral research project, *The Future of the Present: Autonomous Archiving of Activist Videos*, she examined the born-digital materials remaining from the Occupy movements in New York and Istanbul by applying grounded theory and ethnographic research methodologies. Artan has been globally active in her research domains, conducting workshops, giving lectures, and publishing papers. In addition to her research projects, she is the coordinator and curator of the Federal German Migrant Women's Association's (Bundesverband der Migrantinnen e.V.) archival box in the Historical Museum Frankfurt. This participatory museum project encourages German migrant women to be the authors of their HERstory and, hence, curators of their own collective voice.

Introduction

Contemporary museums are shifting from passive repositories of artifacts to active spaces for social engagement and community collaboration. This shift reflects a growing emphasis on inclusivity, participation, and relevance, as seen in the work of Jacob (1995), who foregrounds socially engaged curatorial practices, and Bennett (1995), who critiques the museum's historical role in shaping public culture. Simon (2010) advocates for participatory design that invites community co-creation, while Bishop (2012) critically examines the politics of participation in art institutions. In 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) enshrined this vision in its new museum definition, describing a museum as 'a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society' that is 'open to the public, accessible and inclusive,' and operates 'with the participation of communities' (ICOM, 2022). This shift reflects a broader paradigm change in museology from the museum as a 'temple' of elite knowledge to a 'public fairground' for dialogue and civic engagement. In particular, participatory approaches to curation have emerged as a powerful strategy for museums to increase their engagement with marginalized communities, namely ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, workers, feminist and LGBTQ communities. In other words, by actively involving community members in collecting, narrating and exhibiting unspoken cultural heritage, museums started to foster diversity and inclusivity, along with decolonizing cultural narratives.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on a community-driven memory project, developed within the framework of the Bibliothek der Generationen at the Historical Museum Frankfurt, and carried out in collaboration with women who immigrated from various regions of Turkey to Germany. It explores how participatory curation can empower marginalized voices and create lasting social impact. As a sociologist with a scholarly and professional background in museology, urban studies, digital culture, migration, and gender, and as the coordinator and curator of this archival box, the author brings an insider perspective to this analysis. GKB — the Federal Germany Migrant Women's Association's museum collaboration — offers a compelling example for theoretical discussions on participatory museology. It also highlights the institutional barriers to meaningfully including marginalized perspectives in contemporary museum practices. It simultaneously illustrates both the opportunities and the challenges such efforts entail.

In this paper, I draw from my personal experiences. First, I will briefly discuss the theoretical background of participatory curatorship, focusing on archiving, intersectional feminism, and feminist pedagogy. Then, I will review the *Migrant Women's Memory Box* project by analyzing its conceptual framework, empowering workshops, participatory exhibitions, and original publications. Finally, I will reflect on the key learnings and challenges I encountered throughout this journey. I will also offer recommendations aimed at promoting equal rights for all, especially in relation to the tension between commodification and volunteerism, and the precarious working conditions faced by freelance museum professionals.

Museums, participation and social impact

Under the influence of postmodernity and neoliberal capitalism, museums in the twenty-first century have increasingly been seen as forums that facilitate dialogue, learning, and social impact, in addition to their new tasks in audience development, marketing and communication. Today, globalization dominates all artistic milieus worldwide. In this new era, it is evident that the idea of museums has radically diverged from the old Greek definition as the ‘house of muses.’ The traditional understanding of a museum was shaped by the unification of state ideologies, which laid the foundation for creating a national memory. This process often involved the deliberate inclusion of certain historical narratives that align with the image of the “model citizen,” while marginalizing or excluding events and experiences that challenge dominant ideologies (Artan, 201). Contemporary museology now challenges institutional and structural discrimination while the current interdisciplinary cultural projects have revitalized museum spaces, attracting more visitors with various backgrounds and expectations (Artan, 2011).

Under these circumstances, following the global rise of social movements in the 2010s – particularly the #Occupy movements, which extensively utilized social media platforms – civil society, namely, protestors, began establishing their own archives to ensure their struggles remain unforgettable. Naturally, these counter-archives challenge the dominant narratives of national histories as represented in museums (Artan, 2021). In this manner, as Schwartz and Cook (2002: 13) assert, ‘archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance.’ Hence, it is worth asking: Whose memories do we encounter in archives? Who keeps the records of marginalized groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, workers, and feminist and LGBTQ movements? More importantly, ‘who owns their history?’ (Jimerson, 2006: 31). That is, who has the authority to record, preserve, interpret, and represent these histories – especially when they diverge from official narratives? In this section, I examine how participation in museums can broaden history-writing collaborations by discussing the crucial roles of feminist pedagogy and intersectional feminism in participatory curatorship methodologies.

Participation in the decision-making process is the key strategy for fulfilling democracy – ensuring equal representation for all in museums and archives. However, Michel Foucault (1972) clearly states that an archive determines both the spoken and the unspoken. In other words, it dictates what is and is not recorded as a historical incident. Similar to Foucault, Binark sought to highlight the archive’s role in shaping social values and opinions through the analogy of archaeology. ‘It is known that proper knowledge of history depends on firsthand original documents, namely archival documents. Without documents, there can be no history writing and no clarification as to what happened in history (İsmet Binark, 1994, quoted in Ahiska, 2006: 14).

While archives traditionally rely on official documents as the foundation of history writing, participatory projects offer a powerful tool for collecting the lived experiences and narratives of ordinary people, particularly those of unrecognized citizens who are often excluded from

institutional records. Building on this approach, participatory museology emerged in the 2000s to move beyond top-down content production and open museum doors to visitors and community members, enabling them to become collaborators—as contributors, co-creators, or advisors in the development of exhibitions and public programs:

Participatory museology is examined within the framework of participation policies and the concept of democratization, which are being reshaped by our societal conditions. It also explores the extent and manner in which technology and media influence these processes while encompassing transformation efforts that result from co-production with visitors—or more broadly, museum audiences (Artan, 2015: 20).¹

Indeed, the concept of the audience forms the focal point of participatory museology studies. Generally, the term ‘audience’ is more commonly used in media studies than in museology. However, in research analyzing how museums are being transformed through participatory projects, the use of ‘audience’ instead of ‘visitor’ is intentional. While ‘audience’ refers to individuals who continuously receive messages directed at them, in participatory museology projects, it also highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of museum communication strategies. Usually, visitors enter a museum and leave without leaving any trace – unless explicitly asked for feedback through guestbooks, surveys, evaluation forms or similar means. However, the contemporary museology, based on democracy and equality, demonstrates how the concept of ‘audience,’ borrowed from media studies, reflects the evolving role of individuals in contributing to exhibitions, collections, and public programs.

Moreover, in *The Participatory Museum* (2010; 2015), Nina Simon examines how cultural institutions can use participatory methods. She explores how visitors can express themselves and how institutions can create more meaningful and engaging experiences for all. Whether the goal is fostering dialogue or developing creative forms of expression (e.g. an exhibition or a publication), Simon argues that the key lies in design techniques. According to her, the main difference between traditional and participatory design processes is the direction of information flow between institutions and audience. In conventional design, institutions produce information for visitors to consume, focusing on maintaining high-quality textual and visual content. In contrast, participatory projects encourage multi-directional information production. In this context, institutions act as platforms, opening the stage for participants and assigning them collaborator roles, such as content creators, distributors, consumers, and critics. Rather than just inviting visitors to their museums to consume what is on display, these institutions create spaces enabling opportunities for various experiences to emerge through collective production.

Therefore, the contemporary museum’s mission is to be representative and inclusive, ensuring that no group or individual is excluded or marginalized as ‘unwanted’ by neither society nor state. Accordingly, the ICOM museum definition (2022) explicitly calls on museums to offer experiences for ‘education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing’ through ethical and

professional work ‘with the participation of communities.’ However, I argue that participatory museology has often overlooked the intersectional identities of museum audiences, particularly marginalized communities whose inclusion in national memory has been shaped by state ideologies. Accordingly, cultural institutions and museums engaged in urban research should present city histories based on participatory curatorship and amplify the institutionally and structurally marginalised voices.

Therefore, I believe that participatory curatorship can offer effective methodologies implementing a feminist pedagogy from an intersectional perspective while engaging with marginalized communities in the arts and culture milieu, which embraces diversity and inclusivity, such as in education-, gender- and language-related issues. For instance, communities at the intersection of migration and gender have specific needs when engaging in museum collaborations. Migrant women, for example, require safe spaces to prevent retraumatization when sharing experiences of gender-based and racial discrimination and violence. They also need translation services to overcome communication barriers and trained staff working with vulnerabilities.

Consequently, intersectional feminist pedagogy can be a practical approach in participatory museum projects, fostering a mutual learning model where everyone has equal speaking rights, no one is judged, and individuals are accepted as they are. Thus, participatory museum projects refer to an educational and methodological approach that centers on the diverse and intersecting identities of participants – such as gender, race, class, and sexuality – when co-creating narratives about the past. Moreover, it challenges dominant historical accounts by incorporating marginalized voices in collective information production and emphasizing power dynamics in memory work. This pedagogy actively shapes communities’ histories, ensuring inclusivity, reflexivity, and social justice within participatory archival, curatorial, or digital memory initiatives.

To summarize, in this section I discussed the theoretical background of participatory curatorship within the concept of (counter-)archiving, by offering intersectional feminist pedagogy in participatory methodologies for collecting individual stories excluded from the state’s social memory. Moreover, it argued that participatory curatorship is essential to achieve a comprehensive, non-linear, and non-authoritarian approach to community history-writing. However, Flinn argues that defining and establishing a common understanding of the terms employed in participation is essential yet challenging (Flinn, 2007), as metrics are not necessarily clear or fixed within the heterogeneous cultures of communities. Analyzing the Migrant Women’s Memory Box case study, the next section exposes the journey of a community-driven participatory project conducted within intersectional feminist pedagogy methodologies.

Migrant women’s memory box in Germany #ParticipatoryCuratorship

The Federal Germany Migrant Women’s Association (Bundesverband der Migrantinnen e.V. – GKB) was founded in 2005 in Frankfurt am Main by immigrant women from various regions in Turkey with diverse ethnic and religious identities and experiences in Germany. The Association emerged to seek social justice, notably after discovering that social housing infrastructure in Ginnheim-Frankfurt was causing cancer. Migrant women mobilized for a neighborhood campaign requesting renovation or relocation, asserting their urban rights.

This community activism led to the formation of the Association, recognizing the need for a nationwide network of migrant women in Germany, who immigrated from different geographies around the world. Expanding through personal mobilities and transcity connections, the Association operates in over 20 cities today, collaborating with various organizations at local, regional, national and international levels, advocating for women’s rights. The women mostly speak Turkish, along with some small talks in Kurdish, and present mixed German- and education-levels. They primarily work blue-collar jobs and in social services. There are also journalists, lawyers, therapists, educators and translators among others.

Their first collaboration with the Historical Museum Frankfurt was in 2013 through the *Stadtlabor Project*, which invites locals to shape participatory exhibitions following on-site research, and, thus, leaving museum walls. The project was in Ginnheim that year, leading to the association’s involvement. This connection later provided me with the opportunity to coordinate and curate the *Migrant Women’s Memory Box* for the *Bibliothek der Generationen*. This artistic memory project documents urban history through contributions from individuals and organizations. Today, the library contains works of more than 200 authors and will remain at the museum until 2105.

In the framework of my journey in the participatory museum project as a freelance museum professional originally from Istanbul and immigrated to Germany, I’ll explore coordinating and curating a memory box, from conceptualization to workshops, participatory exhibitions, and publications. I’ll discuss how I implemented the intersectional feminist pedagogy methodologies during the project. Hence, this case study will provide a short review of community-driven information production in various media with different memorization purposes.

01. Conceptualization of the Archival Materials

Globally, migration exhibitions often rely on the image of a suitcase -- symbolizing nostalgia, poverty, and hope. This romanticized portrayal oversimplifies migrant experiences, focusing on early struggles like housing and employment while neglecting their historical achievements in civil society. For instance, migration narratives in German museums have shifted. The first workers from Turkey arrived as temporary, called ‘guest workers.’ But many stayed, forming families and permanent communities. Over time, ‘migrants’ evolved into ‘people with migration backgrounds,’ reflecting the social impact on language and institution (Artan, 2017).

To fill the gap in migrant women's history in Germany, the Migrant Women's Association decided to create a memory box displaying the (her)story of Turkey-origin women living in Germany beyond stigmatized stories. Eventually, we (me and the workshop participants) listed the original materials to be produced in working groups and migrant women signed up according to their personal interest in contribution:

1. Short story-book
2. 10th anniversary book
3. 10th anniversary documentary
4. Chore-book
5. Chore-recording
6. 1-year activities documentation book
7. Friendship-book

Meeting every Sunday for workshops, held in Turkish, in rotation of different working groups on handicraft arts, film screenings, and creative writing was encouraging migrant women to be the author of their own stories. Moreover, we decided to collect all audiovisual recordings and printed materials from past events and create an inventory, to select related materials for the 10th anniversary documentary and book of the association. Furthermore, to provide a detailed overview of the association's efforts and the demands of migrant women over a year, all events held between March 8, 2014, and March 8, 2015, were documented for the 1-year activities book.

02. Participatory Workshops for Migrant Women

From the first day, the role of the participatory curatorship was clear to me: facilitating the participants' decision-making process. Throughout the workshops, I consistently emphasized that while I coordinated the project and curated the materials, the participants—as collaborators—had the final say in shaping the project's outcome. Moreover, I deliberately excluded digital tools from workshops, applying an intersectional feminist pedagogy that acknowledged participants' diverse backgrounds and technological access. Furthermore, as the curator of a participatory museum project, my primary goal was to ensure the shared awareness that I held no authoritative role. To foster engagement, I prepared handwritten, hand-illustrated, and photocopied worksheets, encouraging participants to interact more actively with the materials. This approach proved highly effective. Within a few weeks, the women began arriving at sessions eagerly asking, 'Elif, what do you have for us today?' Over time, we formed friendships beyond the workshops.

We started with short story workshops, structured in two parts. The first part focused on the theoretical aspects of writing, introducing definitions of key storytelling elements such as character, narrator, and setting through a worksheet. In the second part, participants practiced writing short essays based on prompts – sometimes an object, an incident, or a photograph. In the final stage of each workshop, they read their texts aloud, and together, we selected one to

publish on the project blog. In early sessions, women hesitated, asking, 'Am I doing this right?' But as confidence grew, they eagerly anticipated new tasks. Discussions remained flexible, and I occasionally shared personal stories to break hierarchical barriers. Meanwhile, in addition to documentation and outreach, the project blog was an empowering tool, while the women's short essays gained recognition on social media by receiving likes and comments from family and friends. Unfortunately, we couldn't maintain the blog for the long term.

03. 10th Anniversary Exhibition

In the late summer of 2015, the association's executive board invited me to curate the 10th anniversary exhibition. Their past exhibits relied on photos, flyers, and posters, so I proposed a participatory project: co-writing a dictionary. Inspired by the 29 letters of the Turkish alphabet, the dictionary aimed to showcase the struggles of migrant women from A to Z. More than 200 women from 11 cities participated in defining words, concepts, objects, emotions, and even colors related to migration and womanhood. Each entry was collaboratively developed through regional workshops. The pop-up exhibition, *the ABC of the Migrant Women's Association: A Female Dictionary*, debuted in Cologne in November 2015 and traveled to Frankfurt (2016), Istanbul (2016), and Berlin (2017).

The first workshop for the exhibition preparation was held in May in Frankfurt, bringing together more than 20 migrant women from nearby cities. During this workshop, participants compiled a list of words they wanted to feature in the dictionary. Subsequent workshops were organized in various regions, creating a shared pool of words. The exhibition advisory board selected the words to be included and distributed them among the participating regional organizations. Each organization came together to discuss the various aspects of the chosen entries, drafted a short text, and proposed a visual representation.

The dictionary was carefully prepared to reflect both the work carried out by the Frankfurt Migrant Women's Association (GKB) and women's everyday lives. It is difficult to single out any particular word as more significant than others – terms such as discrimination, gender, magazine, housework, trust, soft G (*the letter Ğ*), racism, solidarity, laughter, struggle, honor, *off*, trousers, lipstick, silence, violence, hope, production, poverty, and time all appear. Each of these words highlights different aspects of women's struggles and offers, first, a direct critique of the life imposed on women within the patriarchal system, and second, the stigmatization of migrant women from an intersectional perspective.

Moreover, soft G (*the letter Ğ*) holds a special place for me. Since no word in Turkish begins with this letter, it was initially debated whether to exclude it from the dictionary during the first workshop. However, I encouraged women to think in alternative narratives: 'What does Ğ mean to you in the context of your struggles?' Then the women from Nuremberg came up with the idea of a puzzle – missing one piece. Even though no Turkish word starts with soft G, excluding it from the language is impossible. (Artan, 2019a)

The pop-up exhibition design was my initial goal, since it enables easy transportation and installation in or out of museum spaces. After finalizing the images and texts, we printed exhibition entries on canvas, including welcoming texts. As the curator of this participatory exhibition, my role was to create a common language for textual and visual materials crafted in different cities in different hands. However, the final visuals did not satisfy even exhibition contributors. When we met for the first time in Cologne, at the festival venue, after long phone calls, I received some reactions from women saying, ‘but Elif, this is not the same image that we sent.’ At that point, I realized another challenge of participatory projects: the gaps in communication for spreading the news. After completing the final edit of the textual and visual materials, I had another round of revisions before the production. But I was always in contact on the phone with one person from each city. My contact person, probably, did not always share our conversations with others. Relying solely on regional representatives mirrored the association’s own communication structure limited mutuality. In retrospect, I would have created a broadcast channel to directly share updates with everyone involved. Because group chats are often misused or overwhelming with long text exchanges. But a broadcast tool would have offered a direct line of communication for those interested, while still leaving room for individual follow-ups.

Ultimately, the exhibition reconfigured the language marginalizing women by patriarchal dominance in political, economic, and socio-cultural milieus. The dictionary, published also as booklets in Turkish, German and English, gathered the visual and textual interpretations of the key concepts shaping the agenda of the Migrant Women’s Associations against gender-based, institutional and structural discrimination and violence.

04. Berlin Exhibition

Inspired by the dictionary project, the IG-Metall Trade Union invited the Berlin Migrant Women’s Organization to an exhibition in 2017. With an ample gallery space, we expanded the display to showcase the association’s 12-year archive – this included photos, brochures, banners, and artifacts. The exhibition team was composed of GKB Berlin (The Migrant Women’s Association Berlin) volunteers alongside a professional team, including an architect, graphic designer, and translator – individuals who are experts in their fields and friends of GKB with personal connections to the organization. As the participatory exhibition curator, my role was to gather ideas and feedback from the volunteers, facilitate discussions, and convey the initial plan to the design team. Essentially, I acted as a bridge between two distinct groups, each operating within different conceptual and linguistic frameworks concerning design processes.

Unlike the pop-up format of the first exhibition, this one required structured spatial design. The primary challenge distinguishing the volunteer group from the professional team was visualization. While the volunteers had experience organizing exhibitions for their fairs, they found conceptualizing a space larger than 100 m² difficult. This gap necessitated visualizing

the gallery space in different sections, displaying different exhibition materials with different purposes. Hence, the exhibition area was divided into five sections:

- *ABC of Migrant Women’s Association: A Female Dictionary* – Texts and images reflecting migrant women’s experiences.
- *A Room of One’s Own* – Bilingual magazine covers capturing women’s struggles and solidarity.
- *Photo Album* – Archival images documenting migrant women’s political, social and cultural engagement.
- *reMake—reLive* – Handmade objects reflecting economic and political engagement.
- *The Chest* – Protest materials showcasing visibility of migrant women’s rights in public spaces.

The vernissage of the exhibition, *World from a Female Perspective!*, on 13 July 2017, hosted more than one hundred guests, including members, supporters, collaborators, and all allies. The opening speeches were followed by an open buffet and a chore-performance. Among all display materials, in my opinion, the Chest section holds a significant place in the exhibition room, not only due to its position in the space, but also its significance in Anatolian patriarchal society:

In Turkey, a young woman ready to get married starts establishing a chest composed of hand-made fabric materials and household items. Traditionally, the bridal chest is displayed to the family members and friends before the marriage ceremony. Regarding this tradition, we installed the association’s ‘household equipment’ in the exhibition room, and it presents the essential interrogation of the difference between participatory curatorship and classical approach to exhibition space design. As the flags and banners were sent from various cities in Germany, it was not possible to foresee any exhibition design regarding the displayed objects. Among the sent materials, the women selected the objects to be exhibited (Artan, 2019b: 37).

As curator, I balanced volunteer input with professional design, ensuring clarity while respecting the participatory process. One challenge arose when contributors wanted a female figure in the exhibition, which the architect vehemently opposed. Rather than imposing the architect’s decision, I facilitated discussions, and ultimately, the women chose to omit it, understanding the reasoning. This reinforced the participatory approach, avoiding top-down authority.

05. Delivery of the Box

After nearly a decade, in May 2023, we finally delivered the *Migrant Women’s Memory Box* to the museum. Delays stemmed from my relocation to Berlin for doctoral studies, funding gaps, and my responsibilities at my full-time job after graduation.

Now preserved in the *Bibliothek der Generationen* at the Frankfurt Historical Museum, the materials in the box serve to celebrate migrant women's struggles in the past, achievements in the present, and ongoing fights for equality. Moreover, this participatory project moved beyond symbolic objects like suitcases, offering a more prosperous, multi-dimensional perspective on migrant women's experiences in Germany by containing archival materials initially produced by migrant women:

- *A Story-Book*: Empowering to become the authors of HERstory
- *A Chore-Book and -Recording*: Oral history for preserving intangible cultural heritage
- *A One-Year Activities Documentation Book*: Enhancing community archiving practices
- *A Friendship Book*: Documenting the story of women unification

However, we couldn't complete all the targeted materials. For instance, we (I mean, association volunteers and project collaborators) couldn't even start working on the 10th anniversary documentary and book properly. The foundation of an inventory was only achieved for 1-year activities between 2014 and 2015. But still, we (the association) handed over a sizeable audiovisual archive accumulated in hard disks over the years. They will be accessible both within the memory box and the *mediathek* section of the library for further research and studies.

In conclusion, my journey at the Migrant Women Association's museum collaboration exposed the importance of participatory curatorship from the intersectional feminist pedagogy methodologies in museums to achieve a comprehensive diversity and inclusion, empowering marginalized communities. In addition to the methodological exploration, the project provided me with more insights in practice concerning civil society, equality, and the role of museums in social impact. Drawing from my experiences, I will elaborate on the opportunities and challenges of working with marginalized communities as a freelance museum professional in the next section.

Funding, labor and institutional gaps

Reflecting on this project, I often think not about what we accomplished but what we couldn't do, not as a complaint, but as a way to understand the reality of curating a participatory project as a freelance museum professional. Ultimately, the most significant challenges weren't about curation but coordination, specifically, financial constraints. This section will explore key challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations for more equitable collaborations with marginalized communities.

The museum's invitation to contribute to the *Library of Generations* came with no dedicated budget. Aside from covering the initial conceptualization workshops and a one-time curator honorarium, all other expenses had to be self-fundraised by the association. Fortunately, the

Migrant Women's Association had experience securing donations, which made it possible to fund production costs. Even so, we had to raise eight times the amount the art gallery provided. Despite this, we could only offer small honorariums to the graphic designer and architect — far from what their professional work deserved. Most significantly, none of the hundreds of women involved in local workshops, advisory groups, or exhibitions received compensation. The project, including much of my own professional labor in finalizing the archival materials, relied almost entirely on voluntary work. I could only manage to finalize the project voluntary-working since I had other primary incomes, such as fellowship and regular salary. But it brings me to an institutional and structural economic discrimination issue—the precarious position of freelance museum professionals representing marginalized communities:

Civil society, namely, archives, museums, and NGOs, invites local communities to collaborate—but only for their unpaid contributions. Civil society actors listen to marginalized voices, create various content from publications to TV programs or exhibitions, and secure funding from multiple sources for their collaboration projects 'as a result of' their contribution to diversity and inclusive society (Artan, 2024).

Working with local groups requires regular visits, workshops, and personal engagement to build community trust. Due to the museum's busy schedule, full-time museum staff often overlook this trust-building process, or fail to accomplish it entirely. Therefore, assigning a professional who can facilitate the communication between the community and the museum may be beneficial. Yet, the role of a facilitator in participatory projects is often left to community members without any budget foreseen.

Hence, the case study of the Migrant Women's Memory Box exposes the commodification of working with marginalized communities in voluntary- and project-based museum collaborations. Moreover, it raises questions about the effectiveness and necessity of specialized disciplines in museum studies. If there is to be a distinguishing feature of city museums from community archives, it should be the professionalization of this collaborative work. Consequently, in the next and final section, I'll summarize the findings of the case study analysis, along with my final remarks on enhancing museum social impact in collaboration with marginalized communities.

Conclusion: Amplifying marginalised voices in museums

By stating, '[a]rchives are not neutral or objective,' Jimerson (2006: 22) highlights the political nature of archivists, precisely due to their decisive role of deciding what to *include* and what to *exclude*. In this manner, participatory museology challenges authorities by fostering diversity and inclusion, ensuring that information production is acknowledged in multi-directional, horizontal, not hierarchical communication. However, the vulnerabilities of marginalized communities, namely ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, workers, feminist and LGBTQ communities, have often been overlooked by institutions in the democratization of museums'

historical narratives. In this context, intersectional feminist pedagogy offers efficient methodological tools centering participants' diverse and intersecting identities, such as gender, race, class and sexuality.

Accordingly, drawing personal experiences, this study explored the role of participatory curatorship in amplifying marginalised voices in museums. The case study analysis of the Migrant Women's Memory Box project—a community-driven participatory museum project conducted with women immigrated from various regions of Turkey to Germany hosted at the *Bibliothek der Generationen* housed at the Historical Museum Frankfurt – examined the journey of a participatory curatorship implemented intersectional feminist pedagogy. The Federal Germany Migrant Women's Association's museum collaboration, coordinated and curated by the author, provided a multilayered source to elaborate on theoretical concepts, opportunities, and challenges in practice.

First, I briefly discussed the theoretical background of participatory curatorship within the concept of archiving, intersectional feminism and feminist pedagogy; then, I reviewed the Migrant Women's Memory Box project by analyzing the conceptualization, empowering workshops, participatory exhibitions and original publications; and finally, I elaborated on my key learnings and pain points in this journey, along with my recommendations to ensure equal rights for all in the face of commodification vs. volunteerism case and precarity of freelance museum professionals.

As a result, the project overview revealed the lack of continuous engagement between the museum and the community. The migrant women rarely visited the museum unless invited for a guided tour or an event. The multidimensional engagement for more intensive collaborations was hindered by first language barriers of the women, then the symbolic distance to the arts and culture milieu in general. Moreover, in this project, I realized that the role of a participatory curator is not to speak on behalf of the communities but to provide a platform for their voices to be heard. However, I have also witnessed how voluntary-based museum collaborations often commodify the struggles of marginalized groups, reducing them to mere museum objects. While participation is celebrated, financial resources remain insufficient to ensure equal involvement. One of the most concerning realities for freelance museum professionals is that compensation often comes in public visibility – an unspoken promise that an unpaid project may lead to future employment. This creates an exploitative cycle, where professionals are expected to accept low or no-budget opportunities to strengthen their Curriculum Vitae.

In this context, discussions about the social impact of museums fall short when they focus solely on increasing visibility for marginalized groups. True social impact demands structural changes that ensure all participants are afforded equal rights, recognition, and financial compensation.

Overall, the *Migrant Women's Memory Box* thus offers a multifaceted reflection on the possibilities and limitations of participatory curatorship with marginalized communities. Against this backdrop, I argue that museum studies must move beyond the principle of volunteerism toward equitable compensation. Meaningful collaboration with local communities requires comprehensive funding covering every participation aspect: workshops, curatorship, travel, translation, design, and production. Without this, such projects risk reinforcing systems where only the privileged can afford to take part. The chronic lack of financial support for marginalized communities forces us to confront a fundamental question about the social impact of museums: Whose stories are indeed being told? And what does it mean when only those able to secure external funding are granted the space to share their narratives within museum institutions?

Therefore, we must demand structural change to ensure that museums become spaces of genuine inclusion and equity.

#DecolonizeMuseums

References

- Ahıska, M. (2006) 'Occidentalism and Registers of Truth: The Politics of Archives in Turkey', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 34, pp. 9–29.
- Artan, E. Ç. (2021). *The Future of the Present: Autonomous Archiving of Activist Videos*. Doctoral Dissertation, TU-Berlin-Repository.
- Artan, E. Ç. (2019a). 'Migrant Women's Reminiscence Box in Frankfurt.' In: Akkent, M., and Kovar, S. N. (eds), *Feminist Pedagogy: Museums, Memory Sites, and Practices of Remembrance*, pp. 115–125. Istanbul: İstos Yayınları.
- (2019b). "Confusion of an Architect: Curatorship and Space Design in a Participatory Exhibition Project." In *CAMOC Museums of Cities Review* (Special Issue Migration:Cities – (Im) migration and Arrival Cities), 32–39.
- (2017). 'Reconfiguring Keywords of Migration and Woman Through a Participatory Exhibition Project.' In *Feministische Geo-RundMail*, (73), 22-27.
- (2015). 'Bir Ziyaretçi Sorusu: Katılımcı Müzecilik' [A Visitor's Question: Participatory Museology], in *Genç Sanat*, No. 233, January 2015
- Artan, E. Ç. (2011). *Private Museology, Establishing New Cultural Industries in Istanbul*. Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Routledge.
- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso.
- ICOM (2022). ICOM Museum Definition (approved 24 August 2022). International Council of Museums: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>
- Flinn, A. (2007) 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges.' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2: 151–76.
- Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith, Pantheon

Books, 1972.

Jacob, M. J. (1995). *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*. Bay Press

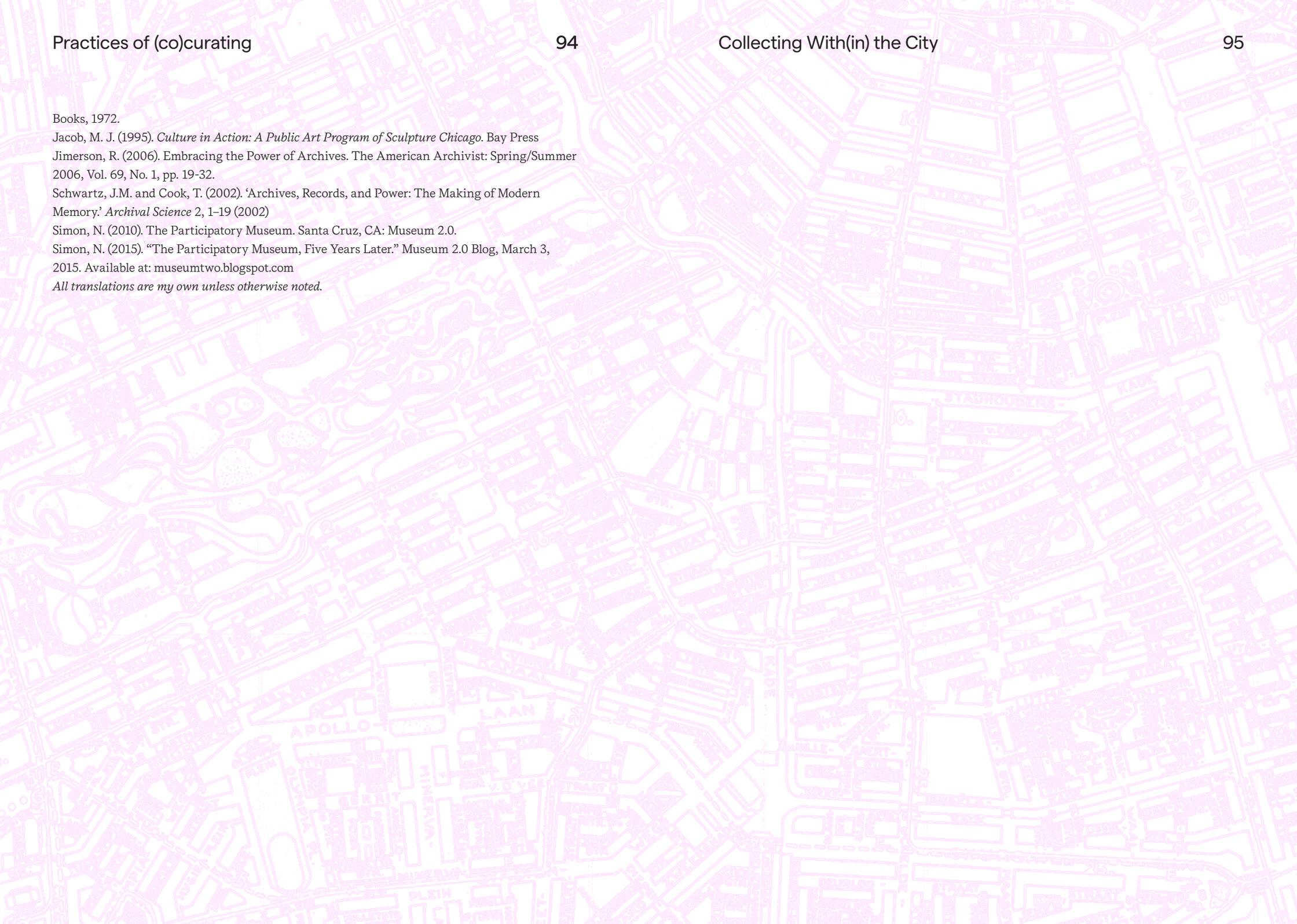
Jimerson, R. (2006). Embracing the Power of Archives. *The American Archivist*: Spring/Summer 2006, Vol. 69, No. 1, pp. 19-32.

Schwartz, J.M. and Cook, T. (2002). 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory.' *Archival Science* 2, 1-19 (2002)

Simon, N. (2010). *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz, CA: Museum 2.0.

Simon, N. (2015). "The Participatory Museum, Five Years Later." *Museum 2.0 Blog*, March 3, 2015. Available at: museumtwo.blogspot.com

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.



Practices of (co)curating

New Neighborhood Heritage: The Wijkcollectie Foundation's Vision for Community Engagement

Nicole van Dijk

Biography

Nicole van Dijk is director of the 'Wijkcollectie' Foundation. After her studies, she supported changes in society in various ways with stories. Starting as an anthropological researcher, through a career as an independent designer to curator in a city museum, she now leads a foundation that she set up to safeguard the stories of Rotterdammers. To preserve this as contemporary heritage of the city and to make the voices of residents sound even more powerful.

Roots in the City

The Wijkcollectie Foundation was established four and a half years ago, growing out of community-based heritage projects initiated by Nicole van Dijk during her time at Museum Rotterdam. The most influential of these was *Echt Rotterdams Erfgoed* (Authentic Rotterdam Heritage), a program that honored individuals, groups and initiatives for their meaningful contributions to the city. It was not only a recognition program but also a way to add these people and initiatives to the museum's collection as living heritage. By applying this methodology, the museum invited residents to help shape and co-own the city's heritage. In doing so, it emphasized that the museum's collection is, in fact, the collection of the people of Rotterdam.

After municipal funding cuts in 2020, Van Dijk transferred this approach to the newly formed independent Wijkcollectie Foundation. The term *Wijkcollectie* translates loosely as "Neighborhood Collection" – a concept that highlights the idea that the stories and actions of residents together form the living heritage of a neighborhood. The foundation is supported by multi-year grants from public and private funds.

A Living Definition of Heritage

From the beginning, the foundation has built on one core belief: stories are heritage, especially when they reflect how people take action to improve their neighborhoods. This vision places the everyday actions of residents at the heart of what defines a city's living identity.

Inspired by political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who described human action as the capacity to initiate something new among others, Wijkcollectie focuses not on theory but on the everyday. The central question is: how can recognizing stories of action help build stronger, more connected neighborhoods?

From Story to Action

Wijkcollectie's projects bring neighborhood stories to life in visible and tangible ways. Museum bicycles carry local stories through the streets, with colorful bags that feature QR codes linking to personal testimonies. Neighborhood films, made together with residents, are screened in public spaces such as parks, inviting the broader community to reflect and respond. Visual materials like neighborhood drawings are printed on tablecloths, tea towels or bags, making abstract issues like poverty, isolation or local pride more visible and shareable. Interactive installations such as the Learning Circus bring together local makers, artists and residents to co-create new expressions of neighborhood identity.

In Lombardijen, the story of Edsel became a central element in the Learning Circus. Edsel can walk, but he chooses to use his neighbors' mobility scooter to do groceries for them. A large-scale painting shows Edsel in motion, surrounded by everyday street scenes. The image celebrates small gestures of care that often go unnoticed but can move an entire neighborhood.



Figure 1: Photo: Nicole van Dijk, 2024. proposition for mural in Lombardijen, Rotterdam Text in painting: Edsel can walk but uses his neighbor's mobility scooter to get shopping supplies for them.



Figure 2: Photo: Marijke Gips, The Learning Circus in Hoek van Holland 2024

The painting is now being considered for reproduction as a mural and already holds a prominent place (as an enlarged linoprint) in the Learning Circus installation. It illustrates how quiet, everyday actions carry meaning and power when we choose to see them. Each of these projects is designed not only to share stories, but to invite people to see the neighborhood and their role in it differently. (See figure 1–2)

What Has Changed?

To understand what these projects actually do, Wijkcollectie developed its own Theory of Change. This model, created together with an external researcher, forms the basis for ongoing impact measurement. Through structured surveys, interviews and observations, the foundation monitors how participation in storytelling and public interventions affects residents' sense of belonging, visibility, social networks and empowerment.

The results are clear: many participants feel more connected to others in the neighborhood after taking part in a Wijkcollectie activity. People often report that they now recognize more faces in the street, have met new people they otherwise would not have spoken to, and have started looking at their surroundings with more appreciation. This is especially meaningful in neighborhoods where social cohesion was initially low.

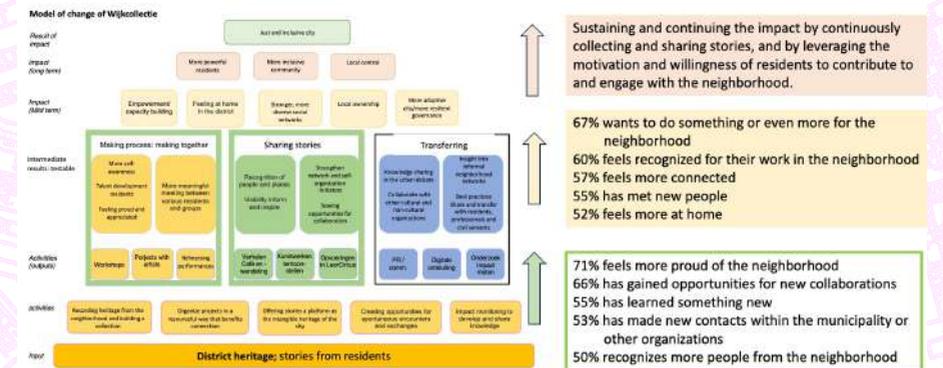


Figure 3: Image: Theory of Change and results of impactresearch by Wijkcollectie. 2024

In some neighborhoods, like Oosterflank, residents described how the projects helped break through feelings of isolation. In others, such as the Oude Noorden, people said that the activities reinforced a strong existing sense of identity and pride. Across all areas, many participants expressed a desire to contribute something to the neighborhood themselves, whether by volunteering, starting an activity, or supporting others informally.

Artists and storytellers involved in the projects also experienced meaningful change. Many gained new contacts and visibility for their work, discovered new collaboration opportunities, and felt more acknowledged for the role they play in their communities. Several mentioned how the public recognition of their stories gave them renewed energy and confidence.

In short, Wijkcollectie's approach does more than collect stories. It sparks social movement, strengthens relationships, and activates a sense of shared ownership and local pride. (See Figure 3)

Challenges Ahead

Despite these promising developments, several challenges remain. Wijkcollectie works in neighborhoods where trust in institutions can be low and social dynamics are complex. Not all residents immediately recognize their own stories as heritage, and participation often depends on personal motivation, timing and informal networks. Ensuring a truly inclusive approach means continuing to reach out beyond the usual circles, especially to residents who are less visible or confident.

Another challenge lies in maintaining long-term engagement. While temporary installations and activities can generate momentum, sustaining that energy over time requires consistent presence, resources, and collaboration with local partners. There is also a constant tension between flexibility and structure: the organization must remain open to bottom-up initiatives while still offering a clear framework and continuity.

Lastly, as the foundation grows, there is the ongoing task of balancing scale with depth. Each neighborhood requires its own rhythm, relationships and sensitivity. Expanding the reach of Wijkcollectie must not come at the expense of the intimate, tailored nature of its work; a challenge that calls for careful stewardship, listening, and continuous learning.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge of all is to bring a different vision of culture and heritage to the forefront, one that sees them not as separate from everyday life, but as deeply woven into it. It is this form of culture, grounded in lived experience and collective action, that has the power to truly move people in neighborhoods: to take part, to create, and to feel that they belong.

Practices of (co)curating

From the Page to the Public Space: a creative mediation project, an invitation, a call to action

Antonis Douroudis

Biography

Antonis Douroudis is an architect, cultural worker and museum scholar. His creative practice aims at the reappropriation of human-made environments, both cultural and built, and at the accessibility and democratization of knowledge, in which he takes an interdisciplinary approach that includes design, research and artistic projects. He is exploring ways that the built environment, and the dynamics that shape it, can be culturally mediated in a museum or exhibition setting. After completing an integrated Master's diploma in architectural engineering at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), he started a Masters in "Arts, Museology and Curatorship" (AMaC) at the University of Bologna (UNIBO), during which he completed an internship in "Museo Spazio Pubblico". At this time, Douroudis developed the project, "From the Page to the Public Space". Since the summer of 2024, he has been working at the Siena Art Institute (SART), actively participating in cultural and educational activities, as well as coordinating design projects.

Museal background of the project

Museo Spazio Pubblico (Public Space Museum) is an independent not-for-profit project based in Bologna, Italy, investigating the complexity of public space culture through a transdisciplinary practice.¹ This practice includes activities such as workshops, public art exhibitions, research and artist residences, training and educational activities in partnership with universities and other public or private institutions and organizations. Founded and curated by Dr. Luisa Bravo, the Public Space Museum is based in the renovated space of an old supermarket, on the ground floor of a residential building in the Porta-Saragozza suburban neighborhood of Bologna. The Museum highlights the intention to engage not only the visiting population of the more touristic city center, but with local citizens of Bologna. Unlike most museums, the Public Space Museum does not have a traditional collection, since its object of study is not something collectable, but rather a fundamental component of the city itself. Putting forward as the Museum's subject matter the concept of public space, its importance, its design, its multiple meanings and the politics surrounding it, this requires new mediating practices and methodologies. In this case, cultural mediation in the Museum - meaning both the act of bringing together and reducing the distance between the object of study and the public. Furthermore, the hermeneutical bridging between the subject matter and the knowledge related to it (Desvallées & Mairesse 2010: 46-48), which cannot be restricted to conventional practices such as exhibition panels.

Defining & curating the collection

Alongside the temporary and recurring activities that were mentioned previously, the Museum also hosts a permanent cultural and educational offering – the Public Space Library – an open resource of books on urban design, architecture, arts and sociology which address themes related to public space and the city. The international, interdisciplinary and thematically focussed library makes it a unique resource for the city, especially to the large international university community that often faces language barriers while visiting other locally based libraries. Anticipating the Public Space Library's opening in May 2024, the Museum turned into a laboratory where the books were being considered as a collection to be curated, after the thorough cataloguing that preceded. What emerged was an experimental cultural mediation project, entitled "From the Page to the Public Space," that was exhibited alongside the museum's new library display which made some of the resources available to the local public for the first time.

Shaping a vision & setting a goal

As a cultural mediation project, the general objective of the Museum is to connect the public with the Public Space library collection. "From the Page to the Public Space" aims to share and communicate to the Museum's diverse audience the library's literary content, to unravel meanings and knowledge it carries, and ultimately to spark a public dialogue. The vision behind this project is that themes concerning public space should not be discussed only by experts, scholars and university students, but should instead keep evolving with the participation of diverse communities in the city. Aligning with the stance taken by several museums in recent years to become more inclusive in their curatorial practices, the project's goal was to mediate the

knowledge surrounding public space from book materials, in order to reach the widest possible audience. In this regard, the target audience included people that may not be familiar with academic texts or were not necessarily interested in reading books on urban design practices and policies. This is an audience that the Museum wanted to reach, since the concepts discussed related to the broader public. Overall, this allows the Library to provide greater accessibility for local citizens to academic resources, and consequently, encourages a sense of agency and a more empowered relationship with the city.

Translating the textual into visual

The Public Space Museum began a process in which the content, themes, key ideas and arguments of several academic books from the collection were translated into diagrams. For the Museum's general audience base, this allowed the book collections to be more approachable and welcoming. The book titles were selected based on their themes and messages, which included the transformative power of play (Mews 2022), directions on how to design more age-inclusive public spaces, belonging and elasticity (Hauderowicz & Serena 2020), and ways to reimagine our cities focusing on local initiatives towards resilience (Sant 2022). New visual compositions in the form of mind maps were created as summaries of the books' content, focusing on messages of empowerment and emancipation of people in and through public space. These interpretative diagrams were included in specially designed posters. In turn, these posters formed a small exhibition, which highlighted the selected books' main messages and acted as an entry point to overarching themes of the museum library collection for the broadest possible audience to access. The exhibition was inaugurated alongside the museum's library and stayed on display for several months.



Figure 1: Exhibition display of the project at Museo Spazio Pubblico. Photograph by Antonis Douroudis (2024).

Spreading public space culture

Since the Public Space Museum wants to promote messages of empowerment and agency to contribute to the cultivation of public space culture in Bologna and beyond, it would not be enough for these book collection images to stay inside the walls of the museum. Instead, the Museum wanted to spread these visual aspects of the collection to related public spaces, in order to reach a larger audience and form a direct relationship between the library and city context. For that reason, the images have been inscribed on t-shirts, to be able to circulate on streets, squares and parks, public transit, schools and universities, festivals and markets, public celebrations and protests. In short, in public spaces - with all their materiality and sociality. The idea is that these t-shirts, which were available for purchase at the Museum's inauguration event, acted as a bridge between people that randomly encounter them on the streets and the content of the specific book on which they focus. These t-shirts act as an invitation to further explore ideas related to public space and the city, as well as a conversation starter surrounding the related themes. In this way, the temporal and spatial characteristics of the exhibition change drastically, since the public now has the opportunity to get involved in the project by having the power to re-enact the exhibition when carrying around a reproducible part of its display. At the same time, the messages on the t-shirts can also function as a call to action, promoting a more active citizenship and involvement in wider city processes.



Figure 2: Spreading empowering and inclusive messages in and through public space in Bologna, Italy. Photograph by Antonis Douroudis (2024).



Figure 4: Spreading empowering and inclusive messages in and through public space in Bologna, Italy. Photograph by Antonis Douroudis (2024).



Figure 3: Spreading empowering and inclusive messages in and through public space in Bologna, Italy. Photograph by Antonis Douroudis (2024).

Discussing the project & forming further ideas

The project was shared at the CAMOC-COMCOL 2024 Conference as a poster presentation, where various conversations with other participants offered valuable insights and constructive feedback. Some of these conversations were centered around the concept of intangible heritage, such as local customs, knowledge and cultural practices that pass from one generation to the next without being connected to specific artifacts, but being carried and transmitted instead by people themselves. This brought to light innovative ways that the applied methodology - meaning both the mind maps and their inscription on t-shirts as a portable display - could potentially be used in that cultural field, as well as in other museum and library heritage content. In addition, intersections and connections between literary content and intangible heritage practices were also discussed, opening up the possibility of exchange in cultural mediation and related methodological tools between the two fields. Other conversations were focused on the exhibition's material moving beyond the museum walls and exploring further ideas and potential ways that this could take place, such as with street posters. Furthermore, the conference was an opportunity to introduce both the developed methodology and the Public Space Museum to the international museum community and, consequently, open up the possibility for future projects and collaborations.

Notes

- 1 For more information on the museum's statement, you can visit <https://www.museospaziopubblico.it/>

References

- Desvallées, A. & Mairesse, F. (eds) (2010). *Key Concepts of Museology*. Paris, France: Armand Colin
- Heuderowicz, D. & Serena K. Ly. (eds) (2020). *Age-Inclusive Public Space*. Berlin, Germany: Hatje Cantz.
- Mews, G. H. (2022). *Transforming public space through play*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Sant, A. (2022). *From the Ground Up: Local efforts to create resilient cities*. Washington, USA: Island Press.

Practices of (co)curating

Harry Kane: I want to play football, the power of temporary display spaces

Zeynep Kussan

Biography

Zeynep Kussan is currently Documentary Curator at London Transport Museum. Zeynep worked at the London Museum (previously Museum of London) on exhibitions including: The Crime Museum Uncovered, Fire! Fire!, Tunnel: The Archaeology of Crossrail and Roman Dead: Death and Burial in Roman London and the award-winning display Harry Kane: I Want to Play Football. Her documenting work has been to record contemporary London, including two major programmes within London museums, the Documentary Curator Programme and Curating London. Zeynep was also the New Museum Production Officer on the London Museum move to West Smithfield. Zeynep was awarded the Museums Association, Museums Change Lives Radical Changemaker award in 2023, for the display Harry Kane: I want to play football.

Introduction

On the evening of Sunday 11 July 2021, the England men's national football team walked down the tunnel onto the pitch at Wembley Stadium, led by their captain. The Three Lions were playing their first ever final in a European Championship, their first international final for 55 years since the 1966 World Cup.

This was no ordinary UEFA European Football Championship, having been postponed due to the global pandemic, it was being played a year later, in the midst of Covid-19 restrictions with social distancing rules still in place. The tournament offered a sense of change, yet familiarity and hope - even if only for 90 minutes - to focus on something else. A unifying moment of togetherness.

This is a different England team; one building a new relationship with a next generation of football fans. This is a different England captain, who had risen through London's grassroots football with sheer determination and self-belief. The boy from Ridgeway Rovers had grown to become the man that would captain England.

This was the introduction panel that greeted visitors as they entered the Harry Kane: I Want to Play Football temporary display at the then Museum of London (now London Museum). In spring 2021, I reached out to Harry Kane's management team to discuss the possibility of an exhibit telling his story, to celebrate his journey so far from London's grassroots football to England captain using objects from his personal collection, that have never been on public display before.



Figure 1: Harry Kane: I want to play football exhibition, 2022. Introduction and youth career section of display. Photograph © London Museum.

As the caption read, the tournament offered a sense of change yet familiarity and hope - the global pandemic has affected people across the world, in many different ways, we are living the effects of it and will continue to do so. With the struggles being faced, I wanted to capture a moment that gave people hope. Spring 2022 saw the temporary exhibit open to celebrate one of the city's sporting heroes in a World Cup year. It charted Harry Kane's own journey from grassroots football to the biggest sporting stage in the world, curated in collaboration with Harry Kane and his family, it was designed to inspire the next generation to never give up on their dreams, no matter how hard it seems to achieve them.

Context of the display

Harry's own story is one of a small boy that knew he wanted to play football from a very young age. His journey was not an easy one, he encountered setbacks and was told he was not good enough, not built like an athlete, not fast enough, and that he did not look like a striker. The display charted his youth, having played for local club Ridgeway Rovers and being rejected by Arsenal football club only after a year, at 8 years old and eventually signing for Tottenham Hotspur. Signing for Tottenham did not guarantee him first team football, Harry had to prove he was good enough to play in the Premier League over already established players. He was sent out on loan to gain experience at Leyton Orient, Millwall, Norwich City and Leicester City. It was on loan at Leicester City that Harry struggled and began to doubt himself, if he couldn't play in the Championship how would he be able to play in the Premier League?



Figure 2: Harry Kane: I want to play football exhibition, 2022. Central wall and senior career section of display. Photograph © London Museum.

This was an important story to tell, and we wanted to do so for our family audiences. The pandemic was difficult for young children and their families, whom had to explain lockdown to a child, why they were not allowed outside, why they couldn't see their friends and, at its worst losing family members and not understanding why they couldn't say their goodbyes.

Mental health is at an all-time high and there is so much support needed going forward. One of the outputs of the display was to support mental health awareness, so we asked ourselves: how we could give back to our communities at a time when it is needed the most? Working in the heritage sector, we are told many times that we cannot change lives, however I believe that even small acts of kindness go a long way, they cause a ripple effect that you don't need to see to understand the lasting change they make.

The Harry Kane Foundation launched on Monday 10 October 2022 on World Mental Health Day with a long-term goal to help transform a generation's thinking about mental wellbeing. Harry has supported the Premier League on the creation of free resources available via the Premier League Primary Stars Education Programme. The activities are designed to encourage 7- to 11-year-olds to recover from setbacks and deal with difficult challenges. This foundation is also the start of Harry's own journey to learn more about mental health and to work with chosen charities and partners to implement lasting change.



Figure 3: Harry Kane: I want to play football exhibition, 2022. International career section of display. Photograph © London Museum.

Football and sport in general can be used as educational tools, the exhibition space allowed for themes to be pulled out for discussion with young people. With the England women's team European Championship success at the time, we were able to highlight why that win was so important and how the Football Association had banned women from playing football on their grounds in 1921, a ban not lifted until 1971. We dedicated a showcase to the men's UEFA European Football Championship 2020 (played in 2021) so that young people could engage with a display focused on an event from their living memory. We were able to educate on the effects of discrimination and racism in the sport, and how desperately immediate change is needed, with more work to be done on equity.

The display itself was not static and updates were made in real time. With the changing of football shirts during the new football season and the digital recording of goals and assists scored by Harry on match days. This meant the display was never out of date during its run leading up to the Qatar World Cup 2022. The display was designed with a changing room of Harry's shirts where visitors could listen to his pre-match playlist on headphones and try on his football boots. Throughout the exhibition, Harry's voice could be heard through speakers documenting his career and sharing his inspirations, across three sections in the space, Youth, Senior and International career.



Figure 4: Harry Kane: I want to play football exhibition, 2022. Changing room section of display. Photograph © London Museum.

Impact of the display

The display brought in new audiences to the museum, within two months of opening there was an increase of 20 per cent in first time visitors. With an enormous spike in 'kids-first families' - parents visiting to entertain their children. There was an increase of visitors from all over the UK who came specifically to see the free display. Children and adults were visiting the museum wearing their football shirts, proudly showing their colours of their team of choice from all over the world. There was audience growth across all social media channels with the increase of selfies of visitors in the exhibition space sharing their experiences. Harry Kane himself shared videos of the exhibition, as did Tottenham Hotspur, The FA, football fans and football social media influencers. Media coverage included non-traditional museum media, moving into mainstream sports coverage, such as live interviews on Sky Sports Breakfast with the curator and ex-professional footballers, beIN SPORTS and radio shows including talkSPORT.

The display was a happy, lively space, where strangers talked to each other, and discussions started around memories of a football match and being there for that important goal. A visitor to the display did not need to be interested in football, or be a football fan to understand the display, the theme throughout was one of not giving up on your dreams and self-belief.

As museums, we always talk about statistics and data collection, and how many visitors we can get through the door, however those traditional methods of capture may not work with displays or inform of its impact. People disregard anecdotal information. To truly understand the impacts of the display, you needed to go beyond surveys or evaluation forms, and be in the space with visitors. To be in the present moment to experience first hand the real day to day impacts, it was having.

What we were seeing was children inspired and excited by the display, understanding it is okay to talk about how they are feeling, or how they can cope with rejection. We saw teenagers making the trip after school in their school uniforms enjoying the space, we also saw adults that enjoy football as part of their social life, week-in, week-out activity that was taken away by the pandemic. Time spent in the museum space increased, with families spending up to five hours in the museum with repeat visits also increasing. How do we continue to capture all the above information, as this is not data acquired with the use of evaluation forms at the museum exit, but by being present in the space, and more importantly, how do we continue to engage with our visitors in a way that we can make a difference when it is needed the most? The answers are in authentic communication, intent and being present, not only in museum spaces, but within your city, truly understanding people, what motivates people, what drives people, what we are passionate about, understanding and celebrating our differences and what brings us together.

During this exhibition, I incorporated time throughout my working day, to be in the display space, engaging and talking with visitors, this provided the additional data along with that from the usual form filling. I did this with this exhibition because I knew it was attracting first time museum visitors and I wanted to make people feel comfortable and welcome.

The display allows for contemporary stories to be told without acquiring, collecting objects, or owning the copyright to someone's lived experience. With a lot of contemporary collecting work, museums acquire a person's story into their permanent collections and then that story becomes the property of the museum, what this can lead to in the future, is that it then can be potentially chopped and changed and be used in a way that was not initially what it was acquired or intended for. This is the power of temporary display spaces; they can be utilised in a way to keep telling stories authentically and working in collaboration with individuals and groups without taking ownership of stories or objects that are rightfully their own.



Figure 5: Harry Kane: I want to play football exhibition, 2022. Middle floor section of display. Photograph © London Museum.

To conclude

The main challenge of the temporary display interestingly came from within the museum sector and from museum workers themselves. The theme of football in a mainstream museum that was not a sports museum brought about push back and many negative comments, it was not deemed appropriate that it belong in a city museum or a non-sport museum. The display spoke for itself upon opening and the comments became mere mumbblings. This leads me back to a question that is asked frequently, who is making the decision on content and what stories are museum worthy, or what belongs in a museum and how it is or was acquired? Until museum's truly look inwardly, to reflect and understand it is time for progression, and evaluate their own motivations for upholding out-dated methods, the road to diversity of thought and authentic inclusivity is still a long one.

The Harry Kane: I want to play football display ran from 21 May 2022 to 4 December 2022. The Museum of London also closed its doors on 4 December 2022, after 46 years of welcoming over 21.5 million people to its address at 150 London Wall. The Museum of London is currently transforming into the London Museum and is relocating to West Smithfield in London. On its last weekend, the museum for the first time in its history remained open for 24 hours, allowing visitors a last chance to see its galleries and collections, this weekend included the most visitors in one day as well as the greatest number of visitors over a weekend in its history.

There is huge power in the use of temporary display spaces, we can use them to tell stories of the past and the present. We can use them to engage with new visitors by creating a story telling museum space, that contrasts with the existing permanent galleries. It gives space to be able to experiment, explore and take risks by stepping outside of traditional and out-dated museum themes and creating compelling programming with distinctive content about London and its people. The hope is that displays such as this can continue to make a lasting positive impact on people and how we engage with London through content and most importantly the power of giving back to our local communities without always looking to take something in return.

References

- Harry Kane Foundation (2022) Harry Kane Museum of London Meet and Greet [YouTube] 28 October. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/OcP6etSMnNA?si=zieJrLQ6yXV2xs-F>> (Accessed: 19 June 2025).
- Harry Kane Foundation (2022) Harry Kane: Resilience [YouTube] 10 October. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/a7MmCj3liMs?si=St7FHRNwo3nhxre0>> (Accessed: 19 June 2025).
- Kane, H. (@HKane) (2022) My hope is that by sharing personal items and my story in the @MuseumofLondon I can inspire an encourage people. [X] 24 May. Available at: <<https://x.com/HKane/status/1529055973062627328?t=V2K3gFbGaC0iM2ubVDFmzQ&s=09>> (Accessed: 19 June 2025)

Working with artists

Curatorship as invention Shaping new understandings of place through the intersection of creative practices and histories

Virginia Rigney

Biography

Virginia Rigney is Senior Curator Visual Arts at Canberra Museum and Gallery, the city museum of Australia's young national capital where she was born and educated. Over a thirty-year career in curatorial practice in Australia and the UK, she has worked at two other city museums, Glasgow and the Gold Coast in Queensland. One of her most recent projects *Canberra Kamberri People and Place* was awarded best permanent collection exhibition in the 2023 AMAGAs.

Curatorship combining contemporary visual arts and historical objects is growing increasingly important as a way of drawing out new and sometimes uncomfortable narratives within museums and historic sites. Less understood are the kinds of dialogue and collaborations involved, the trust required and risks and challenges inherent in these approaches.

Drawing on the experience of two recent projects curated by the author; one for a permanent collection exhibition and the other a temporary installation in a historic city property, this paper reflects on different curatorial considerations involving artists and artworks in dialogue with both the near and distant past. Placing objects from the past in dialogue with artworks from the present generates a new relational bond, one that may provoke new insights but also has the potential to be both confusing or confronting for audiences who may be more familiar with seeing the past as contained and distant.

Artworks have the potential to allow more porous interpretations of the historical past to come forward and to offer insights into the way that the past continues to inform contemporary life. But in this context an artwork is also in danger of becoming little more than a prop – its own vitality and intensity diminished by this new curatorially created partnership. I would argue that this is a false fear and that instead, through this relational dialogue, the potency and agency of both the historical artefact and the artwork can be significantly enhanced.

As the only dedicated museum of Canberra, Australia's National Capital, Canberra Museum and Gallery has a unique collecting role within a city of other national collecting institutions, to focus on the cultural and social history of the city itself. At Federation in 1901, the complex history of competitiveness of Australia's individual states led to the solution to instigate a wholly new city as the National Capital. By 1909 a site midway between the main cities of Sydney and Melbourne was identified and in 1912 a design competition was won by innovative Chicago based architects Marian Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin. Conventional histories of the city focus on a chronological narrative of purposeful creation by government planning and oversight, but the diverse and less known narratives of the city are absolutely there and our collection policy, established with the Museum's founding in 1998 advocated for this diversity. To the public however, the museum remained rigidly siloed in separating the two main collection streams of social history and visual arts in telling these stories. *The Canberra Kamberri Place and People* exhibition which opened in 2023, was the first time that the two collections were joined in the one permanent collection exhibition developed as a curatorial collaboration between Dr Hannah Paddon, Senior Curator Social History, and the author, Senior Curator Visual Arts. (See figure 1)

One of the primary objectives of the new exhibition was to introduce a much more evident narrative of First Nations history and culture into the commonly understood history of Canberra. The 1912 winning scheme by Walter and Marian Griffin sensitively responded to the landscape, creating a garden city based on innovative philosophical principals.

This principal narrative however diminished the recognition of the 6000-year history of First Nations peoples in the region. As curators we felt that the impact of transformation on First Nations people remained at an emotional arm's length for our audiences.



Figure 1: Kamberri Canberra, Nationhood finds a home Dean Cross (2023)

We challenged this narrative by using the concept of ‘The Everywhen’, the idea developed by First Nations Historians that expresses the concept of time as a simultaneous presence of past, present and future and that ancient knowledge is embedded in contemporary practices. Our strategy was to punctuate the chronological narrative through the integration of First Nations objects and artworks throughout the exhibition. One of these was the display of a small contemporary painting on canvas by artist Dean Cross in dialogue with one of the largest works and most prominent works in the collection. Cross is a Worimi man born in Canberra and his apparently simple text work immediately reads as something out of place against a large painting of richly detailed bright landscape of the Molonglo valley on a sunny summer's day. (FIG 1) This work was created in 1913 as an entry for a competition that the new Federal Government instigated to create greater public awareness and excitement towards the development of the new Capital city. Artists were instructed to paint an accurate landscape

view on a summer day so that viewers might imagine the new city coming to life on those vast plains. But what this competition assumed was that the land was indeed vacant. With its' text, ‘Emptiness has never been so full’, Cross immediately shatters that illusion to defiantly claim that in fact this is a landscape rich in the things that colonisers have chosen not to see ; the stories, song, knowledge systems and way finding embodied as Deep History within Country.

The second example in this article discusses the work of leading Canberra based artist eX de Medici for the ‘Guns and Flowers’ project where the artists’ work was placed in contemporary dialogue with the nationally iconic ‘Ned Kelly’ series (1945–47) by Sidney Nolan (1917–1992) in the museum’s gallery spaces and in one of our Historic sites. Ned Kelly remains vivid in Australia’s national imagination as the most notorious colonial era bushranger, celebrated for his defiant rejection of oppression and vilified by others. Sidney Nolan’s series, painted more than three generations later, teased out these lingering complexities and layered them with his own personal experience as a soldier during WWII who defied orders and absconded without leave.

As a leading contemporary artist eX de Medici has developed an unflinching practice that addresses the lingering presence of gun culture within global politics and domestic environments. A series of her large scale watercolours on paper featuring what she described as ‘portraits’ of historically famous guns, entwined with flowers and historical references were shown opposite Nolan’s Ned Kelly series in the gallery space.

Nolan was taught, like any soldier, to use a firearm. As a city boy, he was initially surprised at his confidence with and connection to the weapon. He was to bring the experience of this personal familiarity with a gun to the ‘Kelly’ series that he commenced near the end of the war in 1945. But there was another factor at play. Nolan had failed to return to barracks in late 1944 and so was classified as AWOL until a general amnesty was declared in 1948, only then returning his kit and rifle. Living in virtual hiding, mostly within the semi-rural sanctuary of Heide, just outside Melbourne, it was on the dining room table there, in close collaboration with Sunday Reed, that most of the ‘Kelly’ series was painted. As Nolan’s anxiety at his situation as a deserter lingered, *Return to Glenrowan*, one of the last works in the series from 1947, the masked Kelly figure shoulders and grips a .303 just as Corporal Nolan had been trained to do. With its darkened skies it becomes a haunting portrait of anxiety and isolation. To make this little-known relationship more evident to our audiences, a 303 rifle of the type that Sergeant Nolan would have used, was loaned from a nearby military museum and placed in an adjacent case to the painting.

Disarmingly alluring depictions of weapons, particularly guns, have been prominent within the paintings of eX de Medici¹, but they were also there at the beginning of her practice in the mid-1980s. Recognising that to render these weapons she would also need to understand them personally, she maintains a gun license. Each gun is meticulously observed and has its own specific historical provenance to the man (sic) who used it.



Figure 2: CMAG Guns and Flowers 2023 Sidney Nolan Return to Glenrowan

The fusions between uncomfortable pasts and fears for the future that were reflected in the works displayed in the gallery space, were also present in the site-specific installation by eX de Medici at Lanyon Homestead. The installation engaged with the narratives of Nolan's association with the property and further back, to the histories of the way that women's lives have been structured and contained in the colonial era and beyond. The wallpaper pattern of entwining pink roses set against a stripe was the linking point between all.

The artist site-specific installation was developed for one of the bedrooms in our historic property of Lanyon, which was built at the time of earliest colonial settlement, and which had once functioned as a gallery for Sidney Nolan's paintings. This was the first time our museum had presented a simultaneous contemporary exhibition across our venues – from the conventional gallery space to the historic property.

de Medici had noted the way that Nolan² referenced floral patterning in the 'Kelly' series in the attempted 'de-flowering' of Kate Kelly by Constable Fitzpatrick. In the Lanyon bedroom, built in 1905 for the young bride Louisa, who was encouraged to marry the squire of the estate, Andrew Cunningham, thirty years her senior, de Medici presented the large watercolour on paper *Pink is for boys* above the bed. The work is a portrait of her own gun, a Browning .222, bound tightly

in glorious deep pink satin, a reference to one of the artist's favourite works, the famous Holbein dual portrait *The Ambassadors* of 1533 held in the National Gallery London. The gun's barrel has evaporated into a wallpaper pattern of female hormone molecules and Australian flannel flowers. But this weapon is not useless. Like the artist herself, the sight remains clear and uncovered, looking with clarity and force to create visibility to the unseen. de Medici covered the four poster bed in swathes of the same pink satin and bound it tightly with black cord. The artists' recognisable aesthetic of strange beauty linking the artwork, the historical context of the room and this intervention with the furniture was deliberately confronting within this ostensibly gracious historical room.

The installation also featured an original photograph of Andrew and Louisa in white starched linen, on a hot Christmas Day just after their short-lived marriage in 1911. On what should



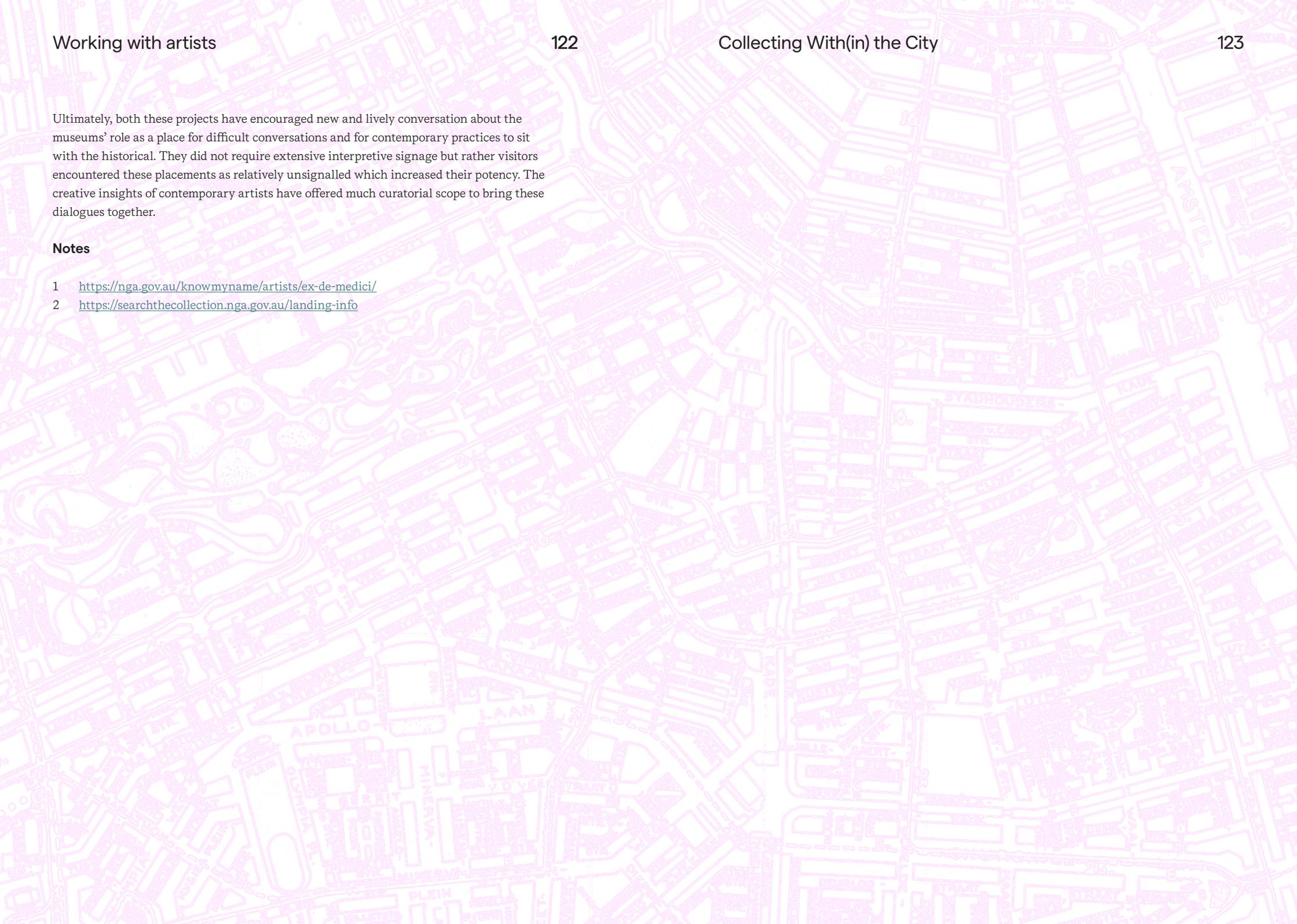
Figure 3: eX De Medici *Pink for Boys* Lanyon 2023 view to window with S Nolan *Vase of Flowers* 1945

have been a happy occasion for the couple, Louisa is notably downcast. Representing the real story of the circumstances of this marriage, which came at a time of limited choices for women without independent wealth, had been an unacknowledged part of the narrative presented on the history of the house. The interpretive materials had largely shown the lineage of families as comfortable, happy and prosperous, however this was not Louisa's private experience. During public programs for the installation, some long standing volunteers questioned the reading of this photograph and thought that the connection between the artwork and the historical context was too overt. The installation however was meant to provoke a re-reading of these narratives and to also highlight the serious widespread issue of domestic violence. Guns are an uncomfortable subject for many, but both de Medici and Nolan created art with open narratives that allowed the past to continue to speak to the contemporary.

Ultimately, both these projects have encouraged new and lively conversation about the museums' role as a place for difficult conversations and for contemporary practices to sit with the historical. They did not require extensive interpretive signage but rather visitors encountered these placements as relatively unsignalled which increased their potency. The creative insights of contemporary artists have offered much curatorial scope to bring these dialogues together.

Notes

- 1 <https://nga.gov.au/knowmyname/artists/ex-de-medici/>
- 2 <https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/landing-info>



Working with artists

Evolving Collections: The Experience of Inhabiting the City

Ethel Ramos

Biography

Ethel Ramos holds a Master's degree in Art History and a Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She completed a professional residency at MACBA (Spain, 2023) and a research residency at the Kunstmuseum Bonn (Germany, 2018). She has participated in national and international symposiums on art history and theory and her essays have been published in books and journals. Ramos has worked as a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Autonomous University of Mexico City. From 2021 to 2024, Ramos was Curator of the Banco de México Museum, where she is currently Head of Exhibitions.

The Museo Banco de México was inaugurated in 2021, and since then, its areas of interest revolve around three fundamental pillars: the central bank's functions, the numismatic and cultural collection, and the main building with an eclectic architectural style. These themes are explored through permanent and temporary exhibitions.

Additionally, activities are organized to strengthen the social cohesion of our community, such as the celebration of the museum's anniversary, dialogues with guest experts from several fields, and Sunday workshops which enhance the visitor experience. From Museo Banco de México's inception, we have prioritized establishing a dialogue with society and, one example includes creating a connection with the adjacent public space. We have also sought to build a living museum through outdoor activities or those within the institution that connect with the city, making the public space a protagonist of our sociocultural history. The construction of memories revolves around it, giving it its own voice, telling its story through its traces and dynamics.

The Museo Banco de México location is key, in the heart of one of the world's biggest cities, it coexists with iconic buildings and tourist attractions that draw diverse audiences. It is located on the corner of 5 de Mayo Street and Eje Central Avenue. Behind it is the Museo del Palacio Postal (Post Office Museum), and across Eje Central is the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes (Museum of Fine Arts). The intersection of these buildings creates a portrait of pre-revolutionary Mexico with its art nouveau and neoclassical facades and an interior built after the Revolution, in an art deco style, reflecting the paradigm shift the country was experiencing at that time. Across from the museum, on 5 de Mayo Street, is the Casa de los Azulejos, an iconic sixteenth-century building clad in blue tiles. Since the nineteenth century, it has been a restaurant frequented by prominent figures in history, including the revolutionary leaders of the early twentieth century.

The Museo de Banco de México integrates itself into the daily dynamics of traffic, commerce, encounters, and strolls that occur in the urban space. For example, artistic activations by collaborators have been carried out, such as the intervention by artist Federico Martínez Montoya in 2022, who created the piece *Águila o sol. Tianguis la Raza*, for the exhibition *Markets from the Perspective of Contemporary Art*. "Águila o sol" is a colloquial Mexican expression for "heads or tails" when you gamble with coin flips. In this piece, the artist went to a nearby street market, where he sold a silver coin to an antiquarian, and with the money, he began flipping coins with people he found in the market's streets, which was recorded on video.

Simultaneously, in the museum, we tracked the flips in real-time on a scaled map of the market, thus constructing a sort of cartography of gains and losses. In this piece the artist established an intriguing connection between the wandering of merchandise, the local currency and La Raza market. At the same time, Federico Martínez Montoya interacted with the people of the place, building ephemeral relationships that involved expectations and illusions, reflecting our social dynamics in the urban environment.

In the same exhibition, we feature the *Mexico City Street Markets Project* (2018) by the urbanist Joseph Heatcott, whose panoramic photographs capture the urban layout of Mexico City. His images highlight the roofs of street market stalls that weave through the streets of several neighborhoods which make up the metropolis. Through color, we observe the length and distribution of the spaces that shoppers navigate on their routes, as if the image were a data graph.

The practice of strolling through the city has its origins in the nineteenth century in Paris, where the flâneur, the man who wandered the streets capturing his impressions of the city, entered the collective modern imagination. This is inspired in 1963 by Charles Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*, in which the flâneur takes mental pictures of the city life through his urban routes of transit, later transcribing them onto paper (2005). In the early twentieth century, Walter Benjamin revisited this figure and, drawing from Baudelaire's texts, analyzed the features of the flâneur. He noted that this character functioned under the logic of converting the modern individual into an agent of commerce (2005). This assertion was based on the argument that the flâneur, being a figure of transit, moved alongside goods, becoming one of them.

In the 1960s, the social needs demanded by art led to practices that were not aligned with the traditional museum, bringing art into the streets and displacing it as the exclusive and hegemonic space of art. An example of this is the work of artist Ben Vautier, who took to the streets of Nice with posters containing poetic and challenging phrases, encouraging interaction with passersby. As mentioned by Oriol Fondevilla (2018), in response to this street art focus, a new concept of the museum emerged, where mediating figures, such as the curator, became translators of ideas and concepts not grounded in the materiality of art and objects from the past.

The museum has had several transformations, required by the changes in social life, including its relationship with public space and the experience of the city, rethinking how collections, exhibitions, and public engagements are constructed, both inside and outside these spaces. In this sense, the reconfiguration of the museum needed an understanding of its own identity, carrying out situated practices, and connecting with its visitors to enable the construction of plural and lasting communities. An example of how the museum has connected with the city is through the exhibition, *Coyolxauhqui Worldview*. This exhibition revisited the figure of the Mexica lunar goddess, whose sculpture was discovered in the historic downtown of Mexico City, 47 years ago. This discovery led to the unearthing of the Templo Mayor, the most important religious temple of the Mexica empire, which until then was only known through written records. It was in 1978 that the Bank of Mexico and Mint began the design projects for the issuance of money with the image of Coyolxauhqui, which led to a banknote and a coin that circulated for eleven years.

To understand the symbolism this figure acquired in the exhibition, it is crucial to delve into the myth that tells her story, which places us before an allegory of the continuous emergence of day and night, representing the encounter of interdependent forces. According to this myth,

the pregnancy of a goddess sparked the struggle between two siblings. Coatlicue, mother of Coyolxauhqui and her warrior siblings, found a bird's feather on the hill of Coatepec. She placed it in her womb and when she looked for it again, the feather had disappeared, and she began to gestate a new life. Coyolxauhqui confronted the child that her mother had given birth to, a warrior named Huitzilopochtli, who fought against his sister until he threw her down the slope of Coatepec. From this myth emerges the form of Coyolxauhqui as we know her today: hurled down from the height of a hill, presented with a fragmented body, adorned with feathers, and symbolic elements of life and death.

Coyolxauhqui, both goddess and warrior, embodies the concept of duality. In the dichotomy that her figure represents, she is shown with a dismembered body arranged in a circular form, where beginning and end exist nowhere and everywhere at once, forming a unity. This relationship generates a creative force that allows a continuous connection between fragmentation and reconstruction.

To address this duality in the exhibition, the concept of the *Coyolxauhqui Imperative* by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), a Chicana writer, was revisited, which she described as an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing. Under this term, the lunar goddess symbolizes the transformation of crisis, wounds and traumas into means of attaining healing and wholeness, as Anzaldúa indicated, the moon's light becomes medicine and a guide.

The Museum's curatorial team worked closely with this text, inviting five female artists to create specific works inspired by Anzaldúa's writings. They collaborated for a year, meeting to share opinions and understand each artist's perspective within their work. Additionally, other invited artists' pieces engaged in dialogue with the curatorship, creating reverberations of the past in the present, establishing bridges for the reinterpretation of both personal and collective histories.

Within the exhibition, constellations were constructed to reflect events that took place between 1978 and 1994. These constellations establish connections between the elements that shaped the collective memory of that era, and show us that it still remains as part of Mexican society. The social, political, and economic events of that time have transformed our present, where we can still feel the nostalgia awakened by the images, which serve as testimonies of another time, and the objects that preserve the past.

These constellations were formed by images alluding to historical events, numismatic pieces, and everyday objects lent by central bank workers. In doing so, the museum recognized the potential for everyone to be active agents in the preservation of memory and the safeguarding of items that gain value over time.

Furthermore, the exhibition conveyed a key message that connected the city to the Coyolxauhqui Imperative: when the city collapsed, fragmenting like the lunar goddess, it underwent a healing process through civil unity and mutual aid. The city witnessed these events, its streets were transformed into the surface of an empire, with the discovery of the Templo Mayor; into a public celebration, during the World Cup; and moreover, into a space of fracture and reconstruction, with the earthquake of 1985.

Overall, *The Coyolxauhqui Worldview* at the Museo Banco de México addresses the mechanisms of transformation and resilience in contemporary life as collective processes and reflections of identity. They are often manifested in public spaces, where we see and we are seen, recognizing ourselves as part of a collective entity.

In the same way, the exhibitions, events, and collaborations mentioned in this text exemplify how the Museo Banco de México conceives its relationship with the city and its inhabitants. The streets and avenues we walk through daily are closely linked to the construction of our memory, giving rise to archives and collections that are activated through the exhibitions and public programs held at the Museum. Our intention is to create an open and inclusive space that seeks to empower individuals and society, through meaningful and enduring connections.

References

- Anzaldúa, G., (2001). 'Let Us Be the Healing Of the Wound: The Coyolxauhqui Imperative—la sombra y el sueño'. In AnaLouise Keating (ed), (2015). *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, pp. 9 – 22. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Baudelaire, C. (2014). *El pintor de la vida moderna*. México: Taurus.
- Benjamin, W. (2005). *Libro de los Pasajes*. Madrid: Akal.
- Matos Moctezuma, E. et. al (2024). *Coyolxauhqui. A 45 años de su descubrimiento*. México City: INAH.
- Fontdevila, O. (2018). *El Arte de la mediación*. Bilbao: Consoni.

Decolonial practices

De-, Post- and Anticolonizing Practices for Museum Collections

Ayla Amon

Biography

Ayla Amon (she/her) is Curator of Collections at the Greensboro History Museum and a lecturer in the History Department at University North Carolina Greensboro. She has previously held curatorial positions at the North Carolina Museum of History, National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Walters Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Tangier American Legation in Morocco. Her research focuses on African Islam and its Diasporas, especially in the United States, and how cultural traditions are retained, adapted and passed down among generations.

Introduction

In October 2023 while searching for an object in collections storage, I found a small, unlabeled box. When I opened it and looked inside, I had an immediate reaction – these objects did not belong at the museum: I was looking at a group of Japanese military identification tags and a plastic bag full of Indigenous ancestral human remains. As a relatively new curator at the Greensboro History Museum (GHM), the discovery of this box began a collections assessment project that sent me on a journey back in time hundreds of years and demanded I look through thousands of records. It will also, hopefully, end with a museum that exemplifies methods of collection, storage, display and interpretation that are de-, post- and anticolonized. Speaking to my efforts to develop and implement community- and culturally-informed collections care policies and practices, and of conducting both voluntary (ethical) repatriations as well as those required by law, this paper will look to three types of materials in the collections of GHM – looted, Indigenous, and religious – as representative case studies of how to develop and maintain the collection in non-colonizing ways.

The Greensboro History Museum, a small city history museum opened to the public in 1925, is about to celebrate its centennial – one hundred years of acting as a space that explores the roots of the city and the people who call it home. However, the collections have not always represented the diverse urban histories of the communities living in the city, nor has the museum always been a collaborative partner with all its constituents. In an institution that has been collecting for a century, there are (unfortunately) bound to be objects that speak to historical imbalances in power, that represent communities through one-sided lenses (if they are represented at all) and that disavow the humanity of people or peoples. This state is far from a rarity, especially in Western museums that were constructed physically and ideologically as part of colonial systems.

As Masum Momaya (2018:15) has argued, the very act of collecting and displaying artifacts within museums advances the colonizing scientific, cultural and political projects of empires. Like many early 20th century museums, GHM built its foundational collection in this vein, including natural science objects, as well as extensive ethnographic collections. GHM also gathered interpretations of foreign cultures brought back by missionaries and tourists and artifacts looted by American soldiers during foreign military campaigns. These collections, and their subsequent displays and interpretations, influenced the social imagination of the public and meant that the museum not only legitimized colonization, but as Momaya (2018: 15) stated, ‘through the very act of collecting itself, became [an] agent of colonization’ wherein ‘communities have long found themselves and their cultures pillaged, exoticized, stereotyped, and maligned.’ However, rather than obscuring these past methods of collecting and representation, this moment is an opportunity to actively bring these issues to light as a restorative practice for the museum and its communities.

Rachel Hartzipanagos of the *Washington Post* defines decolonizing museums as ‘a process that institutions undergo to expand the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonizers.’ (2018) Museums Association further denotes that the practice ‘can create museum spaces that welcome, engage and empower everyone.’²¹ However, most sources and institutions do not articulate the actionable side of these desires – i.e., *how* to decolonize a space and what it will look like for staff, visitors, communities and objects. While the methods, practices and engagements with decolonization differ across museums and are in many cases dependent on finances, storage space and staff time resources, below I detail some of the ways GHM is examining its collection for items furthering colonial practice, and how staff are attempting to remediate the museum’s holdings.

Decolonizing the collection

In addition to creating multivocal public spaces that speak to a plethora of audiences, decolonizing museums should also include deaccessioning as an acknowledgement that objects could either be better valued and contextualized elsewhere (after Momaya 2018: 18) or need returned to their peoples and countries of origin. That is not to say that this inherent disavowal and attempted reversal of colonial collecting is not difficult, – it is – even when mandated by federal or international law.² It is additionally difficult when items exist outside of legal sanctions (which should be viewed as a minimum standard), and fall instead into an ‘ethical’ or ‘voluntary’ restitution and repatriation status, especially given that for many of these objects, as Momaya (2018: 13) points out, ‘transactional records, especially at the first point of exchange, are sparse’ – if they exist at all.

A recent project exemplifying a voluntary ethical repatriation undertaken by GHM included the deaccessioning of 160 pieces of Japanese material culture collected by American military enlistees in the Pacific during WWII.³ Rather than representing government-issued militaria, these items – consisting of Yosegaki Hinomaru (a talismanic flag signed with well-wishes that was gifted to Japanese military servicemen before deployment), identification tags, a collection of photographs, an identification document, a sake cup and naval and army uniform insignia – bear the spirit and personal traces of the soldier who once carried them. Within Japanese culture, objects like this hold specific significance: in addition to being looted cultural property, they fall under a category of ‘non-biological human remains,’ a classification that pertains to extremely personal, unique, and individualized materials that carry significant cultural, social, or religious significance and are believed to contain the spirits of the person or people who carried them (OBON Society 2024). (See figure 1)

While the collecting of war souvenirs was an extremely common and accepted practice during WWII, GHM knew that every effort should be made to return these objects to the families of the soldiers they represented. However, given the nature of the initial collection process, there was minimal documentation, if any, surrounding where and from whom the objects were taken. This, combined with a lack of Japanese language skills or understanding how to access foreign

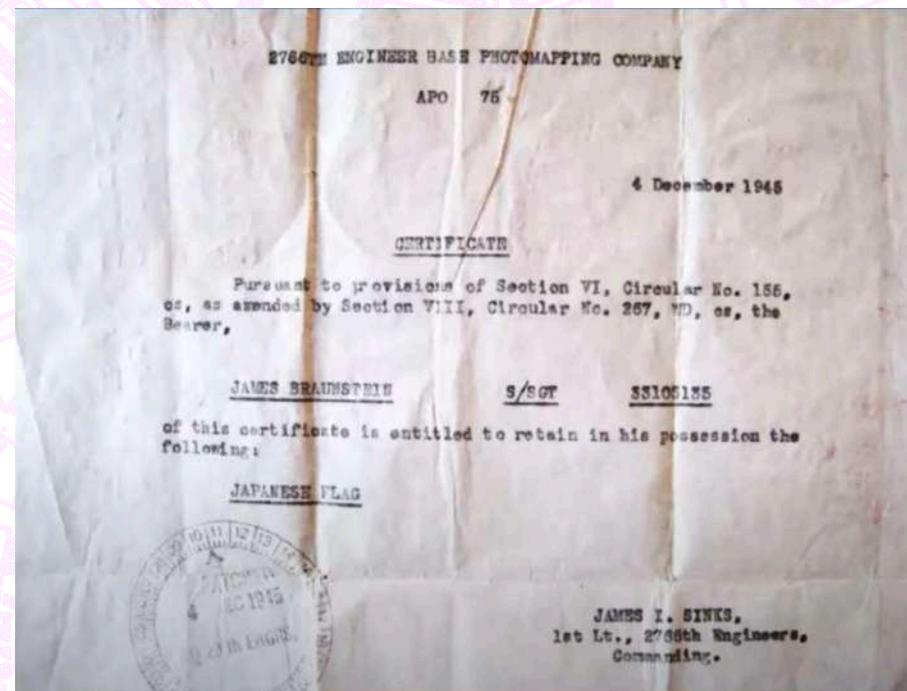


Figure 1: Certificate of approval allowing James Braunstein of the 2766th Engineer Base Photomapping Company to ‘retain in his possession’ a Japanese Flag [Yosegaki Hinomaru], granted on December 4, 1945. Military personnel brought items they collected to company ‘Souvenir Officers’ for approval to keep the item, as noted in this receipt. *Courtesy Rex and Keiko Ziak*

military records, meant that the museum’s ability to directly repatriate to kin was severely limited. Thus, after deaccessioning the items from the collection, GHM sent them to OBON Society, a non-profit in Astoria, Oregon, named after the Japanese festival of honoring the spirits of one’s ancestors. OBON connects with the Japanese Ministry of Culture to research such looted objects, locate living family and repatriate the objects to them. They were able to translate one of the items from GHM – the military identification document of Mr. Etsuji Tohjima – which has been returned to his nephew Toshimitsu Tohjima, allowing the family to have closure and welcome their uncle home. OBON continues to research the other items from GHM’s collection, with the hope of repatriating more in the future. The deaccession and repatriation of these items, which also involved connecting with the local Greensboro Japanese-American community for discussions of object significance to the community, translation, and desired outcome, plays a significant role in the decolonization of the collection and in the positive community relationship and trust-building processes that are central to the GHM mission.

Postcolonial collections handling and care

Physical removal from collections is not the only way to alter balances of power in museum spaces. It is important that museums also act in a postcolonial manner, in part by challenging past practices in caring for collections. Specifically with regard to religious and funerary materials, which in many museums exist in a liminal state somewhere between the sacred and the secular, community engagement is paramount when it comes to display, storage and handling. One category of items that is often excluded from these discussions and that we currently hold at GHM are objects related to persons who were mummified in Egypt. These collection materials, including a small mummiform ushabti – a servant figure placed among grave goods – and mummy wrappings from Thebes, were donated to the museum in 1956 and 1948 respectively by missionaries to the ‘Holy Land’, and they connect to a long history of ‘mummy mania’ in Europe and the United States.



Figure 2: Museums across the United States not only hold ushabti figures, but openly photograph, display and publish them online. The digital record for this example from The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, Maryland) highlights one of many challenges with both collecting and displaying these objects: ‘date and mode of acquisition unknown’. *Ushabti (1567-1085 BCE), Egypt, wood with polychrome, The Walters Art Museum, acquired by Henry Walters, 1930 (22.193), licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal*

The late Victorian period saw the vast collection of objects associated with mummified remains – including the objects placed on the body, the wrappings, and even the body itself – by travelers and museums. Collected as curiosities of a foreign culture, objects with medicinal healing properties, or artifacts associated with Biblical narratives, most museum visitors have seen a mummified human body in a museum (Struck 2021). But these objects are often exempted from discussions surrounding both religion and human remains. As Egyptologist Heba Abd El Gawad (Fennell 2023: 27:40-27:53) notes, ‘They are commodified, they are objects, they are seen as artifacts. They are not seen as human beings. Even the word ‘mummy’ itself makes them an object. They are mummified human remains, and that is something we need to remember.’ The nomenclature shift from ‘mummy’ to ‘mummified human remains,’ should cause an immediate change in care and presentation of these beings and their associated objects in museums (Struck 2021). However, an internet search provides little information about proper handling, housing and care of items like ushabti and wrappings, their acceptability for display and retention in museum collections or if Egypt wants them restituted. At least three ushabti have been returned in higher profile cases,⁴ however, many museums openly hold and display these figurines, leaving an open question whether it is appropriate to display or retain such items in the collection. (See Figure 2)

At GHM, these missionary collections are currently being researched, but we have taken the following steps: 1) separating these items both geographically and within that, by religious tradition. 2) Rehousing the objects in a culturally appropriate manner to the best of our ability (to be updated as we learn more). 3) Reaching out to authorities for each type of material, including scholars, embassies, consulates and community members both within the United States and abroad. And 4) updating all collections records (physical and digital, internal and public) with sensitivity markings. It is our intent to restitute and repatriate any requested objects to their spaces of origin, but importantly for the items that remain in our collection that we are instituting culturally-sensitive, -informed and -approved display, storage and handling.

Anticolonizing through collections development

Sara Wajid (2020) of the Museum of London points to another facet that is often left out of the discussion of decolonizing: ‘the museum’s ability to make exhibitions that [fight] against the dominant narrative [is] hampered by what the museum [has] previously collected under [the colonialist] mindset’. This suggests that it is not enough to face the challenges of an existing collection, but we must be *anticolonizing* in our approach to growing collections. In part, this requires a rethinking of the canonical notions of the ‘value’ of objects by moving away from definitions based on European supremacy (Momaya 2018: 18). In her principles for an ‘Anti-Racist, Anti-Orientalist, Activist Approach to Collections’, Momaya (2018:16) notes that this rethinking actively asks for the ‘co-construction of meaning and destabilizing the notion of authority as residing in one party’ – that is, collecting objects important to a people or community *as defined by* that people or community rather than solely based on external curatorial selection.

To facilitate this more inclusive view of collecting, while writing a Collections Development Plan for GHM, I learned from the anticolonizing collecting ideals behind the Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum. Part exhibition, part social space and part communal dialogue, the Contemporary Jewish Museum (Kedem 2019: 14) centered on ‘recognizing the vast expressions of Jewish identity in contemporary [...] Greensboro.’ In asking members of the community to ‘Please share a personal object that is imbued with significance to you as a Jew’ (Kedem 2019: 31), the objects – inclusive of everything from a space-themed stamp album to Tupperware to needlepoint pillows to Star of David necklaces – allowed the bearer to speak their own histories, and allowed space for Judaism to exist in plural and outside of a strictly religious context. This approach honors the democratic maxim ‘Nothing about us without us’, works to correct the top-down colonial view of knowledge construction embodied by many museums and allows development of a multivocal collection. (See figure 3)

GHM aims to create similar dialogues during the development and expansion of collections from LGBTQIA2+; immigrant, refugee, and displaced; disability and unhoused communities. One way we have started implementing these new collecting practices is by incorporating them into an existing program. For the last few years, GHM has been hosting Community Voices exhibits where a local group – such as a club, faith group or organization – creates a

small exhibition in the lobby space of the museum for a short time. They choose the objects and images, write labels and even host events surrounding the display. Building on these moments of trust, we have begun working with the people represented to see if they are willing to donate the objects and their stories to the museum. Two recent exhibits – *Southern Mix and Expressions of Pride* – have resulted in an addition of collections items from the Asian American and LGBTQIA2+ communities, respectively, that we otherwise may not have had access to. Both the exhibitions and the collecting also promote the museum as a space where these traditionally underrepresented communities see a place for themselves and their histories.

This approach to collecting is also more holistic in the sense that it includes the records and documents associated with objects (including but not limited to acquisition and accession paperwork, object research, digital records, donor statement of purpose and label work) as part of and informative to the collection. Rather than viewing these documents as purely legal or as a product for display that is then discarded, anticolonial approaches to collecting see them as an additional space for inclusivity and expanding the relationship between donor and museum. They are a space of learning in terms of inclusive language, handling and display practices and in transmitting the knowledge of a person or community in their own words. For example, as we have worked with the Montagnard communities in Greensboro, we have made sure that our records include the name of the item in the language of the maker and donor – Jarai, Rhade, Bunong, Bahnar, or Koho – first, with English second: e.g., ‘Reomnga, gathering basket’.



Figure 3: This installation photograph shows some of the objects, both religious and secular in nature, collected for the Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum project in 2019. To the left is a red table that encouraged communal sharing and dialogue, prompting visitors to ‘Please share a personal object imbued with significance to you as a Jew’. Courtesy of Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum Archive, 2020

Repairing the past

The de-, post- and anticolonial practices outlined above propose new methods of collecting, caring for and exhibiting objects that go beyond an expansion of perspectives in museums to also include removal of objects from collections (decolonial), propose new methods of care that do not perpetuate colonial ideologies (postcolonial) and grow collections in ways that assure colonial practices are not repeated moving forward (anticolonial). All of these practices bear directly on the human remains discovered in the GHM storage room. While there was no associated paperwork, clues throughout records and within the bones themselves suggested that they represented Indigenous ancestors.⁵ Staff have compiled both a Summary and an Inventory for the National NAGPRA Database and are working to repatriate these ancestors back to their kin. *But that is the legal minimum.* Their presence in the collection has made me think deeply about the concept of decolonization and how it ties in with reparations – a term often used in reference to those whose ancestors were part of the Western system of chattel enslavement.

Expanding the term ‘reparations’ more broadly to represent our ‘collective debt of colonial theft, oppression, and genocide’ (Brooks 2019) of all forms, these ancestors ask how GHM can make a reparation for their presence in the collection that also honors de-, post- and anticolonial collecting practices. Following Elizabeth Merritt (2019), the museum can make a meaningful intervention in three broad ways: ‘culturally, through the narratives [we] tell; economically, through how [we] manage [our] money; and systemically, through how [we] share [our] power.’ GHM can enact this by first, using the museum’s status as a trusted source of information (American Alliance of Museums 2021) to collect and showcase historical *and* contemporary Indigenous narratives and objects. Second, by using organizational funds to support reparative economic practices, including working and partnering with local, minority or women-owned businesses and organizations and investing in community driven programming and collecting. And third, by reversing the flow of social assets by diversifying our board, staff and volunteers and involving the community in decisions surrounding when, where, if, how and for how long artifacts are showcased and stored in the museum. For, as scholars note, we are not actively doing the work without ‘situating collecting in the larger context of activist views/approaches to *all* of museum practice’ (Momaya 2018: 16).

In sum, staff at GHM can do de-, post- and anticolonizing work: we can return objects to the peoples and spaces from which they were wrongfully removed; we can learn how to properly wrap Jewish tefillin and how to store Muslim prayer rugs; we can make sure we know what artifacts cannot be handled by women or during menstruation; we can ritually feed and offer; we can work with the community to help us collect and write. But we are not *actually* doing the work unless those represented by the artifacts are involved from the beginning, consistently, and their voices are represented in our leadership, records, policies, collection storage and exhibition spaces.

Notes

- 1 Museums Association. (No date). 'Museums as Spaces and Places', Campaigns: Decolonising Museums, <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/museums-as-spaces-and-places/#>>, accessed September 12, 2024.
- 2 In the United States, some of these governing laws include the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA); the Holocaust Era Art Recovery Act (HEAR Act); the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); Standing Rules of Engagement (ROE); the Liber Code; Bill HR1047 for the Emergency Protection for Iraq Cultural Antiquities Act, imposed under the section of the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CCIPA); the 1970 UNESCO Convention against Illicit Export under the Act to implement the convention (the Cultural Property Implementation Act); and UNIDROIT (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illicitly Exported Cultural Objects of 1995.
- 3 Official policy with regards to war trophies gave troops a fair amount of latitude as long as they followed key limitations, which can broadly be said to be those in accord with the Geneva Convention and War Department Policy Circulars. With regards to the former, this mainly related to the possessions of POWs, with the policy being that 'all effects and articles of personal use, except arms, horses, military equipment and military documents shall remain in the possession of prisoners of war, likewise their metal helmets and gas masks and like articles issued for personal protection' (Diplomatic Convention 1949). Any money was supposed to be accounted for, with the POW provided a receipt, and no identification documents, medals, insignia, etc. were allowed to be taken from those captured, nor from the dead. These items *could* be bartered for or bought, however, which was considered lawful. Similarly, if found abandoned on the battlefield, such items were also fair game. The general rule to be followed on the battlefield was that 'under no circumstances may war trophies include any item which in itself is evidence of disrespectful treatment of the enemy dead' (AFYB-SJA-AL 2011).
- 4 Many antiquities left Egypt when the country was under colonial rule, making tracing their history and origins difficult at best, and Egypt's Repatriation of Antiquities Department of the Ministry of Culture understandably appears to have focused first on restituting items with exceedingly clear provenance. The three ushtabi that have been returned to Egypt include one found in Mexico and associated with an illegal excavation and smuggling (*Archaeology Magazine* 2016), one located in London that was stolen from an excavation storehouse in Aswan (*Archaeology Magazine* 2017) and one that was stolen from the Egyptian Museum during the January 25, 2011 uprising (El-Aref 2013).
- 5 The sole piece of paper found with the human remains was a list of the different bones included in the bag, which additionally included part of a deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) mandible. Visual inspection of the remains showed wear on the teeth that is consistent with Indigenous people in early and colonial America, and nothing in the inspection was

definitive that these were not Indigenous remains. It was also noted that the remains appeared to have been rearticulated using wires as well as an adhesive made from a dirt/glue mixture at some time in the past. Sincere appreciation to Robert Anemone in the UNCG Department of Anthropology for his assistance in this inspection.

References

- AFYB-SJA-AL. (2011). 'Information Paper: War Trophies/Souvenirs', adopted 24 March, <<https://home.army.mil/carson/5416/5089/9655/war-trophies-2010-info-paper.pdf>>, accessed October 15, 2023.
- American Alliance of Museums (2021). 'Museums and Trust', *AAM Field Notes Blog*, 30 September, <<https://www.aam-us.org/2021/09/30/museums-and-trust-2021/>>, accessed September 15, 2024.
- Archaeology Magazine. (2016). 'Ushabti Figurine Found in Mexico Returned to Egypt', 7 September, <<https://archaeology.org/news/2016/09/07/160907-ushabti-recovered-mexico/>>, accessed September 16, 2024.
- Archaeology Magazine. (2017). 'England Returns Egyptian Ushabti Figurine', 30 January, <<https://archaeology.org/news/2017/01/30/170130-england-repatriated-ushabti/>>, accessed September 16, 2024.
- Brooks, D. (2019). 'Opinion: The Case for Reparations: A Slow Convert to the Cause', *The New York Times*, 8 March, Section A, p. 29.
- Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War. (1949). 'Treatment of Prisoners of War: Article 18', adopted 12 August, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/geneva-convention-relative-treatment-prisoners-war>>, accessed October 15, 2023.
- El-Aref, N. (2013). '26th Dynasty Ushabti Figure Coming Home From Brussels', *Ahram Online*, 7 December, <<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/88491.aspx>>, accessed September 16, 2024.
- Fennell, M. (2023). The Head in the Library. *Stuff the British Stole* [Podcast]. 27 June. Available at <<https://podcasts.apple.com/bf/podcast/the-head-in-the-library/id1540218461?i=1000631673055>>, accessed September 16, 2024.
- Gugenheim Kedem, S. (2019). *Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum*: 36+2. Columbia, SC: University of North Carolina Greensboro.
- Hatzipanagos, R. (2018). 'The "Decolonization" of the American Museum', *The Washington Post*, 11 October, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/12/decolonization-american-museum/>>, accessed September 12, 2024.
- Merritt, E. (2019). 'Building an Equitable Future: Museums and Reparations', *Center for the Future of Museums Blog*, 19 June 19, <<https://www.aam-us.org/2019/06/19/building-an-equitable-future-museums-and-reparations/>>, accessed September 14, 2024.
- Momaya, M. (2018). 'Ten Principles for an Anti-Racist, Anti-Orientalist, Activist Approach to Collections'. In E. Wood et al. (eds.), *Active Collections*, pp. 13-20. New York: Routledge.
- Museums Association. (No date). 'Museums as Spaces and Places', Campaigns: Decolonising Museums, <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/museums-as-spaces-and-places/#>>, accessed September 12, 2024.
- OBON Society. (2024). 'Non-Biological Human Remains', OBON Society Website, About Us, <<https://obonsociety.org/eng/page/non-biological-human-remains>>, accessed September 29, 2024.
- Shoenberger, E. (2023). 'What Does It Mean to Decolonize A Museum?', *MuseumNext*, 2

- November, <<https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>>, accessed September 8, 2024.
- Struck, D. (2021). 'The Thorny Ethics of Displaying Egyptian Mummies to the Public', *Undark*, 23 June, <<https://undark.org/2021/06/23/thorny-ethics-displaying-egyptian-mummies/>>, accessed September 16, 2024.
- Wajid, S. (2020). 'Film: How can you Decolonise Museums', *MuseumNext*, 2 June, <<https://www.museumnext.com/article/decolonising-museums/>>, accessed September 8, 2024.

Decolonial practices

In front of our eyes, yet under the carpet. Reinterpreting the heritage of African slave communities in Lisbon

Joana Sousa Monteiro & Paulo Almeida Fernandes

Biography

Joana Sousa Monteiro has been director of the Museum of Lisbon since 2015. She was a museum adviser to the Lisbon Councillor for Culture (2010-2014) for the reprogramming of the local museums' management model. She was Assistant Coordinator of the Portuguese Museums Network, which established the first national museum accreditation system under the National Institute of Museums (2000-2010). Previously, she worked at the Institute of Contemporary Art (1997-2000) and the National Museum of Contemporary Art (1994) in the making of learning programmes and art exhibitions.

She holds a degree in Art History, an MA in Museology, and an MA in Arts Management and was a museum management teacher at NOVA University between 2013 and 2024. She was a lecturer at the ICOM Training Centre in Beijing in 2023.

She serves the International Council of Museums as Co-Chair of the Strategic Plan Committee Working Group. Before that position, she was a member of the Portuguese ICOM National Committee Board (2014-2016), a board member of the International Committee for the Collections and Activities of the Museums of Cities, CAMOC (2013-2015), and Chair of CAMOC between 2016 and 2022.

Paulo Almeida Fernandes Head of research at the Museum of Lisbon, holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Coimbra, a MA in Art, Heritage and Restoration and a degree in History, specialising in Art History, from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon. He is an Invited Assistant Professor of History of Art at NOVA University of Lisbon and an integrated researcher of the Institute of History of Art at the same university. Studying the role of Lisbon as world's leading slave port of the Modern era, co-curated the temporary exhibition Coexistence. Plural Lisbon (2019) and co-wrote the book Testimonies of Slavery. The African memory at the Museum of Lisbon (2017). He is a member of the research project Challenging the past. Patronage and agency of people of African birth or descent in early modern arts and architecture in Portugal during the Transatlantic slave trade (2025-2026).

Introduction

The memory of the presence of over four hundred centuries of enslaved African communities is virtually invisible in present-day Lisbon. Not only did the city's renovation after the 1755 earthquake bury ancient marks, but the end of the slavery system in the Portuguese empire also led to a drastic change in the urban and social landscape.

Between the 15th and 20th centuries, Portugal expanded its empire, focusing primarily on Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, as well as vast regions in Brazil and some in South Asia. Although Brazil gained independence in 1822, Salazar's dictatorship (1933-1974) fought against rebellions and independence movements in Africa and Asia from 1961 to 1974, attempting to maintain the imperial ideal. Nevertheless, the stories of the thousands of enslaved people were forgotten in archives and museum collections. Standard historical narratives, constructed to emphasise the glories of the Portuguese Empire and its colonial past, did not encourage critical approaches to the global situation, thereby undermining important collections and data on the topic.

In recent years, the Museum of Lisbon has contributed to reinterpreting the hidden history of the African enslaved communities in the Portuguese capital. Surprisingly, plenty of relevant information remained in our collections, comprised mostly of ceramics, engravings, paintings, documents and tiles spanning from the 16th to the 19th centuries, with rich iconography related to the multicultural patterns of life in Lisbon.

By reinterpreting the museum's collections and placing them in their proper context in time and space, the Museum of Lisbon is promoting a fresh look at silenced stories that had been waiting for a voice. Research projects, temporary exhibitions, publications, and walking tours have been implemented with the help of local and international institutions and Afro-descent groups, contributing to a broader knowledge of the global scale of the slave trade and the role played by Lisbon and its traders.

Some of our collections depicting enslaved people or Afro-descendent workers in Lisbon were formerly seen as exotic aspects of our past communities. New research continues to unveil stories of forced labour, racism, and exclusion to date. Paintings, ceramic objects, and drawings gain completely new and contrasting meanings, questioning beliefs and assumptions and creating public space to highlight the rightful role of the African population in the history of a plural Lisbon.

A misleading starting point

The theme of historical visibility of enslaved African communities is not new. However, it is only recently that research lines have been consolidated in order to shed light on the previously unknown stories of significant characters spanning more than four centuries. Between the second half of the 19th century and the late 20th century, a considerable part of the historiography produced in Portugal on this matter was based on ideological frameworks that whitewashed national responsibility for the first period of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans (Fonseca, 2014: 2). Going back to how history was written in the mid-20th century, it is common to find soft views of the so called “human” practises in the Portuguese empire, of the role of slavery as a step towards integration into Christian civilisation, and even of the scarce African cultural and demographic contribution to Portuguese society. At the end of the 20th century, José Ramos Tinhorão still referred to enslaved African communities in Portugal as a ‘quiet presence’ (Tinhorão, 1988). This expression subtly refers to the censorship that occurred under Salazar’s regime, which explicitly condemned any criticism of the supposed wonders of colonialism.

Some (wrong) assumptions can still be found in various historical narratives, such as in textbooks, media reports and even some research papers. The most common misconception is that the Marquis of Pombal abolished slavery in 1761, which would have made Portugal one of the first countries to do so. This idea artificially defends Portuguese history against accusations made since the first half of the 19th century: that Portugal was slow to abolish slavery. What the Marquis of Pombal established on September 19, 1761, was a ban on the entry of more enslaved Africans into mainland Portugal so that labour would not be removed from Brazil (Ramos, 1971: 170-171). Slavery in Portugal was only abolished in 1869.

Despite many years of research, there is still not enough data about the enslaved people who were traded. This includes information on how they arrived in Lisbon, how they lived, whether they married or ran away, and whether they were freed. *Floor of Shadows* (Pimentel, 2010) and *Sounds of Silence* (Marques, 1999) are two books that demonstrate the cloak of invisibility that has fallen over this subject for decades. Much was done to keep the memory of the African enslaved communities duly invisible, which corresponded to a political strategy, namely during the dictatorship (1926 – 1974).

Nonetheless, the amount of information and material left behind by enslaved African communities is remarkable. Studies of these groups have progressed more since the beginning of the 21st century than during the entire 20th century. In-depth research carried out in archives and museum collections has opened new ways of viewing and understanding the topic.

Asking new questions

In 2017, the Municipality of Lisbon and the Ministry of Culture launched the programme *Testimonies of Slavery* programme, as a part of the events of Lisbon - Ibero-American Capital of Culture. Under that project, we searched the Museum of Lisbon’s collections dedicated to the history of Lisbon for information and iconography about enslaved, freed, and free African people. Unlike our expectations, we found several pieces of interest that had never before been seen as conveying information about slavery in Lisbon and the Empire, including some that were on display. Moreover, little was known about these objects, with no indication of provenance prior to their integration in the museum’s collections.

The need for a deeper knowledge of the museum’s collections, including the correction of mistakes of interpretation, meaning, and context, was only the first step in long-term research. The Lisbon Museum, alongside partners from academia and local stakeholders such as associations of people of African descent, moved on to the city itself. They searched for remains of the slave trade and African communities from the 15th to 19th centuries in the physical landscape of Lisbon. The survey revealed surprisingly well-preserved evidence, such as works of art financed by the “black brotherhoods” (as they were called in the documents of the time), housing areas of these communities that can still be identified, and public and private buildings related to merchants in the port of Lisbon who benefited from the slave system.

Guided by the question, ‘What does this have to do with the role of Lisbon as the world’s leading slave port of the Modern era?’, we have carried out extensive research and are developing programmes alongside national and international partners.

The first exhibition by the Lisbon Museum that tackled the subject was *Plural Lisbon*, 2019, in which there was a section dedicated to the history of Lisbon’s enslaved and freed African communities. Since then, we have delivered a programme under the title *Invisible Places of Slavery*, comprising sets of talks and three walking tours in the city: *Destination Lisbon*, *Living Lisbon*, and *Freedom Lisbon*. A fourth tour, *African Lisbon*, has been co-curated with Batoto Yetu (a Cap-Verdean cultural association).

The Museum of Lisbon was a partner in the organisation of the international conference *Reckoning with Racism - The Social Memory of the Slave Trade*, 2023, Lisbon, when we had the opportunity to consolidate the ongoing partnership with the Slave Wrecks Project / the Smithsonian Institution, as well as a Portuguese association of experts on the insurance history, included that of the transatlantic travels



Figure 1: Ex-voto with a black couple praying to Our Lady of the Rosary Unknown author, 17th century, Oil on canvas and woodwork Church of Saint Catherine, Lisbon Photo by José Avelar / Museum of Lisbon

The role of a city museum in the process of changing minds

The Lisbon Museum is researching and conveying the impact of slavery on the history of Lisbon. The following topics and examples illustrate how this work is progressing:

1. **Patrons and agents involved in the arts.** African communities established in Lisbon was also responsible for artistic creation. *The project Challenging the past. Patronage and agency of people of African birth or descent in early modern arts and architecture in Portugal during the Transatlantic slave trade (1486-1836)*, led by the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and which includes a member of the Lisbon Museum's research team, has revealed information about artistic patronage within Lisbon's African community. Some works are better

known, such as Simoa Godinho's funerary chapel in the old church of Misericórdia de Lisboa. Others remain unclear, such as a representation of Our Lady of the Rosary commissioned by an unknown African couple, who replicated a Western artistic commissioning model. (See figure 1)

2. **Street names uncovered.** The Lisbon Museum has been an active agent in recovering memories of slavery in contemporary Lisbon, by means of conveying untold stories in books, exhibitions and walking tours like the one going past José António Pereira Lane. Pereira (1751-1817) was one of the most successful merchants of the late 18th century and early 19th century. The basis of his commerce was "to extract slaves from African provinces" (as it was stated in 19th century documents referring to his actions and business). He had his own ships and introduced thousands of enslaved people working in Pará and Maranhão (Brazil). Paradoxically, his name was given to this street in Lisbon after slavery was abolished in Portugal.

There are lesser-known cases, such as Nova de Santos Lane, where Pai (Father) Paulino used to live. Little is known about this enslaved man, who was probably of Brazilian origin. He was a hero in the uprisings alongside King Pedro IV (Emperor Pedro I of Brazil), which culminated in the Liberal Revolution in Portugal. He was one of the most influential men in Lisbon, a bagpiper among the "St George Blacks" musicians, and a member of brotherhoods that protected African communities and fought for the rights of African communities and the abolition of slavery. Upon his death, the artist Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro made a bust of him in earthenware. (See figure 2)

3. **Urban myths demystified.** There are ongoing arguments about certain aspects of the city's history with no scientific basis neither archaeological evidence. That is the case of the myth that associates the name of Poço dos Negros (Black Well) Street with the decision of King Manuel I in 1515 to open a deep well to deposit African enslaved corpses. As historian Ana Paula Antunes points out (2017: 14-15), baptism was not only compulsory for enslaved people, but burial was also something that the brotherhoods were responsible for ensuring. Moreover, the toponym was only recorded more than a century after this alleged decision. There is a more plausible explanation: it was a well that belonged to Saint Benedict's Monastery of Health (São Bento da Saúde), whose monks wore a black habit. The well, located near the monastery fence, would ultimately benefit the neighbouring population; thus, being an element of life, not death.



Figure 2: Bust of Father Paulino, Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro (1846-1905), Earthenware Factory of Caldas da Rainha, 1893, Earthenware, Museu Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, Lisbon, MRBP.CER.0736 Photo by José Avelar / Museum of Lisbon

4. **Voices of resistance to be revealed.** For over four centuries, there were voices of resistance against the slave system in Portugal. One was uttered by around 400 enslaved Africans who, in 1580, in exchange for a promise of freedom, abandoned their masters to join the fight against the Spanish Army. This episode is just one of many revealing the vitality of the enslaved African community who lived in Lisbon and dared to face the colonizers, but whose names remain unknown.
5. **A slow process towards abolition: networks of influence.** The financing of the voyages that fuelled the Middle Passage is just one dimension of the wealth generated in Portugal by the cruel business of slavery. Another dimension was how sluggishly different governments of the Constitutional Monarchy legislated on the progressive reduction of human trafficking and slavery while being unable to implement the law. The full extent of the network of influence that was active in Lisbon during the 19th century is yet to be fully uncovered.

6. **New perspectives on the colonial past.** The ideas and meanings given to Lisbon's history are changing alongside research and public awareness. Although there is widespread knowledge that Lisbon was the world's first port for the transatlantic slave trade, there is still some resistance and misunderstanding. This explains why it took the Batoto Yetu Association four years to label twenty monuments and places to tell the story of African Lisbon, or the also long and conflictual story of the Memorial to Enslaved People, titled *Plantation - Prosperity and Nightmare*, by Kiluanji Kia Henda, presented in 2017 and yet to be built. We have found resistance - sinonimo - in national and local authorities and individuals from the audiences and fellow historians. (See figure 3)

Over the last decades, museums have become accessible and inclusive institutions in their spaces, exhibitions, publications and communication, with the purpose of creating a sense of belonging. As much as this goal seems obvious, the path is not clear nor straightforward, and success still feels far. This project is a part of a wider process of decolonising the interpretation of our museum's collections and the narratives about the history of the city, commonly to many other museums of former imperial countries.



Figure 3: Inauguration of the bust of Father Paulino. By the Mayor of Lisbon, Carlos Moedas, Largo de São Domingos, 2024, January 13 Photo by Américo Simas (Lisbon Municipal Council), Departamento e Marca e Comunicação da Câmara Municipal de Lisboa

According to George Abungu (2019), Western museums rooted in times of conquest and colonialisms of various natures have collections with controversial, sometimes contradictory contexts. Today, it is crucial to demand a more profound knowledge of collections. If we want inclusive museums that serve society, this must be achieved without paternalism or condescension, but through a conscious sense of duty and coherence. One of the major goals is to unveil stories and people that turn out to be as relevant as the traditional glorious episodes of the past—if not more.

The “Survey on the presence of heritage from non-European territories in Portuguese museums”, conducted by ICOM Portugal in 2021 and commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, is worth mentioning as a first gesture on a much-needed area of research in this country. It is expected that more museums, social movements, and countries will endeavour to shed light on the incoherences between museums' missions and their actions. The Lisbon Museum is committed to embracing critical approaches to our local and national history, which we affirm as multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious to this day.

References

- Abungu, G. O. (2019). *Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration*. Sandahl, J., Ed. (2019). *Museum International*, vol. 71, Issue 1-2 *The Backbone of Museums*. Paris: ICOM
- Antunes, A. P., Fernandes, P. A. (2017). On the (in)visibility of slaves in the history of Lisbon. *Testimonies of Slavery. The African memory in the Museum of Lisbon*. Lisbon: Museum of Lisbon / EGEAC, p.6-9.
- Fernandes, P. A., Antunes, A. P. (2019, coord). *Coexistence. Plural Lisbon (1147-1910)*. Exhibition catalogue. Lisbon: Museum of Lisbon / EGEAC.
- Fernandes, P. A., Antunes, A. P. (2022). A exposição Lisboa Plural (2019). Diversas as raízes identitárias da cidade. *Revista de Museus*. No. 3. Lisboa: Direção Geral de Património Cultural, p.132-141.
- Fonseca, J. (2014). A historiografia sobre os escravos em Portugal. *Cultura. Revista de História e Teoria das Ideias*. Vol. 33. Lisboa: Centro de História da Cultura, p.191-218.
- Marques, J. P. (1999). *Os sons do silêncio. O Portugal de Oitocentos e a abolição do tráfico de escravos*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Monteiro, J. S. (2023). *A caminho de museus mais colaborativos*. Gonçalves, C., ed. (2023). *Os próximos 10 anos do Património Cultural em Portugal: Tendências*. Lisboa: Património.PT
- Pimentel, M. R. (2010). *Chão de sombras. Estudos sobre a escravatura*. Lisboa: Colibri.
- Ramos, L. O. (1971). Pombal e o escravagismo. *Revista da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto*. Porto: Universidade do Porto, p.169-178.
- Ribeiro, A. P. (2020). *¿Podemos descolonizar los museos?*, Bogotá: Ediciones Vestigio
- Tinhorão, J. R. (1988). *Os negros em Portugal. Uma presença silenciosa*. Lisboa: Caminho
- The authors thank the contributions of Ana Paula Antunes and Ana Margarida Campos.*



Children's board from Amsterdam Museum visits conference. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Dialogue session Collecting Activism. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Interactive session. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Paper presentations. Sharing the power of interpretation. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski

City identities and conflict

Amazigh heritage and museum governance: An analysis of the transition of the Municipal Museum

Omar Idtnaine

Biography

Omar Idtnaine is a museum curator at the Agadir Museum of Art, responsible for managing and preserving its collections through artefact care, restoration coordination, and exhibition design. He also organizes educational programs to engage diverse audiences and enhances museum operations through incident management and infrastructure improvements.

Introduction

Heritage, in its richness and diversity, is a major issue for contemporary societies. It is both a witness to the past, a vector of identity, and a lever for development. Museums, as institutions dedicated to the conservation, study, and enhancement of heritage, play a crucial role in its management and dissemination. However, museums are also spaces of power where representations of the past are negotiated and where tensions between different stakeholders are expressed.

In an international context marked by globalization, migration, and identity claims, the question of museum governance—i.e., how museums are managed and decisions are made—has become a central issue. Museums are increasingly being called upon by local communities, minority groups, and social movements that demand greater participation in heritage management and a better consideration of their perspectives and interests.

In Morocco, Amazigh heritage, rich in its history and culture, holds an important place in the cultural landscape. However, its recognition and enhancement have long been marked by political and identity-related challenges. The transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the Fondation Nationale des Musées (FNM) in 2023 is part of this context of transformation in museum policies and the search for better consideration of cultural diversity.

This research focuses on the challenges and issues of this transition, analyzing the reactions of local actors (associations and artists) and exploring the implications for museum governance. It aims to understand how museums can reconcile national objectives for heritage valorization with the expectations and needs of local communities.

The central issue of this study is the following: How does the transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the FNM address the issues of museum governance and the tensions between local identities and national representations of heritage? To guide this research, the following questions will be asked: What are the reactions of local actors (associations and artists) to the transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the FNM? What are the challenges of involving local actors in the management of museum collections? How can museums reconcile national objectives for heritage valorization with the expectations and needs of local communities?

This research is based on a theoretical and conceptual framework that draws on works on museum governance, heritage studies, and identity theories. It is particularly inspired by the work of Desvallées and Mairesse (2010) on the expanded definition of museums, which emphasizes the social and cultural functions of museums, as well as the work of Nora (1984) on the “lieux de mémoire,” which analyzes the issues of constructing and commemorating the past. Moreover, this study takes into account reflections on the decolonization of museums and the restitution of heritage, which highlight the importance of considering the perspectives of indigenous communities and minority groups (Bennett, 2004; Hicks, 2020).

1. Amazigh heritage: A millennial cultural wealth

Amazigh culture, also known as Berber culture, represents one of the oldest and richest cultural traditions in North Africa. Rooted in a millennial history, it forms a fundamental pillar of Moroccan identity, although its integration into the national narrative has often been marked by tensions and claims. The Amazighs, or Imazighen, have developed a distinct culture characterized by a unique language, Tamazight, remarkable artistic and craft traditions, and an intangible heritage rich in oral stories, music, and rituals. However, despite this wealth, Amazigh culture has long been marginalized in Morocco's cultural and educational policies, leading to movements demanding its recognition and preservation.

The Tamazight language, in particular, holds a central place in Amazigh identity. Recognized as an official language of Morocco in the 2011 Constitution, it symbolizes a significant advance in the recognition of the cultural rights of the Amazighs. However, this formal recognition has not always been translated into concrete valorization in cultural and educational institutions. As Salem Chaker (2013) points out, "the constitutional recognition of Tamazight is an important step, but it remains insufficient without effective implementation in public policies" (Chaker, 2013, p. 45). This tension between formal recognition and practical application is at the heart of the current challenges related to the preservation of Amazigh heritage.

Amazigh tangible heritage, on the other hand, is manifested through artefacts such as carpets, pottery, jewelry, and traditional tools, which bear witness to ancestral craftsmanship. These objects are not only relics of the past, but also vectors of cultural transmission. As Gabriel Camps states, "Amazigh craftsmanship is a living expression of culture that connects generations and perpetuates traditions in a changing world" (Camps, 1987, p. 12). However, globalization and rapid urbanization threaten these artisanal practices, making their preservation even more urgent.

Amazigh intangible heritage, including music, poetry, and oral narratives, also plays a crucial role in the transmission of culture. Amazigh music, for example, with its distinctive rhythms and traditional instruments like the lute and ribab, is a powerful vector of identity and cultural resistance. As Cynthia Becker explains, "Amazigh music is not only an art form, but also a means of claim and resistance against cultural assimilation" (Becker, 2010, p. 78). This political dimension of Amazigh culture is particularly visible in festivals and cultural events, which serve both as celebrations and platforms for identity claims.

However, the preservation of this rich and diverse cultural heritage faces many challenges. The historical marginalization of the Amazighs in national cultural policies has led to the underrepresentation of their heritage in museum and educational institutions. As Moha Ennaji notes, "the absence of equitable representation of Amazigh heritage in national museums reflects a persistent neglect of local identities in favor of a homogenizing national narrative" (Ennaji, 2005, p. 102). This situation has prompted calls for greater inclusion of the Amazighs in the management and valorization of their own heritage.

Amazigh culture, with its linguistic, artistic, and immaterial dimensions, constitutes an invaluable heritage. Its preservation and valorization are essential not only for the Amazigh communities but also for the cultural diversity of Morocco as a whole. However, this preservation requires an inclusive and participatory approach that recognizes the cultural rights of the Amazighs and integrates their perspectives into national cultural policies. As Susan Slyomovics emphasizes, "the valorization of Amazigh heritage cannot be achieved without close collaboration with the local communities, who are its natural guardians" (Slyomovics, 2005, p. 56). This collaboration is all the more crucial in a context of museum transition, where issues of power and representation are at the heart of the debates.

2. The Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage: A central role

The Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage in Agadir, now known as Agadir Museum of Art, occupies a central place in the preservation and promotion of Amazigh culture while serving as a bridge between traditional heritage and contemporary art. Inaugurated on February 29, 2000, the museum was created to mark the 40th anniversary of the Agadir earthquake, symbolizing the resilience and cultural renaissance of the city. Designed by architect Abdelaziz Brakez, the building spans 1,069 m² over three levels, providing both a functional and aesthetic space to house rich and varied collections. From its opening, the museum became the first municipal institution in Morocco fully dedicated to Amazigh heritage, the result of collaboration between the Municipality of Agadir, French museographers led by the Philip Delice company, and local culture enthusiasts.

The museum's primary mission has always been to preserve and promote Amazigh culture, focusing on traditional craftsmanship and combating its gradual disappearance. The museum's collection, built through donations and acquisitions, includes a precious collection of Amazigh jewelry donated by Saïd Zitoun in 1995. These ethnographic objects, which testify to the richness and diversity of Amazigh culture, are complemented by artefacts illustrating local craft techniques.

Beyond its role as a conservatory, the Agadir Museum of Art has also established itself as a vibrant space for creation and cultural dissemination. Equipped with a space dedicated to temporary exhibitions, the museum has hosted hundreds of plastic art, photography, and artistic installation exhibitions since its opening. These events, highlighting both local and international artists, have allowed the public to explore artistic creation in all its diversity. This dynamic programming has made the museum an essential destination for art enthusiasts and visitors to the region, thus strengthening its role as a cultural and educational platform.

In 2023, the museum underwent a major transformation under the supervision of the National Foundation of Museums (FNM), becoming the Agadir Museum of Art. This change in purpose marked a turning point in its history, making it the first art museum in the southern region of Morocco. This new identity was accompanied by an exceptional donation from Moroccan collector Khalil Belguench, which included modern and contemporary artworks. This collection, which includes paintings, sculptures, and installations, interacts with the museum's ethnographic artefacts, creating a link between traditional heritage and modern artistic expressions.

The museum's permanent exhibition is organized around five main themes, each exploring a distinct aspect of Moroccan culture and art. The first, titled "Representing Cultural Traditions," immerses visitors in the visual traditions that shaped Moroccan identity, highlighting scenes of fantasia, adornments, and ceremonial objects. The second theme, "Urban Scenes, Between Exoticism and Modernism," explores the representation of Moroccan cities, balancing between the picturesque and modernism. The third, "Abstraction and Memory," focuses on the postcolonial artistic movement, while the fourth, "Landscapes," examines the representation of Morocco's natural landscapes. Finally, the fifth theme, "Figures and Bodies," explores the evolution of human representation in Moroccan art, from traditional portraits to contemporary interpretations.

In addition to its permanent exhibition, the museum continues to organize educational workshops and cultural events, further reinforcing its role as an institution serving the local community and visitors. Thanks to its dual mission—both as a conservator of Amazigh heritage and as a space dedicated to modern and contemporary art—the Agadir Museum of Art has become a place of convergence between tradition and modernity, offering a rich and diverse cultural experience

3. Methodology

This study, aimed at analyzing the issues surrounding the transition of the Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage to the National Foundation of Museums (FNM), employed a qualitative methodological approach. This choice was justified by the desire to gain in-depth insights into the perceptions, experiences, and discourses of the stakeholders involved in this transition. Indeed, qualitative methods allow for the exploration of the complexity of social phenomena and provide a way to account for the diversity of viewpoints.

The study relied on two main data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local artists and members of local associations. This method allowed for the gathering of detailed information regarding their reactions to the transition, their expectations, and concerns. The participant selection process was guided by a concern for representativeness and diversity. Participants were chosen based on their involvement in the local artistic and cultural scene, their connection to the museum, and their affiliation with various associations. An interview guide was developed to structure the exchanges while leaving room for participants to freely express their views. The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, which facilitated the richness and sincerity of the testimonies.

In addition to the interviews, a content analysis was conducted on publications and statements from key stakeholders. This method allowed for the contextualization of the data collected from the interviews and the identification of the issues and debates surrounding the transition. Relevant sources were identified through targeted documentary research, including newspaper articles, institutional reports, and publications from associations.

The content analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, which involved identifying and analyzing recurring themes that emerged from the documents. This approach helped highlight the major issues of the transition and the positions of the various stakeholders.

The choice of these qualitative methods is justified by their relevance in addressing the study's objectives. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep exploration of the perceptions and experiences of local stakeholders, while the content analysis provided a way to contextualize this data and identify the broader issues surrounding the transition. The complementarity of these methods enabled cross-referencing of information sources and strengthened the validity of the results.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Limitations related to the sample size should be considered. Although the participant selection process was guided by a concern for representativeness, the limited number of interviews conducted does not allow for the generalization of the results to all stakeholders involved in the transition. The limitations related to the subjectivity of qualitative data must also be recognized. The data collected during the interviews and content analysis are inevitably influenced by the perceptions and interpretations of both the participants and the researchers. Finally, the limitations related to the specific context of the study must be taken into account. The results of this study are specific to the context of the transition of the Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage to the FNM and cannot be directly applied to other contexts.

In addition to these methodological aspects, it is important to present the key stakeholders at the core of this study. Local artists constitute a key group of actors in the context of the transition. They play an essential role in the local artistic scene and maintain close ties with the museum, notably through exhibitions and collaborations. The diversity of their artistic practices reflects the richness and vitality of local creation. Members of local associations dedicated to promoting local heritage are another key group in this study. These associations aim to valorize and promote local heritage, and they carry out various activities in this regard, such as organizing cultural events and publishing documents. Their relationship with the museum is marked by partnerships, but also by demands, particularly concerning the place given to local heritage in the museum's programming.

4. Results

4.1 Reactions of local artists

In general, local artists expressed satisfaction with the transition to the FNM. This satisfaction is based on several key points. First, the transition is seen as an opportunity to increase the national visibility of regional artists. Indeed, the integration of the museum into the FNM signifies greater exposure at the national level, which can positively impact the careers and recognition of artists. The FNM, thanks to its network and resources, provides local artists with a larger platform to showcase their work and reach a wider audience.

Furthermore, the transition offers local artists opportunities for exhibitions in prestigious spaces. The FNM regularly organizes large-scale national and even international exhibitions, and the inclusion of the museum within this institution allows local artists to participate in these events and present their work in iconic venues. These exhibitions have a significant impact on the spread of Amazigh art, introducing it to a broader audience and contributing to its valorization.

However, it is important to note that this general satisfaction is accompanied by nuances and criticisms. Some artists expressed concerns about the potential loss of autonomy and proximity that might come with the transition to a national institution. They fear that the centralized management of the FNM may not fully consider the specificities and needs of the local artistic scene. Additionally, local artists have expectations regarding support for local creation. They hope that the museum will continue to play an active role in promoting local artistic creation, particularly by providing exhibition spaces, supporting young artists, and fostering exchanges and collaborations.

4.2 Reactions of members of local associations

The reactions from the members of local associations, key players in promoting local heritage, are marked by a mixed position. On one hand, the association recognizes the positive aspects of the transition. In particular, it emphasizes that the transition to the FNM has increased the museum's visibility due to the communication resources of this institution. The FNM has substantial communication means, which allow for broader dissemination of information about the museum's activities and collections.

On the other hand, members of local associations express concerns about the place given to the local collection in the exhibitions. They wish for this collection to remain central, and fear that the transition may lead to a dilution of the museum's local identity. Members of local associations insist on the importance of highlighting the local collections, which reflect the history and culture of the region. They worry that the FNM might prioritize more general exhibitions, to the detriment of the specificity of the local Amazigh heritage.

In response to these concerns, members of the local associations make several demands. Firstly, they call for the enhancement of the old collections in the exhibitions. They highlight the importance of contextualizing and interpreting these collections to make them accessible and understandable to the public. The members of local associations propose thematic exhibitions that would highlight the local collections, linking them to contemporary issues and fostering dialogue with the audience.

Next, members of the local associations demand the involvement of local actors in the management of the collection. They suggest creating an advisory committee, composed of representatives from associations, artists, and other stakeholders, which would be responsible for giving advice on the museum's direction and participating in defining the acquisition and valorization policy for the collections. Local association members stress the importance of involving local actors in decision-making to ensure that the interests and needs of the local community are taken into account.

Also, members of the local associations call for priority to be given to the local collection in the museum's cultural programming. They propose organizing cultural events that showcase Amazigh heritage, such as conferences, workshops, performances, and festivals. Members of local associations emphasize the importance of cultural mediation and heritage education to raise public awareness of the richness and diversity of Amazigh culture and promote its ownership.

5. Summary of results

The summary of results reveals a diversity of reactions among local artists and members of local associations in response to the on-going transition in the management of museum collections. Generally, artists express a mix of optimism and scepticism. Some welcome the opportunity for greater recognition of their work and their contribution to national culture, while others fear that this transition could further marginalize local voices in favor of a more homogenized national narrative.

Members of local associations, on the other hand, tend to be more critical, highlighting the risk of dilution of local identities and cultural appropriation by national institutions. Common points of convergence between the artists and the members of local associations include a shared concern for the preservation of cultural diversity and the need for equitable representation of different communities. However, differences emerge regarding the means of achieving these goals. Artists tend to favor a collaborative approach with national institutions, while members of local associations emphasize local autonomy and the protection of cultural rights. The factors explaining these varied reactions include differences in personal experiences, ideological perspectives, and the specific interests of each group. For instance, artists who have already benefited from national recognition are more likely to support the transition, while those who feel excluded or marginalized express more resistance.

6. Analysis of the issues

6.1 Tensions between local identities and national representation

The transition in the management of museum collections raises significant identity-related issues. On one hand, it offers an opportunity to strengthen national cohesion by integrating local cultural expressions into a broader national narrative. On the other hand, it risks erasing local specificities in favor of cultural homogenization. This tension is particularly visible in the reactions of artists and local association members, who oscillate between the hope for greater visibility and the fear of losing authenticity.

The impact of the transition on the construction and negotiation of identities is also noteworthy. Local artists often find themselves in a delicate position, navigating between their attachment to their community and their desire for national recognition. This duality can lead to a redefinition of identities, where the boundaries between the local and the national become more fluid.

The recognition and valorization of cultural diversity thus emerge as key elements to mitigate these tensions. An inclusive approach that respects and celebrates cultural differences can contribute to a smoother transition and a better integration of local identities into the national narrative.

6.2 Power and control over heritage

The transition in the management of museum collections also involves issues of power and control. Power relations between various actors — artists, local associations, national institutions — are often characterized by imbalances. National institutions, equipped with more resources and influence, tend to dominate the process, leaving little room for local voices.

The impact of the transition on the distribution of power and resources is therefore a key issue. If the transition is poorly managed, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities and further marginalizing local communities. Conversely, a well-managed transition, which includes a fair redistribution of resources and active participation from local actors, can contribute to a better balance of power.

Transparency, accountability, and responsibility are essential elements to ensure a just and equitable transition. National institutions must be held accountable for their actions and decisions, and local actors should play an active role in the decision-making process.

7. Discussion

7.1 Comparison of results with other case studies

Comparing the results of this study with other cultural transitions at the local level highlights both notable similarities and differences. In particular, the case of the management shift of the Agadir Oufella site, which was transferred to a local development company, presents specificities related to the historical, political, and cultural context of the region. In Agadir, this transition aims to reconcile heritage management with the needs of local and tourism development, while preserving the specific cultural values of the city and its inhabitants.

As in other regions of the world, the active participation of local communities and the recognition of cultural diversity are essential elements for the success of such a transition. However, in Agadir, the challenges are also influenced by the unique history of the Agadir Oufella site, particularly the reconstruction of the city after the 1960 earthquake, which deeply impacted the local collective memory. Heritage management in this context goes beyond mere material conservation; it also includes identity issues related to how the community reclaims its past while evolving within a modern development framework.

The political specificities of the region, notably the recent role of the local development company, as well as the challenges related to participatory governance, directly affect how this transition is perceived and implemented. Unlike other contexts where management changes may have been more centralized, the decentralized management at Agadir Oufella reflects a desire to bring heritage management closer to local realities while integrating economic and tourism development dynamics.

Thus, while analogies exist with other museum transitions worldwide, the historical and cultural particularities of Agadir significantly influence how this transition is carried out and perceived by local actors.

7.2 Analysis of the implications of the results for museum governance

The results of this study have significant implications for museum governance, particularly regarding centralized versus participatory management. Our analysis of the Agadir Museum of Art highlights the reality of “top-down” governance, which largely stems from the desire to harmonize policies and programs under the National Foundation of Museums (FNM). For example, initiatives like “Museum and Gallery Nights,” organized nationally by the FNM, illustrate this centralization of management. Although these programs carry significant symbolic value and contribute to increased visibility for museums at the national level, they limit the autonomy of local museums, such as the one in Agadir, in decision-making related to programming, particularly in involving local artists in these events.

As a result, museum teams sometimes find themselves with little room to incorporate local specificities or tailor activities to the expectations of communities. For instance, the involvement of local artists, which is essential for a place-based approach, is often limited due to the directives and centralized control of these events.

This highlights the need for more participatory governance, where local stakeholders are better integrated into the decision-making process. Such an approach would foster greater acceptance of programs and enhance their legitimacy within local communities. To achieve this, it is essential that governance structures are adapted to the local context and include mechanisms for regular consultation, local advisory committees, and the inclusion of local representatives in decision-making bodies.

7.3 Reflection on the issues of local stakeholder participation in heritage management

The participation of local stakeholders in heritage management offers both advantages and limitations. Among the advantages, one can cite better representation of collections, greater legitimacy of decisions, and increased ownership of heritage by local communities. However, this participation can also face obstacles, such as conflicts of interest, power imbalances, and logistical challenges.

The conditions for the success of a participatory approach include open and transparent communication, an equitable distribution of resources, and adequate training for local stakeholders. It is also essential to ensure the representativeness and legitimacy of participants, in order to avoid risks of marginalization or cooptation.

Strategies to promote the participation of local stakeholders include the establishment of regular consultation mechanisms, the organization of workshops and training, and the creation of partnerships with local associations. These strategies must be tailored to the needs and capacities of local communities and be supported by strong political commitment.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the main issues and challenges related to the management of Amazigh heritage in the context of a museum transition. The results revealed a diversity of reactions among artists and members of local associations, oscillating between hope and scepticism in the face of on-going changes. The tensions between local identities and national representation, issues of power and control over heritage, and the challenges of reconciling national objectives with local expectations were at the heart of the analysis.

The central problem of this study was to understand how the transition in museum collection management could both enhance Amazigh heritage and meet the expectations of local stakeholders, while strengthening national cohesion. The objectives were to identify points of convergence and divergence between the different stakeholders, analyze the explanatory factors of their reactions, and propose recommendations for a more inclusive and participatory museum governance.

The main arguments and conclusions of this study emphasize the importance of a collaborative and transparent approach to overcome the identified challenges. The participation of local stakeholders, the recognition of cultural diversity, and the fair redistribution of resources are key elements for a successful transition. Participatory governance models, such as the creation of local advisory committees and the inclusion of local collections in national programming, have been proposed as viable solutions to reconcile national objectives with local expectations.

The future of Amazigh heritage management will largely depend on the continued efforts in participation and collaboration. Current initiatives need to be sustained and strengthened to ensure their long-term impact. This requires on-going commitment from national institutions, local stakeholders, and associations, as well as adequate resource allocation to support these initiatives.

The challenges of sustaining initiatives and partnerships include the need to maintain open and transparent communication, ensure the representativeness and legitimacy of local stakeholders, and adapt strategies to the evolving political and cultural contexts. The creation of regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is also essential to measure the impact of initiatives and adjust strategies accordingly.

The participation of local stakeholders in museum governance presents significant advantages, including better representation of collections, greater legitimacy of decisions, and increased ownership of heritage by local communities. These benefits must be highlighted and valued to encourage the implementation of participatory museum governance models.

A call for the implementation of these models is essential to ensure fair and sustainable cultural heritage management. National institutions must be encouraged to adopt inclusive and collaborative approaches and integrate local stakeholders into the decision-making process. This requires strong political will and on-going commitment to participation and transparency.

References

- Becker, C. (2010). *Amazigh arts in Morocco: Women shaping berber identity*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bennett, T. (2004). *The Birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. Routledge.
- Camps, G. (1987). *Les Berbères : Mémoire et identité*. Paris : Éditions Errance.
- Chaker, S. (2013). *Berbères aujourd'hui*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Desvallées, A., & Mairesse, F. (Eds.). (2010). *Vers une redéfinition du musée?*. Armand Colin.
- Ennaji, M. (2005). *Multilingualism, cultural identity, and education in Morocco*. New York: Springer.
- Hicks, D. (2020). *The Brutish museums: The Benin bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*. Pluto Press.
- Nora, P. (1984). *Les lieux de mémoire*. Gallimard.
- Slyomovics, S. (2005). *The performance of human rights in Morocco*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

City identities and conflict

Curating War. A Dynamic Heritage Approach in the In Flanders

Els Veraverbeke

Biography

Els Veraverbeke brings over two decades of experience in museums and heritage, with a distinguished career as Conservator-Director of Collections at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Yper Museum, and Merghelynck Museum. Her leadership has shaped innovative museum visions, strategic collection management, and institutional growth. Previously, she led collections and research at The House of Alijn, where she fostered creative approaches to heritage interpretation and achieved notable success in non-profit fundraising. Committed to advancing cultural brokerage and sustainability, Els combines collaborative leadership with strategic insight, empowering teams and enriching public engagement

Ypres: A City of Emotionally Charged History

Internationally, the city of Ypres in Belgium is recognised as a powerful symbol of the First World War. The city was completely destroyed during the war. Its reconstruction — from the physical rebuilding of structures to the reconstitution of social life — is itself a deeply emotional story. Today, Ypres is a vibrant provincial town. The legacy of the First World War remains omnipresent: monuments, cemeteries, and the surrounding landscape continue to bear witness to the conflict. Countless associations, ceremonies, and practices emerged as a consequence of the war. The presence of the international community — both tourists and residents — is often rooted in war history. The world is present in Ypres, and Ypres is present in the world. As a tribute, many streets and parks around the globe bear the name of the city. As a committed and engaged museum, the *In Flanders Fields Museum* assumes the responsibility of interpreting and giving meaning to the memory and heritage of the First World War today and for the future.

That task begins with the collection and curation of the museum's holdings. The first objects were acquired in 1927. Nearly a century of collecting reveals shifting curatorial visions and evolving approaches to war heritage. The compelling history of the museum's collection not only recounts the war itself, but also reflects changing ways of curating conflict. A new collecting policy was launched in 2023, placing contemporary practices of remembrance at the heart of its vision. Given the complexity of the subject matter, curating war heritage — both tangible and intangible, historical and contemporary — requires care, ethics, and sensitivity.

We aim to make the public active stakeholders in this collection, enhancing its social value for both present and future generations. We ascribe meaning to the past, present, and future of First World War heritage.

Connecting collections, A new collection policy

The *In Flanders Fields Museum* is Belgium's nationally recognised heritage institution dedicated to the First World War. War heritage is a complex and charged domain. How does one collect war? And how can a collection relating to a conflict over a century ago maintain relevance today? How can one shape a twenty-first-century collecting policy around such a theme?

In recent years, the museum was deeply engaged in the centenary commemorations of 2014–2018. With a new strategic phase launched in 2022, including a comprehensive collecting plan, the museum is now focusing on both the continued stewardship of its rich and diverse holdings — and the shaping of the collection of the future.

As Martin Gegner and Bart Ziino observed in *The Heritage of War* (Routledge, 2012), war generates new forms of cultural memory, which are transformed over time into both tangible and intangible heritage. Heritage is not fixed; it is continuously constructed through social and political processes by multiple actors. Heritage itself has a history: a history of meaning-making, of management, and of reinterpretation.

A good war museum highlights the value of peace — a principle the In Flanders Fields Museum embraces fully. The significance of the war heritage collection is central in this mission. Its emotional impact is visible in responses to stories and testimonies, from military artefacts to personal diaries.

As temporal distance from the First World War increases, so too does the need for a war museum. While previous generations heard the stories from eyewitnesses, today it is through objects, images, and documents that the narratives are told. The year 2022 marked a turning point. A new collecting policy placed a strong emphasis on documenting current commemorative practices, including the integration of ICE (Intangible Cultural Heritage and Education). This shift initiated a new phase of contemporary collecting and the development of a robust digital strategy. High-quality documentation, sharing, and linking of collection data are at the heart of this approach.

As a thematic museum with a world war as its focus, the In Flanders Fields Museum operates inherently on an international level. Across the globe, museums focus on the First World War — often with a keen interest in the Belgian front region. The IFFM's collecting policy is therefore framed within an international context. Collaboration with both international and local museums fosters knowledge exchange and alignment of collecting strategies. Such partnerships and participatory approaches strengthen the museum's policy. Through these networks, the collection is enriched — but also, professionals and amateurs alike, from specialists to enthusiasts, contribute vitally to the understanding of war heritage, both inside and beyond the museum walls. As an engaged institution, the In Flanders Fields Museum is committed to reinforcing the meaning and relevance of war heritage collections.

From military collections to a dynamic heritage approach

Human history comprises countless chapters on war — many of which are commemorated in museums. War heritage is often collected, managed, and interpreted within broader contexts: urban or national histories, military narratives, or arms collections.

The In Flanders Fields Museum holds a unique position. A century of collecting since the 1920's has resulted in a remarkably diverse and layered assemblage. This is not only a reference collection on the First World War — it also bears witness to shifting perspectives, evolving methods, and changing attitudes toward war heritage across generations.

A war museum presents complex challenges in all areas of museum practice, particularly in collection policy. What is war heritage? How does one collect war? How can such heritage be managed, displayed, and shared? In short: how does a museum curate war? These questions are part of our daily work at the In Flanders Fields Museum. We take them seriously, not only in practice, but also as research questions that guide a reflective, inclusive, and forward-looking collecting strategy.

Until the 1990s, war heritage was largely synonymous with military artefacts from the war years. Internationally, war museums were often embedded within national military contexts. While the early predecessors did not fully adopt this militarised lens, their collecting was still predominantly military in nature. From the late twentieth century onward, the scholarly and curatorial lens began to shift. War came to be seen not only as a military conflict, but as a total event that touched lives, bodies, landscapes, and identities. Through this human dimension, the museum's collecting profile changed fundamentally.

Since the 1990s, the personal perspective has become central. War is part of everyday life. This vision now informs the museum's entire heritage strategy — including its collection policy. Diaries, letters, photo albums, and other ego-documents are preserved as literal carriers of life stories. But many other items in the collection also embody personal narratives, emotions, and experiences.

Often, it is not the object's material qualities that matter most, but the stories they evoke and represent. War heritage is clearly more than just tangible matter. It encompasses objects, narratives, and practices. It concerns not only the past, but also how we, today and tomorrow, relate to remembrance and loss.

War is not only curated by museums; it is also inherited by society — through rituals, traditions, and acts of memory. First World War heritage includes objects, images, documents, and sounds, but also traditions, commemorative rituals, and landscapes.

The In Flanders Fields Museum collects and documents all these dimensions: material, immaterial, and environmental. These elements are never static. Rituals change. Landscapes evolve. Cultural memory is always in motion. As a museum, we aim to remain alert and responsive to this evolution.

Together with others, we seek to recognise, collect, research, and safeguard war heritage in a participatory way. A core principle in this approach is the maximum digital accessibility of the collection — making heritage more widely available and strengthening its social relevance for the present and the future.

A History of the museum, from the 1920s actual collecting to a place of memory

In the late 1920s, a war museum opened in the centre of Ypres — a private initiative by British veteran Leo Murphy. At the same time, many other souvenir-related ventures emerged, ranging from shop displays to commercial sales. Murphy's museum stood out for several reasons: its central location, the attempt to build a coherent collection, and the provision of contextual information through captions and guided tours. Leo Murphy (Manchester, 1891 – Ypres, 1951) had served in France during the First World War. After the conflict, he returned to the continent and settled in Vlamertinge, near Ypres. During this period, large numbers of British visitors came to Ypres and the surrounding Salient as part of pilgrimage journeys — often to sites where

loved ones had fallen. Murphy established the British Touring and Information Bureau on the town's main square, offering travel packages and battlefield tours. He was a founding member of the Ypres Branch of the British Legion and served as chairman of the Ypres Branch of The Old Contemptibles' Association. In the off-season, Murphy worked as an electrician. By the late 1920s (or early 1930s), he had opened the Ypres Salient War Museum. In 1937, this collection — or parts of it — was relocated to the newly rebuilt western wing of the Cloth Hall (Lakenhallen). Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, and at Murphy's request, the collection was transferred to the United Kingdom, where it was exhibited at Gloucester Place in Brighton. Several objects from his collection were later incorporated into the holdings of Ypres's newly established Municipal Museum.

In the 1920s, the city of Ypres — like the wider region — underwent extensive reconstruction. Wartime debris was cleared, and large-scale rebuilding ensued.

Before the war, Ypres was home to one of Belgium's oldest municipal museums, located in the Vleeshuis (Meat Hall). The collection primarily focused on fine and decorative arts. However, the Vleeshuis was completely destroyed during the First World War. In the postwar years, the building was rebuilt and designated solely for museum use. The renewed institution gained momentum through acquisitions — particularly via bequests, such as the significant 1927 legacy of Héléne Ceriez-De Hem.

In addition, the museum launched a public appeal for donation, what we now call participatory collecting. This resulted in a highly eclectic collection of paintings, furniture, sculpture, prints, coins, medals, commemorative plaques, flags, photographs, and more.

Among the donations were personal and official wartime memorabilia. The museum actively sought First World War items, especially official documents and objects related to the military conflict. Heads of state and commanding officers were even invited to contribute a signed photograph along with a personal item. This marked the beginning of a civic war heritage collection — a body of artefacts reflecting Ypres's wartime identity and public memory. Today, many of these objects are part of the core holdings of the In Flanders Fields Museum. The postwar reconstruction of Ypres's iconic Cloth Hall (Lakenhallen) was a lengthy undertaking. Work began in 1928 and continued until 1967. Before the Second World War, key elements were already restored: the belfry (1929–1934) and the western and northern wings (1934–1939). Later came the city hall (1957–1967), the Nieuwerck, and the council chamber. Amidst the reconstruction, plans emerged to integrate museum functions into the building. Even before full completion, a first exhibition space was inaugurated: in 1937, a room within the belfry was designated to display objects related to the Groote Oorlog (Great War) in Ypres. The war-related holdings of the Municipal Museum were incorporated into this display. The terminology reflects the historical moment: prior to the Second World War, the term “First World War” was not yet in common use. The conflict was still referred to as the “Great War”.

In 1964, Ypres hosted a large temporary exhibition marking the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of war — titled “50 Years Later”. Public interest in war heritage was growing, as was recognition of the collection's cultural and commemorative value. In 1968, the museum moved to the ground floor of the newly completed eastern wing of the Cloth Hall. It reopened under a new name: the Ypres Salient Museum. As the name implies, the focus now explicitly centred on the First World War as experienced on the front lines in and around Ypres.

The Ypres Salient Memorial Museum (1985)

Initially, the *Ypres Salient Museum* focused heavily on the display of weaponry. Many of its objects were local battlefield finds. In 1985, the museum underwent a nominal transformation — becoming the *Ypres Salient Memorial Museum 1914–18*. This subtle rebranding marked a shift toward remembrance and reflection. In 1989, the City of Ypres acquired the extensive private library of the late Dr. Alfred Caenepeel, a veterinarian with a deep personal interest in the First World War.

Through his professional contacts with local farmers, he had assembled a unique collection of battlefield finds — including artefacts linked to the first gas attacks near Steenstrate (Langemark). While this development introduced a new dimension to the museum's operations, its core mission remained unchanged: the collection and presentation of First World War heritage, with a specific focus on the Ypres Salient.

In Flanders Fields Museum (1998-)

By 1995, the city of Ypres recognised the need to reprofile its existing war museum. With the First World War centenary on the horizon, ambitions grew. Plans were drawn up for an expanded and conceptually strengthened museum, housed within the historic Cloth Hall. This transition coincided with a broader shift in the heritage field. Internationally, the concept of heritage was being redefined: no longer limited to monuments or fine art collections, but now embracing contested, historical, and emotionally charged heritage. At the same time, the museum paradigm itself was evolving. Institutions that once operated as closed bastions of scholarship began to prioritise public engagement. The historiography of the First World War underwent a parallel transformation. Military history gave way to more socially and culturally oriented interpretations of the war experience.

In 1998, the *In Flanders Fields Museum* opened its doors. It offered a new vision of what a war museum could be — establishing a pioneering, internationally recognised narrative. Unlike many war museums founded within military or nationalist frameworks, the IFFM embraced a deliberately polyphonic and human-centred approach. This vision extended across exhibitions, collecting strategies, educational outreach, and audience engagement.

The museum's collection policy was fundamentally reimagined. The military-historical core was no longer privileged; instead, the concept of war heritage was expanded. Alongside militaria, the collection of war art grew in importance, and increasing attention was paid to the life stories of individuals who had experienced the war — initially in exhibitions, and progressively through active collecting. This commitment to polyphony requires critical knowledge: Which voices are present in the collection? Which are missing?

By documenting life stories from before, during, and after the war, the museum situates the First World War within a broader historical continuum — encompassing, for many, the Spanish flu, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. This biographical approach allows for nuanced connections to be made — even to contemporary issues.

Collaboration and Networking with Collectors

Alongside institutional collections, a substantial amount of First World War heritage is held in private hands. This collector community is both active and diverse — spanning generations, regions, and national contexts, and comprising individuals as well as groups. Some collectors focus on a specific typology (such as particular weapons, trench art, or memorial cards), while others concentrate on a location (e.g. Ypres or occupied Leuven), a specific unit, battle, or theme. Many are recognised experts in their field of interest.

The In Flanders Fields Museum invests actively in building relationships with these collectors — fostering dialogue, exchanging knowledge, and receiving input on acquisition opportunities and research. One collector in particular holds a special place in the museum's network: Mr Philippe Oosterlinck, who has been collecting First World War heritage for over 65 years. His collection is largely complementary to the museum's holdings, with a strong emphasis on military history. A significant portion of his collection is currently on display in the museum's permanent exhibition. Of particular note is his unique assembly of complete uniform sets from various national armies that fought on Belgian soil.

Please Touch: Developing a Handling Collection

The In Flanders Fields Museum collects, preserves, researches, and presents a substantial and diverse body of war heritage. While the core museum functions remain a priority, increasing emphasis is placed on enhancing the social relevance of the collection. To this end, the museum is exploring ways to engage with its collection beyond traditional exhibition — particularly in educational and outreach contexts, both inside and outside the museum's walls. While the permanent and temporary exhibitions prominently feature collection items, the institution seeks to go beyond static display. There is a growing need for a handling collection: a separate body of material culture that can be used for educational, participatory, and sensory experiences — free from the stringent conservation restrictions of the main heritage collection.

The museum collection is governed by professional protocols: careful selection, conservation, interpretation, and research. These protocols ensure that objects are passed down responsibly to future generations — but they also impose strict limits on use. The handling collection, by contrast, is designed for interaction. These objects are meant to be touched, held, and explored. The collection includes selected original pieces (not subject to weapons legislation), as well as high-quality replicas and reproductions — created specifically for educational and tactile engagement. The scope and content of the handling collection align with the museum's curatorial vision. In addition, digital and digitised materials can supplement physical objects — offering flexible and accessible pathways to interpretation. In doing so, the museum redefines its collection as not only an object of preservation, but also a resource for experience, participation, and emotional engagement.

Intangible Heritage : Commemorative Ceremonies and Museums

The First World War inflicted catastrophic damage — on individuals (death, trauma, displacement), and on the physical environment (the destruction of villages, nature, and landscapes). In its aftermath, a commemorative landscape emerged: cemeteries, monuments, rituals, and traditions — all part of an ongoing effort to cope with the scars of war. Commemorative practices are highly diverse. Some are personal — such as pilgrimage visits, laying a poppy wreath at a grave, or attending a reburial. Others are collective and ceremonial, such as the daily Last Post Ceremony beneath the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Many rituals are tied to the calendar — such as 22 April (the first gas attack) or 11 November (Armistice Day). Yet new practices continue to emerge, often prompted by contemporary events, research, emotion, or personal motivation. Some traditions were revitalised during the centenary years (2014–2018), supported by growing heritage communities.

It is crucial to document these practices. While some rituals have been extensively studied, there remains a lack of structured research into the impact of war on commemorative culture in Flanders. The multiplicity of remembrance forms reflects the global nature of the conflict. People from around the world were involved in the Western Front. The war affected everyone — from schoolchildren to commanding officers.

How do we remember such a wide range of participants? Which traditions have endured? What forms of commemoration exist — from intimate and participatory to formal and state-sponsored? First World War commemorations are abundant, in Belgium and globally. Often, a specific person or group is central. But how can museums represent such practices without losing sight of inclusivity and polyphony?

The In Flanders Fields Museum plays an active role in the commemorative landscape. It is both a documenting institution and a participating actor, especially in pilgrimage-related events. This dual role raises important questions — not only about how to present remembrance but

also how to invite the public to experience it meaningfully. The museum is especially committed to fostering new practices, including those that focus on the remembrance of civilian victims. Connecting WWI remembrance to present-day conflicts can be powerful — but it must be done carefully, with meaningful intent and ethical awareness, together with heritage community. This term we use to indicate everybody that is involved, from experts to amateurs, from participants to researchers. The museum is therefore seeking frameworks and tools to apply its curatorial expertise in war heritage to the realm of commemorative practices.

At the same time, remembrance tourism brings its own rituals and expectations, influencing local traditions and raising further curatorial challenges. As part of its collection policy, the museum is now documenting evolving commemorative practices. On the one hand, it is mapping existing archives and visual sources. On the other, it is proactively recording new rituals. But this leads to curatorial questions: Do we prioritise endangered, lesser-known practices — or the most active and visible ones? Do we focus on diversity of location, scale, subject, or level of community engagement? These are the complex questions the In Flanders Fields Museum, in collaboration with peer institutions worldwide, is actively exploring. The most important World War One museum gather once a year and the topic of intangible heritage is a important topic discussed in this group.

Material Culture and Emotion: The Role of Emotions in Collection Policy

The classical concept of the museum — rooted in the accumulation and care of tangible objects — is being reshaped in the 21st century. Digital collecting, intangible heritage, and changing expectations are redefining what it means to collect and preserve. Museums originated as repositories of material culture, but collection typologies have diversified dramatically. At the same time, the growing professionalisation of conservation has brought rising costs and mounting workloads. The British research project *Heritage Futures* offered critical insights into sustainable collecting, urging heritage institutions to reflect carefully on what they designate and treat as “heritage”. Yet physical collections remain vital. They are essential to exhibitions, installations, outreach, research, wellbeing initiatives, and participatory engagement.

The emotional dimension of objects has long been explored in the field of emotion history, and is now gaining prominence in heritage studies, museum theory, and institutional practice — especially with regard to public audiences and visitor experiences. But what about the emotional dynamics within museums? Do emotions have a place in collection policy? How are they acknowledged or integrated? War heritage is, by its nature, emotionally charged. It evokes loss, fear, anger, grief — but also remembrance, resilience, and hope. In 2014, the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin* explored this theme in the exhibition *Krieg. Emotionen im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Other platforms — such as the Emotions in the Museum conference (York, 2020) and *Reimagine Collecting* (COMCOL, 2021) — have underscored the need for theoretical frameworks and critical reflection. At the In Flanders Fields Museum, this issue touches the

heart of its mission. The museum seeks to build a polyphonic reference collection on the First World War. Its inclusive and open approach to war heritage is valuable — but it also raises curatorial challenges: How do you make informed selections amid an abundance of available material? Is the process guided by professional detachment, or by emotional resonance? Can — or should — emotion be a valid selection criterion? Many objects in the museum’s collection carry emotional weight — shaped by their historical context, but also by the experiences of donors, staff, and visitors.

The museum therefore places emphasis on story and context. These are made explicit in exhibitions. But how can such meaning be preserved and sustained within the collection itself? Through biographical research into objects and studies of visitor responses to emotionally loaded exhibits, the museum is generating new insights into how emotions shape collection practices and interpretive strategies. At the University of Antwerp, research is currently underway on the role of emotions in collection policy — especially within museums that deal with contested or painful heritage. For instance how do we collect and deal with skeletons, photo’s of death bodies, ashes etc. in collection policies, from collecting till sharing and presenting. Of how do deal with weapons? As machines that got better, saying more efficient or do we emphasise the impact on people, wich injuries of number of death they cause?

This includes analysis of donor motivations, staff reflections, and the evolving relationship between emotional content and curatorial practice. Have emotions always played a role in acquisition? Are they now addressed more deliberately — more reflexively, more explicitly? What emotional responses do museum objects evoke in visitors? How do exhibition design and sensory engagement contribute? The war heritage collection at the *In Flanders Fields Museum* illustrates how emotions, time, and context are constantly reconfigured — shifting with each new generation. By the focus on people, how we collect and the data we are registering in combination with the way we share our collection to the public is how we try to do this.

Conclusion

Curating war demands ethical awareness, emotional intelligence, and methodological innovation. At the In Flanders Fields Museum, war heritage is not confined to the battlefield or the archive; it extends into landscapes, rituals, and communities. The museum’s collection policy reflects an ongoing commitment to inclusivity, polyphony, and critical reflection — acknowledging that heritage is constructed, contested, and constantly evolving. By documenting not only the war itself, but also how it is remembered, felt, and represented, the museum affirms its role as a space of public dialogue and shared responsibility — curating the past with an eye toward the future.

Oral histories revisited

14 Henrietta Street: Your Tenement Memories Oral History Programme

Laura Keogh

Biography

Laura Keogh is the Head of Engagement with the Dublin City Council Culture Company. In this role, she is responsible for overseeing a variety of community-focused programmes, including the 14 Henrietta Street oral history programme. Laura's work involves collaborating with local communities and cultural partners and developing innovative ways to engage the public in cultural exploration.

Introduction

14 Henrietta Street is a social history museum of Dublin life, from one building's Georgian beginnings to its tenement times. The museum, located in the heart of Dublin city, connects the history of urban life over 300 years to the stories of the people who called this place home. (See figure 1)

14 Henrietta Street was built in the late 1740s by Luke Gardiner. Its first occupant was The Right Honourable Richard, Lord Viscount Molesworth and his family. Subsequent residents in the 18th Century included the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, the Bishop of Clogher, and Charles 12th Viscount Dillon. However, by the mid-19th century Dublin was increasingly becoming home to the poor. 14 Henrietta Street became a tenement in 1877 and remained a tenement for many years with the last residents living in it until the late 1970s.¹

Dublin City Council started the process of purchasing 14 Henrietta Street in the 2000s. After acquiring the building in 2008, they embarked on a decade-long restoration and conservation project to preserve and stabilise the house for future generations. The purchase and conservation of 14 Henrietta Street was a direct result of the Dublin City Heritage Plan 2002 – 2006² and the Henrietta Street conservation plan.³ 14 Henrietta Street is owned and conserved by Dublin City Council and run by Dublin City Council Culture Company who opened the museum to the public in 2018.

The Dublin City Council Culture Company continues to protect and share the history of 14 Henrietta Street, particularly emphasising personal testimonies and social history of the house. Their vision is to create a Dublin where culture connects all aspects of life, with a people-led approach to placemaking, cultural heritage programmes and buildings.⁴



Figure 1: Front door of 14 Henrietta Street Image by Ros Kavanagh

The museum's collection

14 Henrietta Street takes an innovative approach in telling the history of a building. This is reflected in the museum's collection. Rather than being solely made up of physical objects, 50% of the collection is made up of the building itself, 20% are physical objects, 25% is the oral history collection and 5% are artistic responses.

Central to the museum experience is the house, which is interpreted through objects, stories of former residents, and the tour guides' accounts of the everyday realities of the people who lived there. The museum is experienced through guided tours only. These tours of the museum bring to life the stories of the people who lived in the house, their changing circumstances, the impact of world affairs, and their experiences of family life and politics. These stories are communicated by the tour guides along with a carefully curated selection of objects, which are exhibited in recreated immersive rooms and supported by audio-visual and specially commissioned artistic responses which illuminate the stories further. (See figure 2)



Figure 2: Children from St. Mary's National School Schools at 14 Henrietta Street Photographer_ Ste Murray.

The design of the museum experience and the tours at 14 Henrietta Street welcomes the recollections of the people who visit it. As Black (2011) notes:

When people use museums, they bring their life experiences with them. Often, their encounter with objects in the museum brings back vivid recollections, half-remembered places and emotions which would otherwise have remained forgotten. It is commonplace for such memories to be discussed amongst the social or family group taking part in the visit. From the exhibits encountered and the memories evoked, new meanings are shared.

At 14 Henrietta Street the fabric of the building allows visitors to see the lives of the people who previously lived there, from the plasterwork and grand staircase of Georgian times to the layers of paint and the remains of the wallpaper from its later years. The rooms of the museum that are dressed to recreate a particular period of time, create a different opportunity to connect with objects that have a familiarity in people's own lives from the more recent past.

On the guided tours, visitors are welcome to join in and add their own personal recollections, creating an equal exchange between the visitors and the guides, acknowledging the many versions of the stories being told. This exchange allows new meanings to be shared and provides visitors with an opportunity to connect personally with the lives of those who lived in 14 Henrietta Street.

Oral history collection

14 Henrietta Street's oral history programme, *Your Tenement Memories*, plays an integral role in the museum through gathering the living memories of tenement life in Dublin. By listening and talking with visitors, historians, local residents and their families, and through the knowledge of others, the museum continues to discover new stories, gathering memories and adding to the museum's collection and visitor experience.

In 2015, the museum initiated a series of memory evenings held both in 14 Henrietta Street and in local community spaces. These events invited former residents to share their memories of tenement life, marking the inception of the museum's oral history programme. Subsequently, a team of historians and academics worked alongside these former residents to research the museum's narrative. This ensured that the human stories were given as much prominence as the documented historical facts from the outset.

Your Tenement Memories is a collaborative project with the people of Dublin, which has enabled the museum to engage with individuals and communities across the city and its suburbs. In order to find participants for the programme, the museum issued an open call which invited people to come to 14 Henrietta Street to share their memories. This was extended to the libraries in the suburbs of Dublin, where many people who lived in the tenements had moved to. The museum's coordinators and tour guides documented hundreds of written initial accounts of memories through this process. In phase two of this programme, participants were selected based on specific criteria⁵ and invited to attend a second interview which was audio recorded.⁶

The audio recordings, which become part of the museum's collection, provide a wealth of information, both through what the participants tell and also how they tell it. As Shopes (2002) notes:

What is needed then is an understanding of oral history not so much as an exercise in fact finding but as an interpretive event, as the narrator compresses years of living into a few hours of talk, selecting, consciously and unconsciously, what to say and how to say it.



Figure 3: 14 Henrietta Street Launch former resident Peter Brannigan and Lillian Rowley Quinn Photo by Julien Behal Photography

Your Tenement Memories audio recordings capture the performative nature of the interview; the accents, the laughter, the emotions involved. The silences, the pauses and the inclinations of people's voices tell as much as the stories they are sharing. This enables the museum and its tour guides to understand the details of tenement life but also importantly preserves these accounts for future research purposes in the museum's collection. (See figure 3)

Bidzinski et al. (2017) define oral history as "the act of interviewing individuals about historic events and activities to which they were witness or involved in order to gain a more comprehensive - and personal - view of the past." Your Tenement Memories is particularly interested in participants' personal view of the past. It focuses on the daily lives of the people who lived in Henrietta Street and in tenement Dublin more widely. These personal accounts tell us about family, childhood, education, religion and many other facets of people's lives. As Blair and Reynolds (2023) discuss in relation to oral history:

The theory and practice are constantly evolving, and numerous case studies demonstrate that its inherent subjectivity should not be seen as a limitation but a strength. We all have the truth of our lived experience and that must always be respected.

The subjectivity of the oral histories collected also enables the people who visit the museum to connect to these stories. Each guided tour of the house offers visitors a unique and nuanced understanding of its past, even though the overarching narrative remains consistent across all tours. This is achieved through the guides' personal research and augmented by the museum's oral history collection which provides a valuable repository of first-hand accounts and memories

that add depth and authenticity to the tours. By actively collecting and incorporating these personal stories, 14 Henrietta Street ensures that diverse perspectives on tenement life are represented and shared. This not only enhances the tour guides knowledge but infuses the tours with a genuine and relatable quality, allowing visitors to connect to the past on a more personal level. Therefore, the tours are a multi-faceted exploration of history, offering visitors a truly unique and memorable experience.

Collecting oral histories gives participants the opportunity to tell their own truth and to describe things how they remember them. There are often differences in how things are remembered when family members are interviewed, based on the age of the person. Quite often the difficulties of living in tenement Dublin were not so apparent to younger members of the family who remember their childhood fondly playing on Henrietta Street with their friends. All accounts are valued as the participant's truth, and each brings to light a different facet of tenement Dublin. As Bidzinski et al. (2017) discuss, "The conversation an oral history generates - as collaboration between narrator and interviewer - can round out and even challenge perspectives on the past." This dialogue enables participants to revisit and dig deeper into their memories in a different manner and can often lead to insights which challenge their own previous views on the past.

Conclusion

14 Henrietta Street protects, shares and adds to the cultural life of Dublin city. Through its innovative approach to collecting and presenting history, the museum invites visitors to connect with the past on a personal level. Its oral history programme, Your Tenement Memories, continues to open up the museum to new views of the past, inviting the people of Dublin to become part of the museum and to participate in recounting the history of tenement life. By valuing the subjectivity of these accounts, the museum allows for a more inclusive understanding of Dublin's past, enabling collective memory to shape our understanding of history.

Notes

- 1 Further information on the history of the house is available here <https://14henriettastreet.ie/about/history-of-the-house/>
- 2 Available at https://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-05/dublin_city_heritage_plan_2002_2006.pdf
- 3 Available at https://www.dublincity.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-05/plean_caomhantais_shraid_henrietta_street_conservation_plan.pdf
- 4 Dublin City Council Culture Company Strategy 2019-2024 available at <https://www.dublincitycouncilculturecompany.ie/content/files/DCCCC-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf>
- 5 Participants were selected based on where the tenement they lived was located, with number 14 and Henrietta Street being the priority, and when they lived there.
- 6 Participants sign a participation and recording agreement and have the opportunity to request any changes, redactions, omissions and/or edits needed before signing final consent.

References

- Abrams, L. (2016). *Oral History Theory* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Black, G. (2011). Museums, Memory and History. *Cultural and Social History*, 8. 415-427. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275820607_Museums_Memory_and_History/link/5fcb6617299bf188d4f606e6/download?tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnNOUGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19, accessed 27 February 2025.
- Blair, W. and Reynolds, C. (2023) Dealing with the legacy of the past: oral history and museums in Northern Ireland. *Oral History*, 51 (1), 114-127
- Bidzinski, H., Giesbrecht, J., Hinthner, R. L., Reilly, S. (2017). Building the Oral History Program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*. 37.
- Cento Bull, A. and Reynolds, C. (2021). Uses of Oral History in Museums: A Tool for Agonism and Dissonance or Promoting a Linear Narrative?. *Museum & Society*, 19(3), 283-300. <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v19i3.3520>, accessed 27 February 2025.
- Shopes, L. (2002). Making Sense of Oral History, *History Matters: The US Survey Course on the Web*. <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/oral.pdf>, accessed 27 February 2025.

Oral histories revisited

Reactivating Oral Histories In Washington, D.C.

Miriam Doutriaux

Biography

Miriam Doutriaux is head of collections at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum, where she oversees the preservation, documentation and interpretation of collections and leads efforts to involve local constituents in collections stewardship. Previously, she was the exhibition curator for pre-Columbian art at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum. Doutriaux holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and a BA from McGill University. Research interests include the history of collecting and the ways identity connects with material culture.

Narratives of Community

Dianne Dale grew up in southeast Washington, D.C. in the 1940s, and remembers many movie theaters, among them the Carver Theater. “The Carver Theater was ours. We grew up with that movie theater. And we could go there on Saturdays for nine cents and stay all day and watch Lash LaRue [Westerns]”. A fourth-generation Washingtonian, Dale lived in the middle-class African American neighborhood of Anacostia. The movie theater she frequented in her youth eventually closed, and in 1967, the building was renovated to house what is now the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum, a place Dale described as “our museum”, where “you just stopped in to say hello to somebody that you knew who worked there” (Dale 1992).

Della Lowery moved to Anacostia from Massachusetts, and recalled “there were houses on the street that had no running water and had no electricity. [...] And I was amazed, because I thought of Washington, DC in terms of being a major city, not expecting to find those kinds of conditions in 1950.” The community grew quickly in the wake of a federal program of “urban renewal” that displaced residents from other parts of Washington, DC, but it retained a neighborly character. Interviewed in 1971, Lowery reflected that “It was a very cooperative neighborhood and still is really. It’s always been that way. That’s one reason I’m still living there” (Lowery 1971).



Figure 1: Community members and staff associated with the DC Women Speak project gather in front of a banner printed in their honor. Audi Field, Washington, D.C., August 2024. Photograph by Joseph Campbell. Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

Dale and Lowery are among hundreds of local residents whose narratives offer a history of Washington, D.C. rooted in the city's neighborhoods and communities. Archived at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum (ACM), they are the result of a steady effort to record oral histories since the early 1970s. Initially recorded on audio reels and cassette tapes, and eventually in digital format, the interviews are a key part of the museum's practice and have long informed exhibitions and programming. The interlocutors, subject matter and format have varied over time, but the conversations have sustained and encouraged a museology guided by community voices and intent on sharing and reflecting local perspectives. They also preserve a record of an evolving city where residents have made homes, founded businesses, gathered for celebration and mobilized for change. In recent years, digital tools and platforms have opened new opportunities for sharing, interpreting, and activating this rich record. The museum's DC Women Speak project invites online exploration and renewed engagement with oral histories collected over the past five decades. (See figure 1)

Recording Unsung Histories

The Museum launched its first oral history project in 1970, in an effort to capture the remembered history of the Anacostia neighborhood. At a time of emerging interest in African American history in the United States, the museum's director articulated an ambitious and transformative goal: to rectify gaps in Washington, D.C.'s historical record, particularly with respect to the presence, role and contributions of Black Americans, and "to inspire a sense of pride and to heighten the aspirations for dignity and self-assurance of every person, no matter his station in life" (Kinard 1977:x). The museum undertook to document the neighborhood and city through extensive archival research and on-the-ground evidence gathering. It was among the first to use a "unique and exciting technique [...] that is part of the black experience: the taking of oral history from the people themselves" (ibid).

In a series of public meetings, the museum's historian Louise Hutchinson recruited dozens of local residents who agreed to be interviewed about their community. Narrators answered a series of formal questions about their work, local businesses, churches, schools and city services, but also reminisced about earlier times and offered their opinions and perspectives on current issues. The project captured a broad range of voices, including those of African Americans but also white Americans, professionals, business owners and laborers, longtime residents and newcomers to the neighborhood. The conversations flourished in no small part due to existing ties between residents and staff, and excitement about the Museum's mandate of direct engagement with the community. Eventually, narrators saw their stories incorporated into exhibitions on display in the museum's gallery, such as *Evolution of a Community* (1972) and *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930* (1977).

Other projects followed, with a focus on different neighborhoods and other topics. One gathered the stories of Black immigrants to the Washington, D.C. region. Curator Portia James worked closely with first-generation residents from South and Central America and the Caribbean to

document their experiences of arrival and integration in a new environment. Conversations in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole explored questions of race, culture, identity, and belonging. James developed the project into the exhibition *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D. C.* (1993). In keeping with the museum's practice, however, she centered the oral history process as a goal in its own right. It was through conversations with and among members of varied cultural communities that the exhibition took shape. The museum hosted forums for discussing culture and identity, and deliberately modeled for other museums and cultural institutions a collaborative approach to understanding and interpreting immigration.

Oral history has always been created in relationships, between the interviewer and interviewee, often delving deep into personal memories and evoking new reflections. Even when conducted with the goal of data gathering, the engagement is social, personal and collaborative. At ACM and other city museums, the subject matter is close at hand and many curatorial projects are a reason and context for conversing with neighbors. In project after project, discussions with other residents of our city serve to develop content, inform the structure of exhibitions and programs, and even inspire new avenues of research. Importantly, they also impact our neighbors who articulate their thoughts, share their lives and accomplishments, reflect on new topics and find validation of their stories. In the past, these conversations retired when oral history entered the archives, but this is changing in the digital age.

Rediscovering the Narratives

Until recently, most of the museum's oral histories collected in the pre-digital era remained on physical media stored in boxes in the archives. They were consulted occasionally by researchers, by appointment, but remained little known outside of academia. Most narrators in previous decades expected this. How could they have anticipated a world in which archives were digitally open to the world 24/7? Once the project was completed, once the exhibition closed, so too the voices left the public sphere. In many cases, narrators' interactions with the museum became less frequent, or stopped altogether as subsequent projects moved to address different topics and engage other communities of people. Many of the interviews faded from memory, except for the occasional citation in a publication or exhibition.

In 2021, the Anacostia Community Museum launched the DC Women Speak project¹ to digitize and catalogue hundreds of audio recordings so as to preserve and facilitate access to the remarkable narratives they hold. Among them were those associated with past exhibition projects including *Evolution of a Community* (1972), *Anacostia Story* (1977), and *Black Mosaic* (1993). ACM's archivist, Jennifer Morris, led efforts to create digital copies of the recordings and detailed descriptive records of their contents in the Smithsonian online virtual archive. The project was designed to facilitate discovery, so the records include subject tags identifying topics, persons, institutions, cultural groups and places mentioned. These act as access points for anyone conducting a keyword search online. Likewise, project archivists developed biographical

information about each interviewee, using museum records or researching genealogical or census records. Reparative cataloguing seeks to create more accurate and inclusive descriptions of collections by adding contextual information or replacing outdated or harmful language. A conscious effort was made to note individual characteristics such as race and gender in contexts where it seemed relevant, and to name all women, even those previously recorded as Mrs. [Husband's Name].

An associated *DC Women Speak* website presents curated stories of community drawn from the interviews. Online visitors can listen to women like Dianne Dale and Della Lowery share their thoughts and recollections in 4-7 minute narratives. Each story is illustrated with historic photographs and includes contextual information and a short bio, as well as a link to the online record for the full interview. The website also offers the possibility to explore stories thematically by selecting from categories including food, family, education, arts & culture, health, activism, migration, and race & identity. The stories are remarkable and varied, a tribute to the generations of interviewees who were willing to share their voices with the museum and their city.

Renewing Ties

The very public nature of the website and online archive created an important opportunity to reach back out to the original narrators. They had shared and allowed publication of their personal stories in a pre-digital era but might find the prospect of their voices being broadcast online unnerving or possibly unwelcome. Words spoken in a different era can land differently when heard in a new context. The project team therefore developed an updated list of contacts for original narrators or their family members and set out to introduce our work. Very quickly, our emails or phone calls turned into conversations of their own. Many narrators expressed curiosity and joy at rediscovering decades-old interviews and reflecting on their younger selves. One octogenarian described her recovered recording as a treasured memento of a period of her life she had forgotten. She found new motivation to share her life story with others. Family members expressed gratitude for recordings they had not known existed. One daughter wrote “I was very moved by seeing my mother’s photo, and some of my “other mothers” photos [...] The project “DC Women Speak” highlighting women who helped raise me, was sooooo moving and brought back so many memories.”

In tandem with these expressions of excitement and deep appreciation, the speakers also shared new information with museum staff, and helped correct or clarify the museum’s records. New portrait photographs illustrate several of the stories. A disagreement over the details of a story led to a discussion about the inherent subjectivity of oral histories, and the potential for multiple perspectives of a place or event. In many cases, women also shared new stories inspired by the ones they had encountered. The new documentation has enriched what was already a very diverse and democratic set of records.

The project has also had unanticipated impact beyond the original group of narrators. A local high school used the *DC Women Speak* website to encourage students to reflect on the significance of personal stories and the power of community in our city’s history. It hosted an exhibition of student artworks inspired by the DC Women’s narratives. The museum also received a request from the Washington Spirit professional women’s soccer team to honor the narrators with a banner at a home game in August 2024. This served as an occasion to gather in person at the stadium, for what became a de-facto reunion of project participants, a multigenerational cross-section of people connected to oral history projects the museum had conducted between the 1970s and the 1990s. In the words of Dianne Dale, who attended, “it was fun!”

Digital tools and platforms create opportunities to expand accessibility and increase engagement with historic collections, and they also have the potential to renew conversations and stimulate new interactions. The *DC Women Speak* project was launched with the goal to invite online exploration of oral history narratives held in the archives. It became an opportunity to share powerful stories of community, to cultivate interest in local history, and to renew ties to past interviewees and their families. At the root, a remarkable decades-long endeavor to record voices, experiences and perspectives of Washington, D.C. continues to inspire and connect.

Notes

- 1 The *DC Women Speak* project was funded in part by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative Pool administered by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum.

References

- Dale, D. (1992) Oral history interview (ACM 25th Anniversary Oral History Project, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution).
- Kinard, J. (1977) ‘Foreword’. In L. D. Hutchinson, *The Anacostia Story: 1608-1930*, pp. ix-x. Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lowery, D. (1971) Oral history interview (Evolution of a Community: 1972 Exhibition Records, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution).

City Identities – plural narratives

Two city museums, two collections that tells the history of Montréal with a multivocal approach

Andrea Delaplace

Biography

Andréa Cristina Delaplace is an art historian and anthropologist. She holds a doctorate in art history (specializing in Heritage and Museums) from ED 441 History of Art, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (thesis director Dominique Poulot). She is also a member of the board of ICOM-CAMOC (International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities) and editor of the CAMOC Review since 2022. She recently published *Musées d'immigration : nouvelles muséographies, anciens paradigmes* (Immigration Museums: New Museographies, Old Paradigms), based on her doctoral thesis, with Éditions L'Harmattan.

Introduction

While museums have traditionally focused on preserving tangible and intangible heritage, they now face increasing political, social, and cultural challenges. The recent ICOM debates on redefining museums highlighted their evolving role as spaces for critical dialogue and social justice.

History museums, once shaped by dominant, official narratives, are now embracing multivocality—a shift promoted by social museology since the 1970s. A central challenge remains: integrating dominant national narratives with those of marginalized groups, including Indigenous peoples and immigrant communities.

In light of postcolonial critique and decolonization movements, museums are increasingly recognizing the multiplicity of historical narratives and the need to reflect cultural diversity in their collections and exhibitions. The aim is to examine how museums represent “the other” in contemporary society.

This figure of the “Other” may refer to the immigrant, central to my own research, or to the Indigenous person, historically constructed through colonial narratives such as the “noble savage” and systematically marginalized by structures of domination. In this context, museums hold the potential to serve as spaces for reconciliation and social cohesion, engaging in what may be termed a *museology of reconciliation*—an approach aimed at addressing historical injustices and fostering dialogue in increasingly polarized societies.

The “museology of reconciliation” (Galla, 1995; Guzin-Lukic, 2001) offers a framework for museums to actively engage with multicultural and multiethnic communities. Drawing from social museology (Brulon Soares, 2015), which advocates participatory practices rooted in community engagement, this approach promotes living together as both an ethical commitment and a curatorial method.

Montréal is home to several museums that interpret the city’s history through diverse lenses, including the McCord Stewart Museum, the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises, Pointe-à-Callière, and Château Ramezay. The McCord Stewart foregrounds social history and Indigenous perspectives within a formerly private collection; the MEM emphasizes oral histories and the plural identities of Montréalers; Pointe-à-Callière offers archaeological insight at the city’s founding site; and Château Ramezay presents a broad narrative from Indigenous prehistory to the modern era. Together, these institutions illustrate how multivocality, reconciliation, and urban heritage converge in contemporary museology.

In this article, I will explore the historical development of the collections of the McCord Stewart and MEM museums, and examine how both are currently engaging in postcolonial approaches to expand their collections—highlighting efforts to include diverse, often marginalized voices in the narrative of Montréal’s heritage.

1. Teaching Their Own History in Their Own Words: The Importance of First Peoples' Voices

In Canada, the process of Reconciliation accelerated after 2015, when the government formally acknowledged the harm caused to First Nations by colonial policies. That year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report, based on testimony from over 6,500 witnesses, along with 94 Calls to Action to redress the legacy of residential schools.

In December 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged a “renewed, nation-to-nation relationship” with First Nations, signaling a shift in national discourse. However, critics argue that efforts at Indigenization risk being symbolic—treating Indigenous participation as a means to ease colonial guilt rather than enabling real structural change.

In the museum field, this shift is visible through growing efforts at decolonization (removing colonial frameworks) and Indigenization (integrating Indigenous knowledge and voices) when creating new exhibitions and ways of displaying the permanent collections. These concepts, though distinct, share a common goal: to correct historical exclusions by creating space for Indigenous narratives in exhibitions, collections, and governance. The main key questions that arise:

- How do museums select communities to collaborate with?
- What methods can effectively reach and involve historically marginalized groups?
- How can these relationships be sustained long-term?
- What mistakes have been made—and what can be learned?
- How can reconciliation be meaningfully embedded into institutional structures?
- Museums today must move beyond symbolic gestures and engage in genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities, allowing them to tell their own stories in their own voices.

2. Gathered together - The idea of reconciliation and creating respect towards indigenous cultures

Museums have long been complicit in colonial practices, especially through the unethical acquisition of Indigenous artefacts and the silencing of Indigenous voices. These actions often reflected a broader colonial intent: to assert dominance over Indigenous peoples by controlling their material culture and narratives. Today, decolonizing museums means reversing these dynamics by giving voice and authority back to the communities whose heritage is on display.

The Indigenous Heritage Circle (IHC)¹ offers a vital framework for this shift. It defines Indigenous heritage as:

“Complex and dynamic... encompassing ideas, experiences, belongings, artistic expressions, practices, knowledge, and places that are valued because they are culturally meaningful and connected to shared memory. Indigenous heritage cannot be separated from either Indigenous identity or Indigenous life.”²

This definition underscores that Indigenous heritage is living and evolving—not frozen in time—and intrinsically tied to identity, land, and memory. It challenges museums to move beyond token inclusion toward ethical collaboration and meaningful representation.

Decolonization, in this context, is not simply about restitution or land rights—it’s about restoring voice, agency, and cultural continuity. It also means educating non-Indigenous publics to foster greater respect, understanding, and accountability. This is where the museum’s role expands: from preservation to dialogue, from authority to shared stewardship.

In Canadian museums, decolonization and Indigenization are increasingly practiced through: land acknowledgements as a standard practice in public programming; revision of terminology, replacing colonial or racist descriptors with culturally accurate language; hiring and inclusion of Indigenous staff in curatorial, leadership, and educational roles; respecting the right to heritage, by aligning with the principles of UNDRIP³ (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), particularly regarding community control over cultural material; provenance research and digital repatriation, ensuring Indigenous peoples can access and interpret their heritage; Institutional reforms, aimed at dismantling systemic racism, oppression, and exclusion at all levels of museum operations. Nonetheless, several critical questions persist and warrant further examination:

- How can cultural institutions establish trust-based, long-term partnerships with Indigenous communities?
- What frameworks or mechanisms can ensure that inclusion moves beyond symbolic gestures to become structurally embedded within institutional practices?
- In what ways can museums confront and take responsibility for their colonial legacies, and what does meaningful accountability entail in this context?

These are not quick fixes, but ongoing processes. At the heart of reconciliation is the act of listening and thus amplifying Indigenous voices not as subjects of history, but as co-authors of a shared future. In this way, museums can become spaces not just for exhibiting culture, but for co-creating it.

3. The Montreal Social History Museum: Musée McCord Stewart

The McCord Stewart Museum, originally founded in 1921 by David Ross McCord to house his family's private collection, has since evolved into a major institution with extensive holdings. Over the past century, the museum has significantly expanded its collections, which now encompass diverse aspects of Montréal's social history, its role within Québec and Canada, and the ongoing presence and vitality of Indigenous cultures.

As a social history museum, the McCord Stewart has increasingly adopted a decolonial approach, particularly through long-standing collaborations with Indigenous communities dating back to the early 20th century. Contemporary initiatives reflect a shift in curatorial practice: exhibitions focusing on Indigenous cultures are now co-created with Indigenous partners, centring their voices, perspectives, and historical narratives. Moreover, the museum is actively re-evaluating its collections practices; the documentation and interpretation of objects are now conducted in direct dialogue with Indigenous representatives, ensuring cultural accuracy, accountability, and shared authority in knowledge production.

At the McCord Stewart Museum in Montréal, Jonathan Lainey, curator of Indigenous collections at the McCord Stewart Museum and a member of the Huron-Wendat Nation, plays a central role in advancing decolonial museological practices. With a background in history and deep expertise in Indigenous heritage, Lainey advocates for collaborative curatorial approaches that respect and centre Indigenous voices. His work aligns closely with the influence of Élisabeth Kaine, whose contributions to community-based museology—particularly through her leadership at *La Boîte Rouge Vif*—have significantly shaped the museum's engagement with Indigenous communities. Kaine's methodologies, grounded in co-creation and cultural self-representation, have informed McCord's efforts to not only reframe its existing collections but also develop new exhibitions in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders. Together, Lainey and Kaine exemplify a shift toward inclusive, ethically grounded museology in the context of reconciliation and Indigenous cultural resurgence. (See figure 1)

As part of my postdoctoral research, I had the opportunity to interview Jonathan Lainey and he emphasized the importance of establishing respectful, long-term relationships with Indigenous communities and highlighted the museum's commitment to co-creation. In this context, he pointed to the pivotal role of Élisabeth Kaine, as a leading figure in the development of co-creative museological practices in Québec. Kaine's work with *La Boîte Rouge Vif*⁶ has been instrumental in shaping methodologies that prioritize Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, and modes of representation. Her approach to collaborative and decolonial practices has served as a model for institutions like the McCord Stewart Museum and the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec city, demonstrating how collaborative frameworks can lead to more ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded museum practices.

La Boîte Rouge Vif is an Indigenous-led cultural organisation based in Québec that specializes in community engagement, heritage preservation, and participatory museology. Founded in 2004 and closely linked to the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), it works primarily with First Nations communities, particularly the Innu, to develop projects that promote Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and ways of seeing the world.

The organisation is best known for its innovative approach to social museology (or “museology from within” as they call it), where Indigenous communities actively lead the research, interpretation, and presentation of their own heritage. It uses multimedia tools, immersive installations, and traveling exhibitions to support cultural transmission and intergenerational dialogue. It plays a significant role in the broader movement toward decolonizing museums and rethinking heritage practices in Québec and Canada, prioritizing Indigenous agency and voice at every stage of cultural work.

As an example, between 2010 and 2013, *La Boîte Rouge Vif*, in collaboration with the Musée de la civilisation in Québec, led an extensive consultation tour involving the eleven Indigenous Nations of Québec. Nearly 700 participants took part in this unprecedented initiative, resulting in a vast cultural repertoire: over 5,000 pages of transcribed testimonies, 250 hours of video recordings, and 10,000 photographs.

This project gave voice to individuals across generations, genders, and areas of interest, creating a vivid and multifaceted self-portrait of their cultures and the contemporary challenges they face. Within this rich corpus, the living heritage of each Nation comes to life—through landscapes, stories, and experiences. The words of First Nations and Inuit participants form the core of the project, accompanied by powerful photographic documentation. Together, they convey a profound wisdom—one that reflects on the past while envisioning the future.

In 2023, Jonathan Lainey curated the significant exhibition “Wampum: Beads of Diplomacy.” This exhibition explored the historical, political, and cultural meanings of wampum belts—objects of deep importance for many Indigenous nations in Eastern North America. By presenting these belts not merely as artifacts, but as living records of diplomacy, alliances, and oral traditions, Lainey challenged conventional museological approaches and emphasized Indigenous epistemologies. His curatorial vision, informed by both scholarly and community-based knowledge, reflects a broader institutional shift at the McCord Stewart Museum toward decolonial practice and co-creation with Indigenous partners. (See figure 2)

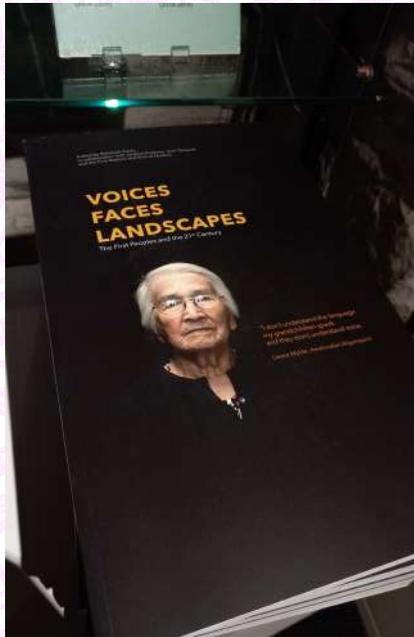


Figure 1: Book by la Boite Rouge Vif dedicated to co-creation with Indigenous communities



Figure 2: Entrance of McCord Museum Exhibition

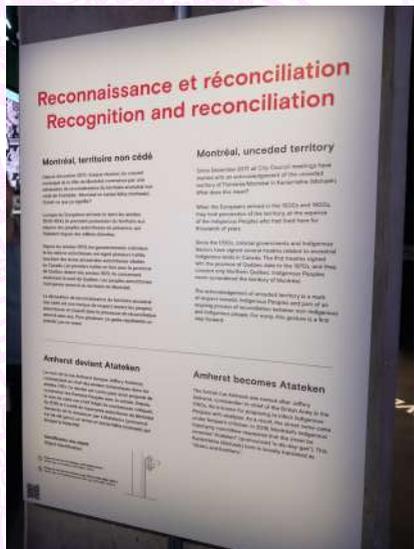


Figure 3: Photo MEM 2024 - Recognition and Reconciliation in Montreal



Figure 4: Forum open to all inhabitants of Montreal at the MEM

4. The MEM : “You are the history of Montreal, together let’s talk about you!”

The MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises (re)opened in September 2023 with new name, location and exhibitions. But this institution has a long history connecting with its local communities in Montréal. The Centre d’histoire de Montréal (previous name of the same institution) was created in 1983. How to collect the city’s histories through the memories of its inhabitants that’s the proposition of the MEM (that is already imprinted in the museum’s own name).

At the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises, the central objective is to reflect the plural identities that constitute the fabric of Montréal, including the histories and ongoing presence of Indigenous communities. Any city museum that seeks to narrate the history of Montréal must necessarily engage with Indigenous heritage as an integral component of local identity. The MEM’s collection is primarily composed of oral histories and objects from popular culture, emphasizing everyday experiences and diverse perspectives. This approach invites Montréalers to revisit their own history through the lens of others, fostering a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of the city’s past and present. (See figure 3)

The forum located at the entrance of the MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises functions as an open, accessible space designed to welcome all citizens, whether they wish to visit the exhibitions, have a coffee, or simply spend time in a communal environment. This space reflects the museum’s core philosophy: it is not only about the inhabitants of Montréal, but first and foremost, a museum *for* them. The forum fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging by offering free access to amenities such as seating areas and temporary exhibitions—such as *A Mile in My Shoes*⁶ (on view from February 27, 2024, to August 31, 2025)—without the requirement of purchasing admission. In doing so, the museum affirms its commitment to civic engagement, social accessibility, and the democratization of cultural spaces.

The MEM – Centre des mémoires montréalaises is a museum primarily focused on oral history from the 20th and 21st centuries. Its temporary exhibitions—such as *Détours*—highlight the cultural and religious diversity of Montréal’s neighborhoods through the personal narratives of its residents. By foregrounding individual and community voices, the museum plays a critical role in preserving and interpreting Montréal’s cultural and historical heritage. It serves as a platform for exploring the multiplicity of experiences that have shaped the city, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding among its diverse communities.

This approach illustrates how Montréal offers a compelling model for representing urban history through multiple perspectives. Whether through the McCord Stewart Museum, which has transitioned from a private collection to a socially engaged institution foregrounding Indigenous voices and heritage, or through MEM’s emphasis on memory, oral testimony, and community participation, these institutions collectively underscore the importance of inclusive museological practices. At the heart of MEM’s mission is the commitment to documenting personal and collective experiences, particularly those of historically marginalized groups, thereby contributing to a richer and more equitable understanding of the city’s identity. (See figure 4)

Multivocal Approaches in Montréal's City Museums: Towards a Museology of Reconciliation

This paper examined two Montréal museums—the McCord Stewart Museum and the MEM—Centre des mémoires montréalaises—as examples of multivocal approaches to city history. While the MEM, supported by the City of Montréal, focuses on popular culture and oral histories from the 20th and 21st centuries, it integrates Indigenous heritage through toponymy and testimonies of Indigenous citizens, despite lacking a dedicated Indigenous collection. This reflects an inclusive, community-based museology committed to representing the city's diverse identities.

In contrast, the McCord Stewart Museum, originally founded in 1921 from a private collection, demonstrates how a legacy institution can engage in decolonial practices. Through sustained collaboration with Indigenous communities, the hiring of Indigenous staff, and co-curated exhibitions—such as the recent *Wampum* exhibit curated by Jonathan Lainey—the museum reinterprets its collections with a view to restorative narrative justice.

Both institutions embody distinct yet complementary models of city museums—one centered on oral memory and contemporary life, the other on historical material culture recontextualized through Indigenous perspectives. Together, they show how plural narratives can be harnessed to foster dialogue and inclusivity.

This curatorial evolution unfolds within a broader social context marked by increasing polarization. Contemporary societies face growing divisions around immigration, gender, systemic racism, and economic insecurity—particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising living costs. In this climate, history and society museums can play a conciliatory role by fostering intercultural understanding and dialogue.

As the McCord Stewart Museum states, its goal is to “initiate a dialogue for better mutual understanding,”⁷⁷ while the MEM aspires to “bring the city to life through a multiplicity of perspectives.”⁷⁸ Both affirm the potential of museums to act as civic spaces for plural memory and shared futures.

In conclusion, both the McCord Stewart Museum and the MEM—Centre des mémoires montréalaises exemplify evolving museological practices that foreground inclusion, dialogue, and multivocality in narrating the history of Montréal. Their respective approaches—one rooted in participatory oral history, the other in decolonizing historical collections—illustrate how city museums can serve as platforms for cultural pluralism and social cohesion. They also embody, in different ways, the principles of a museology of reconciliation, offering space for marginalized voices and contributing to the broader project of rethinking heritage in a fractured society.

However, a critical evaluation of these practices reveals ongoing challenges. Key among them is the question of power and agency: How influential are Indigenous individuals and communities in shaping museum narratives and curatorial decisions? To what extent is their participation structural rather than symbolic? While the hiring of Indigenous curators, such as Jonathan Lainey at the McCord, and partnerships with institutions like La Boîte Rouge Vif signal meaningful progress, the sustainability of these networks remains uncertain.

Additionally, the dependency of museums on national and provincial policy frameworks raises concerns about continuity. What happens to these collaborative efforts if political priorities shift? Will institutional commitments to reconciliation and decolonization persist in the absence of supportive policy environments?

These questions underscore the necessity for museums not only to engage with communities but also to embed those relationships into their institutional structures. Moving forward, museums must work towards governance models that guarantee Indigenous authority and continuity, irrespective of changing political landscapes. Only through such structural transformations can the promise of multivocal and reconciliatory museology be fully realized.

Notes

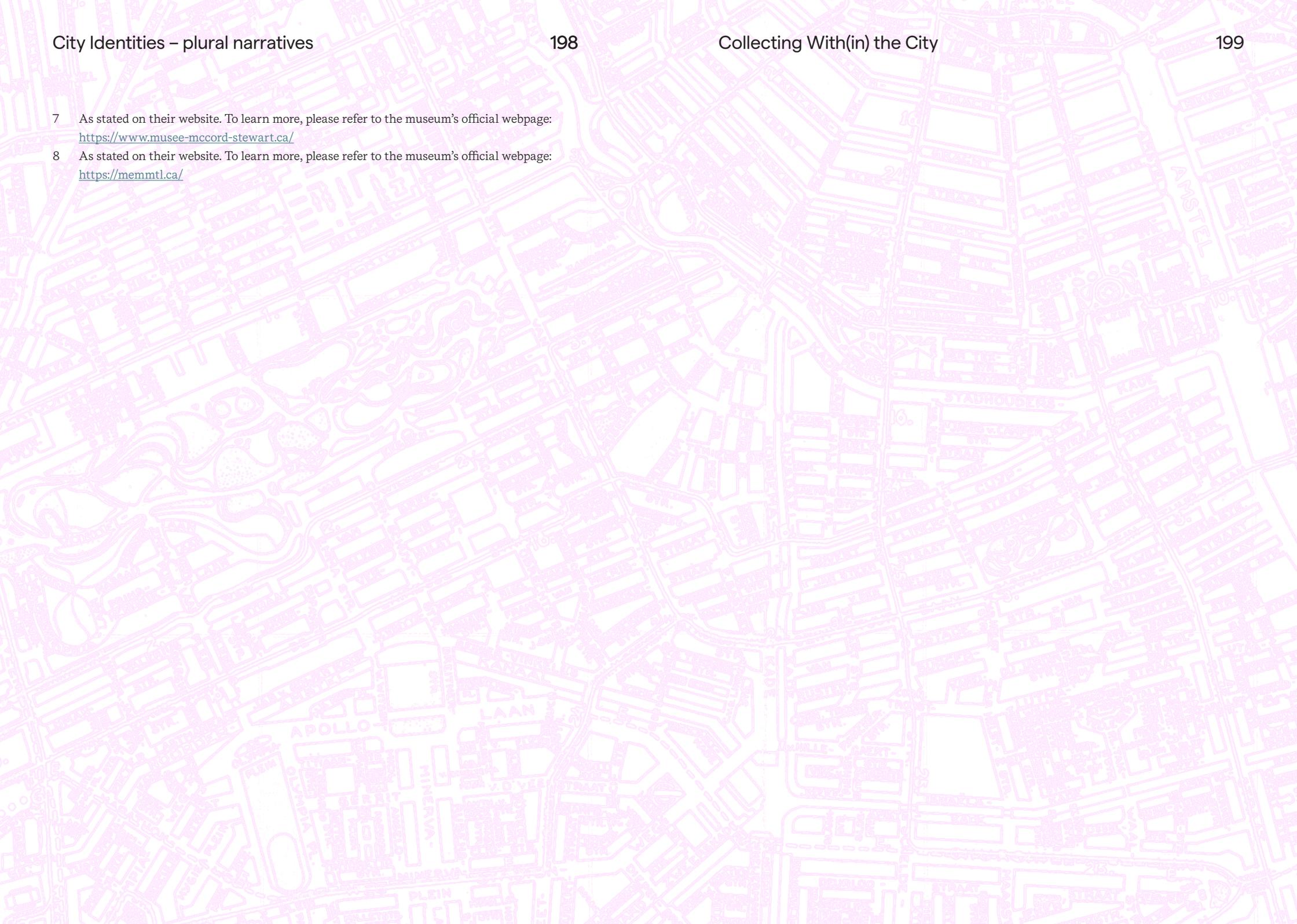
- 1 The Indigenous Heritage Circle is a national Indigenous-led organization in Canada that advocates for the recognition, protection, and promotion of Indigenous heritage in all its forms. It aims to support Indigenous communities in safeguarding their cultural heritage and provides guidance to institutions on best practices for respectful and collaborative engagement. The IHC defines Indigenous heritage as complex, dynamic, and inseparable from Indigenous identity and life—encompassing ideas, practices, belongings, knowledge, and places rooted in shared memory and cultural meaning. For more information on the Indigenous Heritage Circle: <https://indigenousheritage.ca/>
- 2 This definition of Indigenous heritage, developed by members of the Indigenous circle, is rooted in the beliefs and values of Indigenous communities. Complex and dynamic, it embraces ideas, experiences, belongings, artistic expressions, practices, knowledge, and places that hold cultural meaning and connect to shared memory, inseparable from Indigenous identity and life.
- 3 For the full declaration please check here: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenousspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf
- 4 For more info on this organisation please check their website: <https://www.laboiterougevif.com/>
- 5 It was also present at the genesis of CAMOC in 1993 at the Museum of London.
- 6 The exhibition above mentioned, a project by the Empathy Museum, devised in London by Clare Patey, brings 30 stories of Montrealers from different cultural and social backgrounds.: <https://memmtl.ca/en/programming/a-mile-in-my-shoes>

7 As stated on their website. To learn more, please refer to the museum's official webpage:

<https://www.musee-mccord-stewart.ca/>

8 As stated on their website. To learn more, please refer to the museum's official webpage:

<https://memmtl.ca/>



City Identities – plural narratives

Building an Urban-Based Collection: The Case of Cheonggyecheon Museum, a Branch of the Seoul Museum of History

Park Hyounmin

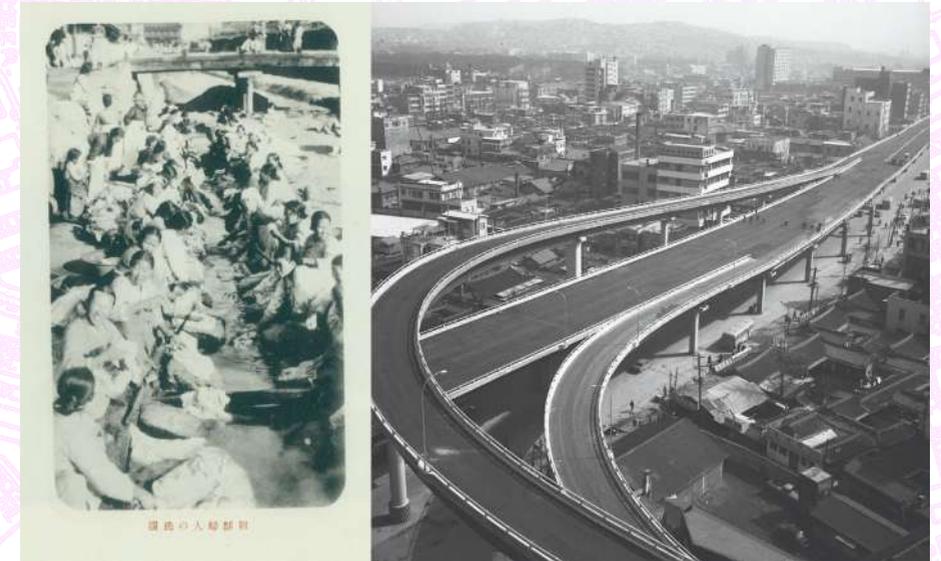
Biography

Park Hyounmin holds a master's degree in Korean art history from Ewha Womans University and has been a curator at the Seoul Museum of History since 2005. She is currently the Head of the Research and Survey Division, specializing in urban heritage preservation. She curated multiple exhibitions at the Cheonggyecheon Museum and has worked extensively on the conservation of Seoul's tangible and intangible heritage. Her notable publications include *Seoul Map* (2006) and *Joseon White Porcelain* (2008).

Introduction

Seoul is a rapidly evolving metropolis where modernization continuously reshapes its landscape. However, beneath this transformation lie deep historical layers. Due to this ongoing urban development, the Seoul Metropolitan Government mandates cultural heritage surveys before any construction projects begin. If significant heritage elements are discovered, excavation efforts take precedence, halting construction until the artifacts are properly studied and preserved. The Seoul Museum of History plays a crucial role in these efforts, ensuring that urban heritage is thoroughly documented and protected before redevelopment proceeds.

Among its most ambitious urban renewal projects is the restoration of Cheonggyecheon Stream. The stream, which once served as a vital waterway, underwent modernization, covering, and later a large-scale restoration. This paper explores the urban collection efforts of the Cheonggyecheon Museum, demonstrating how urban history is preserved, documented, and presented through museum practices, with a focus on both physical artifacts and intangible cultural heritage.



The transformation of Cheonggyecheon from a communal laundry space (Joseon Dynasty) to an expressway (1970s).
Collection of the Seoul Museum of History.

The History and Transformation of Cheonggyecheon

Cheonggyecheon Stream has been central to Seoul's urban development (See figure 1). During the Joseon period (1392-1910), it was an essential waterway, but colonial and post-war urbanization led to its coverage, turning it into a highway in the 1970s. The restoration project in the early 2000s reinstated the stream as a cultural and ecological landmark, garnering both praise and criticism. While the project revitalized an urban space, it also displaced communities and erased certain historical traces. The Cheonggyecheon Museum, established in 2005, documents these transformations to ensure that the historical and social fabric of the stream is not lost.

Seoul Museum of History's Collection Strategies for Urban Heritage

The Seoul Museum of History's approach to collecting urban heritage extends beyond traditional museum practices, incorporating a broad range of tangible and intangible elements. The Cheonggyecheon Museum, as a branch, follows these key strategies:

1. Archaeological Excavation and Documentation

The museum actively excavates sites along the stream, uncovering historical artifacts, architectural remains, and tools used in daily life. These findings are preserved and contextualized within exhibitions.

2. Archival and Historical Records

Historical maps, urban planning documents, and development records provide insight into how Cheonggyecheon has changed over centuries. Government records, media reports, and environmental assessments from the restoration project are essential sources.

3. Oral Histories and Community Narratives

Recognizing the importance of intangible heritage, the museum conducts interviews with former residents, shop owners, and industrial workers who lived and worked near the stream. These narratives capture social and cultural changes that physical artifacts alone cannot convey.

4. Industrial and Commercial Heritage

Cheonggyecheon was historically a hub for small-scale industries and commercial activity. The museum collects shop signs, manufacturing tools, and trade-related documents to illustrate the economic history of the area.

5. Continuous Collection and Research

Unlike conventional museums that passively house static exhibits, the Cheonggyecheon Museum continuously collects artifacts and historical data from the surrounding area. This dynamic process allows the museum to integrate recent discoveries into its exhibitions and educational programs, reinforcing its role as a living archive of Seoul's urban transformation.

Exhibitions and Public Programs

The museum curates thematic exhibitions that bring urban history to life. Notable exhibitions include: To convey the history of the city in a more engaging and accessible manner, the museum curates thematic exhibitions categorized into three major themes: “History,” “Topography: Waterways,” and “Local Lifestyles.” Representative exhibitions include the following:

Juncheon (준천, 準川) – Showcasing Cheonggyecheon's role in Joseon-era drainage management, featuring excavated artifacts and historical illustrations of the king's procession crossing the stream. A significant highlight is the connection between recovered iron gate relics from Cheonggyecheon's excavation and their depiction in historical paintings, which provide invaluable insights into the stream's historical infrastructure. Juncheon refers to a managed or regulated waterway, emphasizing the historical efforts to control and maintain the flow of the stream. During the Joseon Dynasty, the king would issue direct orders to oversee the cleaning and maintenance of Cheonggyecheon, ensuring the proper management of the city's main waterway.¹ (See figure 2)



Figure 2: An iron gate excavated from Cheonggyecheon (left) and its depiction in a historical painting from the Juncheon exhibition poster (right). Collection of the Seoul Museum of History.

Baekundongcheon (백운동천) – This exhibition explores the tributary streams of Cheonggyecheon, based on research conducted over multiple years. It showcases the transformation of riverside communities and the evolving lifestyles of residents along the stream, illustrating how the environment shaped daily life through different eras.²

Made in Cheonggyecheon: Media Art × Sewoon Arcade – This exhibition series focuses on the evolving character of Cheonggyecheon’s surrounding communities from the Joseon era to modern times. It examines how the area transitioned from a settlement of traditional Seoul natives to a hub for new migrants, who played a significant role in shaping its commercial landscape. The exhibition highlights the construction of Sewoon Arcade, Seoul’s first mixed-use residential-commercial complex built in the late 1960s, and how its secondhand electronics market flourished. Notably, it features a story about how world-renowned video artist Nam June Paik sourced broken televisions from the market, incorporating them into his pioneering video art. This exhibition series demonstrates how Cheonggyecheon has continuously adapted to social and technological changes.³

Additionally, the museum organizes public programs such as guided tours, educational workshops, and participatory oral history projects, ensuring that citizens engage directly with Seoul’s urban heritage.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Cheonggyecheon Museum and the Seoul Museum of History play a crucial role in documenting and interpreting urban history in a rapidly changing metropolis. The excavation projects, oral history research, exhibitions, and museum education programs initiated by the Cheonggyecheon Museum have set a precedent for urban history museums globally. Many other cities pursuing urban regeneration projects now look to Cheonggyecheon as a model for integrating museum functions into city planning.

Looking ahead, the museum can enhance its role in urban heritage preservation through several initiatives:

1. Expanding Digital Archives: Developing interactive online exhibits and digitizing oral histories to increase accessibility.
2. Strengthening Community Collaboration: Engaging former residents, industry experts, and local organizations in storytelling and archival projects.
3. Enhancing Public Participation: Broadening educational programs, participatory exhibitions, and workshops to foster a deeper connection between the public and urban history.
4. Balancing Heritage and Development: Continuing research on unpreserved sections of Cheonggyecheon and advocating for the historical recognition of evolving urban spaces.

By integrating historical narratives into contemporary urban development, the Cheonggyecheon Museum provides a sustainable model for urban heritage preservation worldwide.

Notes

- 1 The exhibition, titled *Juncheon: Connecting Yeongjo and Baekseong*¹, was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from August 26 to November 5, 2017: *Juncheon: Connecting Yeongjo and Baekseong* was a special exhibition at the Cheonggyecheon Museum that explored the symbolic and functional roles of water management under King Yeongjo, emphasizing the link between royal authority and civic life.
- 2 The exhibition, titled *Baekundongcheon*², was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from December 15, 2017 to March 25, 2018.: *Baekundongcheon* was a special exhibition that explored the social and spatial transformations of the tributary streams of Cheonggyecheon, focusing on the interplay between water, environment, and everyday life in riverside communities.
- 3 The exhibition, titled *Media Art × Sewoon Arcade*³, was held at the Cheonggyecheon Museum from December 10, 2020 to May 9, 2021: *Media Art × Sewoon Arcade* was a special exhibition that explored the evolving identity of the Cheonggyecheon area, focusing on urban transition, secondhand technology culture, and media art practices in and around Sewoon Arcade.

City Identities – plural narratives

Collecting with(in) Cairo: Towards Enhancing the Living Heritage of the Coffeehouses

Manar Mazhar Ashour Hassan

Biography

Manar is a Learning specialist at the Grand Egyptian Museum. She holds a double MA in museum studies from the Universities of Würzburg and Helwan. She has participated in various museography projects in Egypt, Germany, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. In her thesis project, she worked on the first assumption of a city museum in Egypt. In 2022 she started her educational content on social media to raise awareness about Heritage and Museums.

Like all global mega-cities, the city of Cairo is known for its rich diversity of living heritage, full of life, sketching a vibrant cultural scene that adds value to places, streets, walls and more. The people of Cairo have unique memories of the city; they connect to Cairo's coffeehouses, which are regarded as places of social life and entertainment.

In Cairo, rethinking what museums collect and how they collect, means moving beyond physical objects to capture the city's sounds, rhythms, stories, and people. Revising and changing the collecting and displaying practices is to explore how historical collections can inspire new insights and question how to care for contemporary narratives. Cairo Museums are re-displaying their collections to include stories and experiences through participatory projects with local communities of the city. In this empirical study, interviews with café owners, regular café visitors, and historians who wrote their works of literature in cafés contribute to understanding beyond the place and objects of Cairo Coffeehouses.

In Cairo, coffeehouses are believed to have originated in the 16th century, shortly after coffee was introduced to the region. The traditional *Qahwa* (Coffee) culture appeared during the Ottoman era (when Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire), with a unique story of place and a culture that lives until modern times, 'Specialty Coffee Shops.'



A photo in 1997 at El Fishawi Historic Café in Cairo featuring the author and her family gathering and enjoying a day while making memories at the coffeehouse

Built on the ruins of historic buildings, the coffeehouses of Cairo witnessed the city's social and political history. The function of coffeehouses as gathering places for intellectuals, artists, and revolutionaries, has always shaped and influenced various historical events. In the early years of the twentieth century, coffeehouses were the public's favourite places. Doubtless, Cairo's daily life has always included time inside coffeehouses, whether in the early mornings to get the first sip of the day or during the day to spill the tea. Among Cairo's famous historic cafés, those with a role in shaping public discourse are: Café Riche, Matatia Café, Al-Anglo Café, Al-Horeya Café, El-Lewaa Café, Fishawi and Groppi. (See figure 1)



Figure 2: A photo taken by the author from the temporary exhibition 'Intangible Cultural Heritage – A Bridge for Dialogue Among Cultures' featuring photographs and artifacts at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, celebrating the rich tapestry of ICH in Egypt through a unique dialogue.

When considering what represents the living heritage of the city, coffeehouses stand out in particular. The cultural values of coffeehouses as intangible heritage are crucial when Cairo museum professionals consider creating a city museum dedicated to Cairo.¹ Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage spotlights the "Cultural Narratives of Cafes", which are essential to exploring the coffeehouses of Cairo as informal museums of urban culture, memory, and storytelling. The approach of "collecting with(in) the city" in the context of non-traditional cultural spaces, classified into two versions, the traditional and the modern, is a coin bearing two faces of contemporary life for people who consider coffeehouses as their living tradition. Doubtless, the traditional coffeehouse includes tangible and intangible elements that act as repositories of collective memory for people, through their architecture, objects, furniture, sounds, and stories. (See figure 3)



Figure 3: A photo of some objects linked to the traditional coffeehouses in Cairo. Credits: Karim El Hayawan

The rise of contemporary cafés has no real impact on the existence of traditional ones, as both serve as social spaces and gathering hubs.

First, let's highlight the difference between the two kinds of cafés, the traditional one, also known as 'El Ahwa El Balady' is a community-centered, no-frills café where people—mostly men and less women—gather to socialize, drink tea or Turkish coffee, and play games like backgammon or dominoes. It reflects a deep-rooted cultural tradition and offers a casual, familiar space at low prices. Unlike the contemporary cafés, or the 'Specialty cafés', they focus on high-quality beans, modern brewing methods, and stylish, comfortable interiors designed for working, relaxing, or meeting friends. They cater to a younger, mixed-gender urban crowd and reflect global coffee trends with higher prices and curated experiences. Newer generations are increasingly drawn to discovering hidden gems like historic coffeehouses, which not only help preserve heritage but also align with evolving social media trends. In turn, these trends play a beneficial role in enhancing tourism in Cairo by promoting its rich café culture.

In conclusion, the future of coffeehouses as sites of collecting and cultural engagement face potential challenges due to gentrification, urban development, and their existence in museum displays. The cultural narratives of cafés play a vital role in preserving Cairo's coffeehouse heritage, as they bear memories of people who lived and who are still living, human interactions, and the daily life stories of the people. Museums and cultural institutions in the city have opportunities to collaborate with artists and emerging community initiatives to rethink the representation of coffeehouses as public spaces of living heritage. Digital Archiving of stories weaved from the cultural narratives of cafés is essential to safeguarding the oral history of Cairo for future generations.

Notes

- 1 Cairo doesn't have a city museum yet, only the author of this article created the first assumption in her MA thesis.

Senses

The integration of collections and Chinese garden: Cross-border curatorial practices that go beyond the collection.

Jie LIU

Biography

Jie LIU, serves as an Associate Professor and curator in National Library of China. Member of the International Council of Museums and IAAA. Her research focuses on ancient collections, iconography and digital art curation.

The function and visual culture in Chinese garden landscape

Chambers, the British court architect who visited China in the 18th century, once introduced Chinese gardens in this way: “In China, gardening is a specialized profession, and only a few people can achieve the environment.” Therefore, Chinese gardeners are not florists, but artists and philosophers.”

“Window” in Chinese gardens not only has the effect of viewing through space, but also the different shapes of flower windows are endowed with rich cultural and historical connotations. In China “heaven” is endowed with divine meaning, it is supreme and rules everything. The sun symbol is related to the celestial phenomena. The windows are often expressed by the imitation sun pattern, cross pattern, etc. In the hollow flower turn of the garden, we can see the sun pattern flower window and stone carving. There are also solar symbols on Chinese New Stone age pottery decorations. In the OuYuan garden of Suzhou Gardens, there are flower windows that represent the sun rising above the clouds. The cross flower window is also related to the sun, which comes from the sun worship pattern in the ancient Chinese script. The cross represents the sun, and the two people bow down to the cross represents the worship of the sun. In Suzhou garden building components, the skip carving window has become a unique architectural decoration. The various hollow patterns decorated in the window holes integrate the dual functions of light transmission and aesthetic view. The hollow patterns primarily consist of floral, avian, and animal motifs, as well as depictions of mountains, rivers, and geometric shapes. Additionally, they incorporate elements related to the ancient Chinese literati culture such as musical instruments (Qin), chess games (Weiqi), books, and paintings. The Chinese instrument Qin window is adorned with a Qin carving, accompanied by intricate ice plum blossom motifs surrounding it. The window is adorned with an intricately carved Go board. There is a thread-bound book moulded in the window. Chessboard and thread bound books are often decorated with peony, pomegranate and other flowers and plants background. The window is decorated with a scroll, surrounded by geometric figures and decorative rattan. This is an important functional landscape that Chinese gardens display by borrowing and skip carving scenes. Plants which decorate around these windows, such as Nantian bamboo, caryophylla and podocarpus echo each other. Plant combination arrangement add to the interest of the garden display.

There is a close relationship between the construction of Chinese garden water system and the transformation of visual landscape. Garden water system has the function of dividing areas. In addition, through the creation of different water directions, the viewer can travel according to different flow lines and transition to different functional areas. Water-related garden buildings such as pavilions, terraces, buildings and pavilions have become unique architectural forms that form different visual levels. In the courtyard, the combination of poems inscribed board, plants, rocks and artificial bonsai in the courtyard have become indispensable elements to increase visual richness.

The collection in exhibition of garden's landscape

1. Display landscape displacement of space

Usually, we use storage and display Spaces that match with the museum architectural standards as the main places for museum display. Because in this specialized space, in the sense of cultural collection protection, the cultural relics can be collected and preserved for a long time. However, from the perspective of cultural relics collection and display, transferring cultural relics to the original environment where they do not belong is not a good way to interpret their historical and cultural significance.

Therefore, as a garden space, it has its own unique collection. The original display and possession of collection in the garden, or placed in the appropriate location of the exhibition may become a way for us to re-integrate the function of cultural space in urban space. In the environment of the exhibition hall, museums in order to restore the historical and cultural scenes corresponding to a certain piece or a certain theme cultural relic, we often spend materials, even tissue engineering to complete this task. Instead of that, it is better to move the museum's display environment into the existing urban space. Parks and gardens have their own historical, artistic and cultural properties as leisure places that the public can visit to them. In addition, many Chinese gardens have their own collections, so bringing them into the corresponding theme exhibitions is our original intention to carry out this practice. In the third part of the curatorial practices, we will talk about some exhibition cases that are suitable for the Chinese garden landscape.

2. The landscape of the visit streamline

Here, we will discuss the relationship between exhibition space and urban leisure space. As a part of urban leisure space, the garden takes into account the different visiting effects caused by different travel routes from the perspective of landscape, plants, ponds, rocks and so on. Chinese gardens themselves have strong creativity in the flow of visit lines. Compared with the artificial circuit created by the exhibition wall and space division in the exhibition hall of the museum, it has more natural interest of the integration of human and nature. The unexpected encounters and surprises that go beyond the roadmap.

The design of the exhibition hall streamline is often related to the order of the exhibit unit display, according to the chronological order of the antiques exhibit, or to the content planning of the unit order has become the basis for the design of the visiting line. Chinese garden design fully considers the relationship between landscape installation and architectural function in landscape construction. Not limited to the indoor exhibition hall planning in the museum's existing buildings.

3. The exhibition value of existing antique furnishings in gardens

In ancient times, Chinese gardens primarily belonged to private residences. The furnishings of these gardens varied according to the different functions of spaces such as halls, bedrooms, pavilions and study rooms. Ancient furniture gradually became a significant component of the garden heritage collection.

The garden furniture are often made of rosewood, pear and Nanwood, especially the mahogany furniture made in 18th century. The craftsman pay attention to simplicity, lines and fine elegance of the production process. The chairs, tables, beds, cabinets and screens in the furniture have all become the exhibits in gardens.

In Chinese gardens, there is a value that is close to cultural meaning and more with the temperament of nature and humanity is **bonsai**. Although bonsai plants have the characteristics of prosperity and decline, they have different schools in Chinese gardens and become part of the landscape display. Flower pots are not only special existence in collection value, Yixing purple clay pots, Jingdezhen ceramic pots also become the collections in gardens. In bonsai art, the selected form of plant and age have a particular treatment.

Lingnan style bonsai is often graceful. In Anhui Province, cypress trees and plum bonsai are most popular. Sichuan bonsai is more common in begonia, black persimmon wood. Jiangsu bonsai is represented by Yangzhou and overlapping with micro landscape. Bonsai can not only become the exhibits in the garden residence display, but also have the function of transition and connection between the units of exhibition. Placing them at the junction of the prologue, the restoration of the landscape or the transformation of the unit, or even the transformation of the color in different environment which all have the characteristics of beauty, heritage and function.

Because of the residence function of the garden, the calligraphy traces left by the literati have also become a collection that can be fully utilized for garden display. Garden calligraphy is different from calligraphy which written on paper or silk fabrics. It is often engraved on brick, stone and wood. In the Suzhou style garden, the book strip stone itself has collection value. For example, the calligraphy in the Liu Garden includes the works of famous Song Dynasty calligraphers such as Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, as well as the works of famous scribes such as Han Qi, Ouyang Xiu, Yu Qian, Fan Chengda, etc.

The stone is shaped by nature to form a natural form style. In the scenery of Chinese garden, pay attention to the effect of echoing the scenery with the lake and mountain plants. Here, stone plays an important role. Taihu stone is a kind of limestone often used in Chinese gardens. Spaces with stones are often paired with plants and ponds. The stones themselves through different forms of stacking also become the display of visual segmentation provides the possibility.

In the section of the exhibition content, different stone and interior furnishings distinguish different themes, Twin peaks and single mountains are frequently used, as well as piled into lions, crabs and other forms of stone have become an extension of garden interest. In the formation of interior landscape, the exhibition flow line which formed by garden architecture often integrates the courtyard connection between the front hall and the backyard of the interior room. The height head of the cloisters and steps are based on the order of the architectural form.

4. Immersive restoration of folk scenes

Gardens have a close relationship with traditional Chinese festivals, intangible cultural heritage skills exhibition, poetry collection and other activities. They have also become a practical attempt to break through the limitations of the exhibition hall and realize the living display of intangible cultural heritage. Taking Kunqu Opera performance as an example, the rhythm and dynamic posture of Kunqu opera have the same aesthetic spirit with Chinese garden architecture. The Kunqu opera is delicate and graceful, garden music, coupled with drinking, tea and other elegant interaction with ancient traditions, the display of intangible cultural heritage skills in the garden has become a form of regeneration expression of traditional Jiangnan culture.

After the Humble Administrator's Garden was acquired by Zhang Luqian, a wealthy businessman, the sound effect function of garden architecture was fully taken into account when the pavilion was rebuilt. The pool build a thirty-six Yuanyang hall, the top structure of the hall for the roll shed, vault-shaped roof. Singing in the hall lingering sound around the beam, lasting. There is a tearroom in each of the four corners of the pavilion, which is a place for performers to rest, change clothes, make up and wait for the stage.

In holding the exhibitions with festive characteristics, the garden itself has the function of restoring the scene of ancient life. Therefore, it is more appropriate to move the museum's exhibitions related to traditional festivals into the garden space. In southern China, on the Lantern Festival people carry lanterns and walk on bridges. The Lantern Festival and Lantern Festival exhibition are placed in the garden environment, whether it is a bridge or a corridor eaves, it has become a natural display space and an architectural form that can be relied on. At the same time, since ancient times, Chinese people have the custom of appreciating the moon on the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is often carried out in the pavilions or corridors of gardens, drinking alcohol, composing poems, tasting tea and snacks are very common. The creation of poems and paintings about the Mid-Autumn Festival is also numerous. In the collection related to the Mid-Autumn Festival, furniture, tea sets, wine pots lamps, mooncake molds are displayed in the garden scene, which appropriately provides the exhibition with a display environment that can perceive the changes of seasonal temperature, weather and light. This kind of environment is incomparable to the lighting and scene restoration construction of the exhibition hall.

Garden curatorial practices beyond collections

1. Shanghai Museum Museum roof garden and Exhibition The resonance of wood and stone: Jiangnan Scholar's Rocks and Shanghai-style Penjing

Since its completion, the East Pavilion area of Shanghai Museum has fully integrated the characteristics of modern urban architecture space and urban land. Use Chinese Jiangnan culture as the core create a roof garden display space where integrating museum architecture with Chinese garden.

This exhibition will belong to the original landscape display of the garden, such as bonsai, garden stone as a collection through display into the museum collection category. Such exhibitions expand the range of museum collections. The garden architecture endowed with the rich connotation of Jiangnan culture, the curatorial practice of cross-exhibition space and the new definition of traditional museum collection is constructed.

Chinese "four famous stones": Taihu stone, Lingbi stone, Yingshi, Kunshi and Shanghai style bonsai all play a major role in creating this exhibition and spanning collections and gardens. Ancient stones, famous stones, Shanghai style bonsai, orchids let the audience wander in the interest of mountains and forests in the roof space of the metropolis, and the garden collection display of this roof space is also connected with the Jiangnan Creation exhibition Hall located on the top floor of the building. As the scholar Richard Rosenblum has observed, "the stones are changed by the way they are placed." Remove the base, the stone is restored to a natural object. Put it back on the seat and it goes from stone to art again.

Orchids as the representative flowers in the interior furnishings of Chinese gardens which form a single living display unit in this exhibition.

Orchid cultivation in China has a long history, dating back to the late Tang Dynasty (618-907). Orchid cultivation became more popular in China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). From the 17th century to the 19th century, works on orchid culture and orchid art gradually increased. Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai areas became the center of cultivation and appreciation of Wenlan (Orchid specie), meanwhile orchid markets and fairs appeared.

Particularly, in the past 60 years, the Shanghai Botanical Garden and the Japanese orchid community keep strengthened exchanges and cooperation and cultivated new orchid varieties. In this exhibition unit, the orchid landscape displays the combination of garden plants, garden collections and museum collections, highlighting the beauty of Jiangnan culture in China, and presenting the elegant feelings of traditional Chinese literati in a three-dimensional manner.

2. Shanghai: Immersive display of gardens and old sites

There are a large number of former gardens and old sites in Shanghai. It is an interesting attempt to carry out cultural activities with corresponding contents in them. Class Plant Garden also known as “Ma’s Family Garden”, which is a private garden located in Zhujiajiao built in 1912. There are more than 200 buildings in garden, such as welcoming hall, banquet hall, main hall, Book Castle Tower, Moon Tower, drama stage, singing platform, Lotus Pavilion, Lion Pavilion, Teacher Pavilion, stele gallery. There are calligraphy inscriptions of Ming Dynasty literati embedded in the corridor, which are engraved by Zhou Meigu who invited as the carving master. There are 12 poems of “You Xishan Temple” written by Wen Zhengming, one poem of “Plum Blossom” by Zhu Zhishan, and two poems by Tang Yin Xinza and Zhou Tianqiu written in Ming Dynasty. In the park, there are rockery, nine Bridges, lessons plant bridge, lotus pond, rice village and other sightseeing attractions. There is a theater in the rockery area of the garden. Between the theater and the stage, there is a vast empty lawn. The visitor sitting on the lawn can enjoy the drama. Here become the most suitable part of the Kunqu Opera scene restoration in the Class Plant Garden.

In the hot summer, people in Jiangnan like to go out at night to cool off, in this process, the garden designed a light show and immersive traditional drama performances. The light display and intangible cultural heritage performance skills made the old garden full of vitality and vitality.

The former Navy Club and later Sun Ke’s residence in downtown Shanghai is a blend of Islamic and Byzantine architectural styles, with the old house pond brightening up at night. Here, the immersive theater and the old architecture are perfectly integrated to stage a modern urban love drama. From the theater to the private courtyard, architecture as an immovable cultural relic has been endowed with new connotation in modern urban cultural life.

3. Nanjing: Zhan Garden and Museum Exhibition

Zhanyuan Garden is the oldest existing Ming Dynasty classical garden in Nanjing. Its history can be traced back to the Wu palace before Zhu Yuanzhang became emperor of the Ming Taizu. The palace garden given to the King of Zhongshan, is known for its rockery, named after Ouyang Xiu’s poem “Looking at the Jade Hall, as if in the sky”, and is known as the “first garden of the Southern capital” in the Ming Dynasty. It is now a national cultural heritage protection unit and a national AAAAA tourist attraction.

Zhanyuan Garden is the best preserved Ming Dynasty classical garden complex in Nanjing and it is also the only open Ming Dynasty palace. Zhanyuan garden experienced Ming, Qing, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Republic of China and contemporary times. Most of the gardens in the south of the Yangtze River, the history is complex, the garden has undergone changes.

There is the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum in the garden, which is the only museum dedicated to the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in China. Zhanyuan Garden is an early representative of the integration of historical display and garden in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period. The garden integrates the environment space rich in the temperament of local residents, so it is convenient to hold exhibitions with local folk characteristics here. These exhibitions concentrate in the daily life of local people in modern times in a clay sculpture scene restoration, concentrated in interesting handicrafts, making the garden a link to the emotions of local residents for several generations.

4. Beijing: Exhibitions and cultural events in the Palace Garden

Prince Gong’s Mansion located in downtown Beijing is the Qing Dynasty palace, which has a large area of residences and palace gardens. Magnolia, begonia, peony, lotus and other flowers bloom in different seasons. According to the garden plants and the layout of the palace. Traditional opera performances are held in the Grand Theatre in the summer. This theater is located inside, and its interior is decorated with wisteria paintings, which can be called the most luxurious palace theater in the world. Since the Royal Palace Garden has crabapple flowers in full bloom every spring and summer, it has restored the poetry activity of crabapple collection according to the life scene of ancient Chinese literati.

In terms of exhibition, according to the characteristics of the palace building, make full use of existing windows, plants, courtyards, etc. The palace garden try to build exhibitions related to ancient architecture, traditional skills and ancient paintings.

To sum up, we find that the garden not only has its own collection but also has natural exhibition conditions, which can be a place of collection and a place of display. At the same time, the garden can also become the representative of local culture and be moved into the museum, so that the artifacts and landscapes that were not paid attention to before, such as rocks and bonsai become a new collection of the museum.

Senses

Transforming Karen Porridge: Heritage, Innovation, and the Praxis of Food as a Living Collection in Museum Interpretation

Patoo Cusripituck & Teerawan Minbualuang
& Jitjayang Yamabhai

Biography

Assistant Professor Dr. Patoo Cusripituck is a leading scholar in museum studies and Program Chairperson of M.A. Museum Studies at Mahidol University. She leads Vivid Ethnicity, a mobile museum, and the Museum of Cultural Anthropology. Her work emphasizes participatory and transformative approaches to museum engagement, education, and social innovation.

Contact: patooocu@gmail.com

Miss Teerawan Mingbualuang is a researcher at iFood and iCulture and a curator at the Museum of Cultural Anthropology and Vivid Ethnicity at Mahidol University. Her work focuses on ethnic heritage, museum entrepreneurship, and social enterprises, including the Tapopoh Ready-to-Eat project.

Contact: Teerawan.min@gmail.com

Assistant Professor Dr. Jitjayang Yamabhai is a renowned scholar with over 20 years of experience working with ethnic communities. His long-term fieldwork engagement strengthens his ability to identify real issues and develop practical solutions. His expertise lies in social development, museums, and social engagement.

Contact: jitjayang@gmail.com

Introduction

Cultural heritage is often perceived as a static entity, preserved within museums as artifacts that serve as historical documentation. However, this perception overlooks the evolving and dynamic nature of cultural traditions, particularly food heritage. Unlike traditional museum objects that remain fixed in time, food is inherently a living cultural expression – it is practiced, shared, transformed, and adapted across generations and geographies. Food heritage provides a unique lens to understand how communities engage with their history while adapting to contemporary lifestyles.

This study focuses on Karen porridge (*Ta Po Poh*), a staple food of the Karen ethnic group in Thailand, traditionally consumed as a daily meal. Karen porridge carries profound cultural significance, connecting generations through culinary traditions and reinforcing community identity. However, as modernization and urban migration shift consumption patterns, many traditional foods risk becoming obsolete. This research seeks to address this challenge by exploring how Karen Porridge can be transformed into a ready-to-eat, freeze-dried product, making it more accessible while preserving its cultural identity. (See figure 1)

The central argument of this study is that heritage transformation serves as a crucial means of cultural communication in three fundamental ways:

1. It improves accessibility by adapting traditional consumption methods to contemporary life.
2. It fosters cultural pride by elevating everyday practices into celebrated heritage symbols.
3. It generates economic opportunities by creating sustainable heritage-based enterprises.



Figure 1

By adopting a praxis-based approach, this research directly engages with Karen communities to ensure that the innovation remains rooted in authenticity and collective ownership. This paper contributes to museum studies, food heritage discourse, and innovation theory by reinterpreting food as a living collection within heritage preservation and museum curation.

Cultural heritage is often perceived as a static entity, housed within museums as preserved artifacts, detached from its evolving role in contemporary life. However, food heritage challenges this notion by existing as a living, dynamic, and participatory practice. Unlike objects that remain unchanged within museum collections, food is continuously reinterpreted, transformed, and adapted to meet social, economic, and technological shifts. This study proposes a new conceptualization of food as a living collection, advocating for the integration of culinary heritage into museum collection management through an innovative praxis-based approach.

Heritage and innovation: A theoretical framework The living and evolving process of heritage

Museums, archives, and historical sites are frequently used to institutionalize cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation and curation. Nevertheless, intangible cultural heritage, including oral traditions, rituals, and cuisine, cannot be preserved in the same manner as physical artifacts. Within the domain of practice and experience, intangible heritage, particularly food heritage, is present. Daily consumption, storytelling, and social interactions are the primary means of its transmission across generations. The transformation of culinary heritage illustrates the process by which communities negotiate their cultural identity in response to globalization and modernization (Mathew, E., 2024; Chauhan, Y. et al, 2025).

The function of innovation in fostering cultural sustainability The sustainability of cultural patrimony is significantly influenced by innovation. Although some scholars contend that the authenticity of traditional practices is compromised by their modification, others advocate for the preservation of heritage through innovation (Heritage, 2024). This perspective is exemplified by the transformation of Karen porridge into a freeze-dried product, which demonstrates that heritage is not lost through change, but rather preserved through adaptive methods. Traditional cuisines can be made more accessible to a wider audience while still retaining their cultural significance by incorporating novel methods of presentation and consumption.

Museums as living collections of food

Traditional museum collections emphasize tangible artifacts; however, contemporary museum practices are transitioning to incorporate participatory and intangible heritage. The administration of museum collections is complicated by the perishability and perpetual evolution of food, which serves as a medium for cultural expression. Nevertheless, the concept of food as a living collection enables the development of novel curatorial strategies, including digital narrative, interactive culinary programs, and sensory exhibitions. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on museum interpretation and heritage curation by situating Karen porridge as a masterpiece within a living collection.

This investigation implements a community-led, praxis-based research methodology that emphasizes iterative development, co-creation, and active participation. This method derives theory from real-world practice, in contrast to conventional research models that impose external frameworks onto cultural practices. The research guarantees that the transformation of Karen porridge is deeply rooted in cultural authenticity and remains adaptable to modern consumption patterns by directly engaging with the Karen community in *Phrao* District, Chiang Mai Province.

Drawing from the formative work of Olivíé-Touati and Moussa (2017), the heritage innovation relationship has been characterized by a perceived tension between progress and preservation for a long time. This was depicted in conventional models as a dualistic conflict, in which heritage symbolizes stability/exploitation and innovation represents change/exploration. This dichotomy contends that organizations are compelled to select between the pursuit of novel approaches or the reinforcement of historical practices, a perspective that has been criticized for being overly simplistic (Olivíé-Touati & Moussa, 2017).

Reconceptualizing this relationship, duality theory posits that heritage and innovation are interdependent forces that mutually facilitate organizational evolution. From this perspective, heritage generates inspirational capital by means of tangible assets (historic tools/products) and intangible assets (ethical values, territorial identity).

Innovation functions as an evolutionary mechanism that reframes heritage artifacts for contemporary relevance. The ‘Herivation’ paradigm is introduced by the authors, which is a recursive process that involves the merging of innovation and heritage to create trans-organizational artifacts over three phases.

1. Dualism: The early-stage separation of heritage preservation and innovation initiatives
2. Duality: Mature interdependence in which heritage informs incremental innovation and innovation expands heritage repositories
3. Derivation: The ultimate convergence into unified practices that concurrently embody historical legacy and forward-thinking adaptation

This framework fundamentally undermines the notion that disruptive innovation necessitates the renunciation of heritage. Disruptive innovation may temporarily strain heritage systems before attaining renewed synthesis, whereas incremental innovation is consistent with gradual heritage growth (Olivíé-Touati & Moussa, 2017). The temporal dimension is crucial; organizations develop ambidextrous capabilities, which resolve short-term tensions into long-term symbiosis.

Significant debates surrounding heritage-guided innovation include several key concerns.

Firstly, there is the risk of commercialization, where cultural assets are commodified, potentially undermining their original value. Secondly, the scale paradox arises, as scaling heritage-based innovations can challenge the preservation of authenticity. Lastly, power dynamics come into play, particularly when corporate entities and community stewards have differing levels of control over the narrative during the transformation of heritage. This raises questions about who should ultimately oversee shaping these narratives.

Research methodology: a praxis-based, community-led approach

This study adopts a praxis-based methodology, in which theory emerges from real-world practices rather than being predetermined. It emphasizes community participation, co-creation, and iterative development, ensuring that the Karen people serve as active agents in shaping the transformation of their own food heritage.

Before detailing the four key phases of this process, it is important to introduce the *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* project. The *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* serves as a platform for cultural transformation, traveling across Thailand with a collection that stimulates conversations about ethnic groups through everyday life objects. The stories it presents are organic, dynamic, and continuously enriched by audience participation. Rather than being fixed narratives, they evolve as new voices and perspectives are incorporated, allowing for active accumulation of knowledge and meaning.

The *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* has also played a role in supporting the development of the *Doisithan Ecomuseum*, contributing to cultural heritage safeguarding while simultaneously generating economic opportunities through these cultural practices (Yamabhai et al., 2021).

Findings from this research demonstrate that such praxis-based, participatory approaches are effective for both safeguarding cultural heritage and creating sustainable income opportunities for communities. The transformation of *Ta Po Poh* — one of the Karen community's traditional food items — illustrates this process through four key phases, as outlined below.

Community-led recipe selection

The research process began with a culinary competition within the Karen community, where each household prepared its version of *Ta Po Poh*. This approach served multiple purposes: it allowed for the identification of diverse traditional recipes, encouraged community engagement, and fostered a sense of cultural pride in the culinary tradition. A panel consisting of both village elders and researchers assessed the dishes based on authenticity, taste, and practicality for contemporary consumption. After extensive deliberation, two winning recipes were selected: Pork with Black Bean and Chicken with Dried Cabbage. These recipes were chosen for their strong connection to traditional Karen cooking practices and their potential for wider audience appeal.

Ingredient analysis and product development

Once the winning recipes were selected, the research team worked with local cooks to break down the recipes into measurable components, identifying key ingredients and their respective proportions. This analysis was essential to maintaining the integrity of traditional flavors while allowing for standardization in production. The team then experimented with different preservation methods to ensure the dish's feasibility as a ready-to-eat product. Two primary methods were considered:

1. Freeze-dried: using a **freeze-drying process (lyophilization)** to remove moisture while preserving its structure, flavor, and nutrients.
2. Retort: involves sealing the food in a pouch or container and then subjecting it to **high-temperature and high-pressure sterilization**. This process extends shelf life while maintaining the food's flavor, texture, and nutrients.

After conducting controlled experiments, freeze-drying was chosen as the optimal method, as it best preserved the dish's authenticity while allowing for ease of consumption in various settings, including urban environments.



Figure 2: Ta Po Poh Ingredients

Sensory evaluation and consumer testing

Following product development, a Ta Po Poh tasting event was organized at a cultural restaurant. This phase was crucial in refining the product through real-world feedback. Participants, including Karen villagers and urban consumers unfamiliar with the dish, provided insights into:

1. Flavor acceptability and sensory experience
2. Portion sizing and meal presentation
3. Packaging and branding considerations

Feedback gathered from the event led to further refinement of the ingredients, portion size, and final taste profile.

Branding and market positioning

With a finalized product, the next stage involved branding and packaging development (See figure 3). Instead of imposing a commercially driven design, the research team facilitated co-creation workshops where Karen participants contributed to the product's visual identity and narrative storytelling. This ensured that the branding remained rooted in cultural representation while appealing to broader audiences. By integrating these four methodological phases – community engagement, scientific analysis, sensory testing, and branding co-creation – this study establishes a replicable model for heritage food transformation. This methodology not only safeguards Karen porridge's cultural significance but also ensures its adaptability and sustainability in modern contexts. The findings of this study reveal several key insights regarding the transformation of Karen porridge into a market-ready, heritage-based product. By engaging in a co-creative process with the Karen community, the research team was able to ensure that the product retained cultural authenticity while adapting to contemporary consumer needs. The results highlight the balance between tradition and innovation, the challenges and successes of food heritage transformation, and the broader implications for cultural sustainability.

Results: Key Findings

Transforming Karen porridge: Balancing tradition and innovation One of the most significant findings of this study is that heritage food transformation is not merely a technical or commercial process but a deeply cultural act of negotiation. Karen porridge, traditionally prepared at home with fresh ingredients, had to undergo changes in texture, form, and preparation methods to make it viable as a ready-to-eat product. However, the core flavors and cultural significance of the dish remained intact due to the community's active participation in every phase of its transformation.



Figure 3: Packaging

The choice of freeze-drying as the processing method, instead of retort, was essential for preserving product authenticity while achieving a surprising transformation. Freeze-dried, on the other hand, allowed for better texture retention and faster rehydration, making it the preferred method based on community feedback. These results confirm that technological interventions in food heritage must be carefully evaluated through sensory and cultural lenses.

Cultural acceptance and community engagement

A crucial factor in the study's success was the willingness of the Karen community to engage in a process of food innovation. Despite initial hesitations – fueled by concerns over whether modifying Karen porridge would compromise its traditional integrity – participatory methods such as culinary competitions, sensory evaluation events, and co-creation workshops helped foster a sense of ownership and pride.

The study found that, when given the agency to influence decisions, community members embraced the innovation process rather than resisted it. The transition from home-cooked tradition to packaged product was not perceived as cultural loss, but rather as an opportunity to expand the dish's reach while maintaining its symbolic meaning and heritage value. This finding challenges the common assumption that heritage food commercialization always leads to cultural dilution. Instead, it highlights that community involvement in every stage of transformation ensures cultural sustainability rather than commodification.

Consumer reactions and market feasibility

The results from the *Ta Po Poh* tasting event provided valuable insights into consumer perceptions and preferences. The event, which included both Karen community members and urban consumers unfamiliar with the dish, revealed that:

1. Karen participants prioritized authenticity, favoring the freeze-dried format as it retained the closest resemblance to the original dish.
2. Non-Karen consumers focused on convenience and presentation, emphasizing clear instructions, appealing packaging, and portion sizing.
3. Both groups agreed on the need for flexible serving options, with some preferring the product as a standalone meal and others seeing it as a side dish or accompaniment.

These findings suggest that successful heritage food transformation requires balancing multiple audience expectations. While retaining core cultural elements is crucial for authenticity, adapting presentation and usability makes the product more accessible to wider markets. As a result, refinements were made to:

1. Provide clear and culturally respectful packaging
2. Offer varieties of flavor
3. Offer flexible portion sizes to accommodate diverse eating habits

Branding and storytelling: heritage as an economic Asset

The study revealed that effective branding and storytelling were essential for marketing Karen porridge while preserving its cultural roots. In co-creation branding workshops, Karen participants stressed the importance of the product conveying authenticity, highlighting Karen cultural identity, and using visual storytelling to educate consumers about the dish's origins.

These insights culminated in a branding strategy focused on cultural storytelling. The final product design featured traditional Karen motifs and patterns on the packaging, included a short history of *Ta Po Poh* within each package, and provided a QR code linking to digital content showcasing Karen cooks preparing the dish in its original form.

The study found that such strategies enhance both marketability and cultural engagement. Rather than treating the product as just another food commodity, the branding ensures it is positioned as a piece of living heritage that consumers can connect with on a deeper level.



Figure 4: Ta Po Poh mixed

Heritage food transformation and economic sustainability

One of the most promising results of this study was the demonstration that heritage food transformation can generate economic opportunities for local communities. The co-creation model used in this research provides a potential blueprint for other marginalized communities to sustain their culinary heritage while entering contemporary food markets.

Several economic models were considered to support sustainable development. One approach involves small-scale, community-led production, where local businesses maintain control over both manufacturing and sales. Another option is forming partnerships with ethical food companies, ensuring that revenue streams are returned to the community. Additionally, social enterprise models were explored, where profits from sales are used to support cultural education programs in Karen villages.

The feasibility of these approaches depends on continued community involvement and institutional support. This study concludes that, while heritage food transformation presents economic opportunities, ethical considerations must guide business models to avoid cultural exploitation and profit-driven appropriation. (See figure 4)

Addressing challenges: lessons from the field

While the study successfully demonstrated that food heritage transformation can balance authenticity and adaptation, it also identified several challenges:

1. Ensuring equitable financial benefits: Heritage food commercialization often benefits larger companies rather than local communities. This research highlights the importance of community-led business models.
2. Maintaining authenticity in larger production scales: While small-batch freeze dried maintained the original flavor, scaling up production may introduce compromises.
3. Navigating cross-cultural marketing: Introducing Karen porridge to non-Karen consumers requires thoughtful messaging to prevent misrepresentation or cultural stereotyping.

Addressing these challenges will be essential in ensuring long-term sustainability for this and similar projects. The research team proposes further collaboration between marketing experts, cultural experts, and community leaders to refine the model before large-scale commercialization.

Summary of findings

In summary, this study's results confirm that heritage food transformation is possible without erasing cultural authenticity when done through community-led co-creation. The findings demonstrate that:

1. Technology (freeze-dried) can preserve authenticity when carefully selected.
2. Community involvement ensures cultural pride and acceptance of heritage adaptation.
3. Marketing and branding are crucial in making heritage food accessible to new consumers.
4. Economic sustainability requires ethical business models that benefit local producers.

These insights contribute to ongoing debates on heritage preservation, food innovation, and cultural sustainability, providing a replicable model for other communities seeking to safeguard their food traditions while engaging with modern consumption trends.

Discussion: examining the debates on food, innovation, and heritage as a living collection

This investigation has illustrated that the conversion of Karen porridge into a market ready product is not only a method of preserving heritage but also an innovation that improves cultural visibility, economic sustainability, and accessibility. Nevertheless, the results must be contextualized within the broader scholarly discourse on heritage transformation, authenticity, and commercialization. The subsequent discourse analytically evaluates the extent to which the primary arguments of this investigation are either substantiated or refuted by existing research.

The feasibility of modifying conventional food practices

The conversion of agricultural heritage into modern consumption models is widely recognized as a method of reconciling environmental sustainability and cultural preservation (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu-Venedik, Asli, 2024). This is consistent with the heritagization of Karen porridge, as this study illustrates that a culturally significant cuisine can be reinterpreted to accommodate the requirements of contemporary lifestyles without sacrificing its essence.

Nevertheless, the danger of oversimplifying cultural practices to appeal to a wider audience is also concerning. This study contends that the innovation is firmly established in community agency rather than external market forces due to the participatory nature of the project, which involved Karen villagers in the selection of recipes, testing of flavors, and finalizing packaging. In contrast to industrialized heritage food production, this process emphasizes co-creation over appropriation.

Contrary to the prevailing emphasis on digital strategies for enhancing traditional food accessibility in urban markets, this research reveals the indispensable role of physical co-creation spaces, such as community food events and in-person tastings, in maintaining product development authenticity.

Cultural pride through common heritage practices

Food is intricately linked to intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural identity (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu-Venedik, Asli, 2024). The results of this study corroborate that Karen porridge, which was previously perceived as an everyday household staple, is now a source of cultural pride when viewed as a culinary heritage masterpiece. The local culinary competition and co-creation process transformed mundane dietary practices into a collective identity project, connecting food memory with cultural sustainability.

The potential for heritage food commercialization to diminish socio-political significance is a recognized concern. This study, however, provides evidence to the contrary. The evolution of Karen porridge emerged from a participatory process initiated through the Doisithan Ecomuseum project, collaboratively developed by Mahidol University researchers and the local Karen community. Using a community-led, co-creative approach, the transformation was not driven by external commercial forces but shaped by the community's own engagement, ensuring that cultural meaning and integrity were preserved while adapting to new economic opportunities.

Furthermore, this research contributes to a praxis-based framework that actively generates new heritage narratives through community participation, in contrast to previous studies that primarily concentrate on documenting existing food traditions.

Heritage innovation for economic sustainability

The economic potential of food heritage, particularly in the context of culinary tourism and agritourism, is strongly supported by existing research (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu Venedik, Asli, 2024). This study further supports those findings by illustrating that Karen porridge has the potential to expand beyond local consumption and into a broader market.

While heritage commercialization often risks power imbalances that deprive local producers of financial gains, this study demonstrates a counterexample. By highlighting the Karen villagers' central role in all decision-making, from branding to product testing, it refutes such critiques. The co-creation model ensures economic benefits remain within the community, preventing external stakeholder extraction.

Furthermore, this research introduces a novel approach to heritage food studies, which typically concentrate on tourism-based economic models. This approach incorporates food heritage into everyday mobility, catering not only to tourists but also to diaspora communities and urban consumers. (See figure 5)

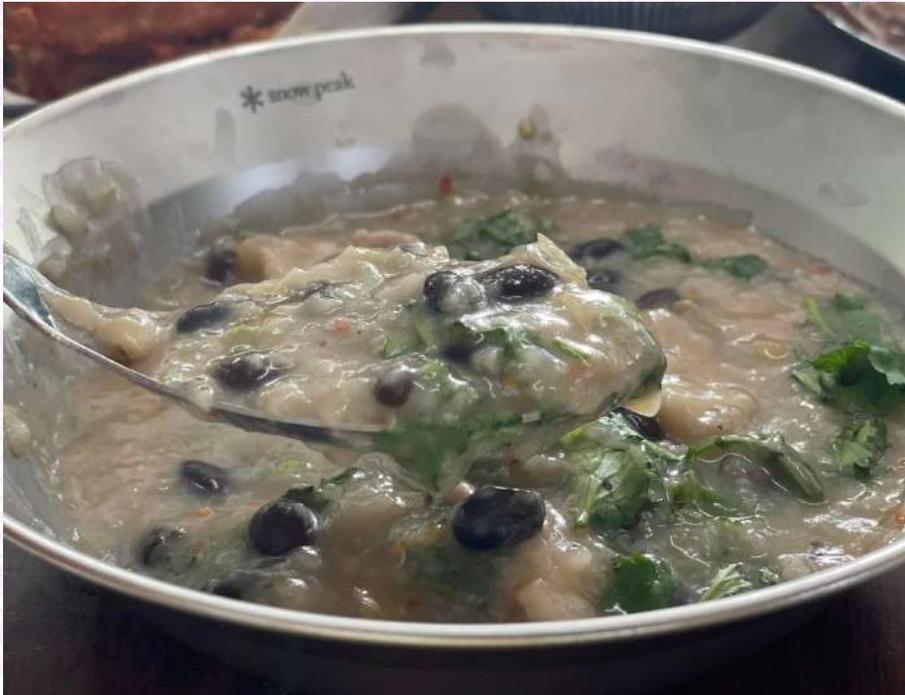


Figure 5: Ta Po Poh prepared

The ethical debate: the balance between preservation and innovation

The results of this investigation confirm that preservation and innovation are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary processes (Mathew, E., 2024; Chauhan, Y. et al, 2025). The research demonstrates the potential of modern food technology to facilitate the transmission of sustainable heritage by converting Karen porridge into a freeze-dried, ready-to-eat product.

However, critics contend that the sensory and cultural experience of traditional dishes may be compromised by culinary innovation (culture-heritage-identity-and-culinary, n.d.). The decision to employ freeze-dried instead of retort was a direct response to this critique, ensuring that the texture and flavor remained as close to the original dish as possible.

Furthermore, this study implies that community-driven innovation models may be more effective in preserving cultural integrity than external heritage policies, despite the fact that some scholars emphasize the necessity of institutional regulation in heritage transformation (Heritage, 2024). Through the SHIFT project—argues that institutional frameworks remain crucial. By integrating technologies like AI, machine learning, and haptics, the project promotes a hybrid model that combines community participation with expert-led digital transformation. It emphasizes that inclusive design and policy support are essential for bridging expertise gaps and ensuring equitable, sustainable heritage practices.

This debate underscores the fact that the transformation of Karen porridge both aligns with and challenges prevailing narratives in economic sustainability, culinary authenticity, and heritage innovation. This study contributes a novel conceptual model for interpreting intangible and edible heritage in institutional and commercial contexts by framing food as a living collection within museum curation.

Future directions

Food as a living collection can enable museums to transition from static object-based curation to interactive heritage preservation, digital narrative, and community-driven museum practices. Karen porridge demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage can be modified without compromising its originality and cultural significance, from authentic food to freeze-dried, instant food. As an immersive and informative medium, food legacy can help museums bridge tradition and innovation.

Interactive food heritage exhibitions

Museums can facilitate visitors' engagement with heritage cuisine through sensory and participatory exhibitions. Examples can be aroma-based exhibits, hands-on culinary seminars, or live cooking demonstrations as offered by the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) in New York or the Basque Culinary Center Museum. This participatory model can also be adopted by local museums, which may integrate traditional foods like Karen porridge to actively engage visitors and sustain cultural heritage as a living practice.

Digital storytelling, virtual archives

As perishable heritage sparks conservatory and preservation concerns digital solutions provide a sustainable alternative to physical culinary displays. Food historians, cultural researchers, and local communities can collaborate with museums to establish interactive digital archives. Through immersive multimedia narrative, online recipe libraries, and QR-coded packaging, the historical, sociological, and culinary context of Karen porridge can be investigated. This method is reminiscent of Google Arts & Culture's 'Taste the Nation' initiative, which utilizes film, recipes, and oral narratives to document the culinary traditions of various countries.

Living museums and culinary heritage

The evolving importance of cuisine in museum curation is consistent with the proliferation of living museums, which actively engage in cultural activities. The Nordic Food Lab in Copenhagen and the Taiwan Indigenous Cultural Park are examples of how live museums can integrate culinary heritage. Potential future initiatives may encompass:

- Monthly Karen activities involving museum visitors in the preparation of meals

During culinary residencies, Karen chefs and food artisans impart their expertise. Visitors are able to investigate the culinary traditions of Karen by participating in interactive stations that rotate.

- Food Trails and Experiences Guided by Museums

Curated cultural food pathways have the potential to facilitate immersive learning experiences that extend beyond museums. Museums may provide Karen food heritage trails that allow visitors to visit Karen communities, interact with food artisans, and participate in cooking classes. There are examples of successful food heritage excursions in Japan, Italy, and Thailand. In this model, museums would contextualize Karen cuisine traditions within historical and social narratives.

Successful examples of food heritage excursions include the Wagashi Sweet Trail in Kanazawa, Okhotsk trail, Higashi Hokkaido food trail Japan; the Chianti wine trail, Tuscany, Italy; and the Northern flavours Chiang Mai Food Tour in Thailand. In this model, museums would contextualize Karen cuisine traditions within historical and social narratives.

- Social innovation and culinary entrepreneurship that are facilitated by museums

Museum-led social entrepreneurship is facilitated by heritage-based culinary transformation. Using models such as the Sustainable Fashion Program at the V&A Museum, museums can collaborate with Karen communities to ethically sell Karen porridge.

Future endeavors could include museums providing branding and technical support to promote fair trade practices, establishing museum-affiliated culinary centers for Karen cuisine distribution, and utilizing sales revenue to support Karen cultural preservation as part of their social engagement and educational missions.

In conclusion, the future of museum culinary heritage curation is the transition from static display to dynamic, community-led, immersive interaction. Through interactive displays, digital storytelling, living museums, cultural culinary trails, and social enterprise models, food should be regarded as a living legacy practice. By incorporating Karen porridge into these expanding museological frameworks, museums have the potential to foster innovation for cultural preservation, thus respecting tradition and change.

The Vivid Ethnicity – A Mobile Museum in Motion

Heritage is never still – it moves, evolves, and takes new forms. In the Vivid Ethnicity, our mobile museum, culture is not an artifact to be preserved but a lived experience, carried through different ethnic groups, shared meals, and evolving traditions. Karen porridge, once rooted in daily life, now transcends its origins, embodying both heritage and innovation.

Like those who move across borders, food negotiates its place between authenticity and reinvention. In this museum, eating becomes an exhibition, cooking a living display, and food a collection that is meant to be consumed, not archived. The transformation of Karen porridge into a heritage-based ready-to-eat product is not a departure from tradition – it is its continuation, ensuring it remains relevant and accessible beyond its place of origin.

Visitors actively engage with the mobile museum through hands-on cooking workshops, storytelling sessions, and interactive food tasting. Community members contribute personal narratives and household objects, enriching the evolving collection with new layers of meaning. The mobile format allows the museum to reach diverse audiences, from rural communities to urban centers, fostering intergenerational dialogue and stimulating reflection on cultural continuity. Many visitors express surprise and pride in seeing their daily practices recognized as valuable heritage, while younger generations discover new connections to ancestral traditions through the shared sensory experience of food. (Cusripituck ed all, 2024)

In this mobile museum engaging with multiple ethnic communities, tradition is not a static exhibit but an unfolding story, told through taste, touch, and shared experience. Heritage does not stand still; it thrives in motion, passing from one generation to the next, reshaping itself while staying true to its roots. In the Vivid Ethnicity, every meal is a narrative, every shared dish a bridge between past and future. This is not just about preserving culture – it is about living it.

In Conclusion

This study provides a new paradigm for food heritage transformation, demonstrating that food can function as a living collection within museum interpretation. The praxis-based, community-led approach ensures that heritage innovation does not erase authenticity but enhances its relevance.

References

- Chauhan, Y., Negi, I., & Singh, M. (2025). 'Cultural identity and Globalization in Culinary Practices: Exploring the Evolution, Diversity and Socioeconomic Impact of Food and Cuisine Across Cultures'. *International Journal for Multidimensional Research Perspectives*, 3(1), 8-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61877/ijmrpv3i1.225>
- Cusripituck, P., Knoop, R., & Yamabhai, J. (2024). Vivid Ethnicity: A Mobile Museum for Transformative Engagement. *Journal of Museum Education*, 49(1), 119-129.
- Heritage. (2024). 'SHIFT - Cultural Heritage transformation project kicks off under Horizon Europe'. *Heritage Management Organization*. <https://heritagemanagement.org/shift/>
- Mathew, E. (2024). 'Globalization and Local Flavours: The Impact of Modern Food Production on Traditional Cuisine and Culinary Heritage Preservation'. *International Journal for Multidimensional Research Perspectives*, 2(7), 61-78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61877/ijmrpv2i7.170>
- Olivie-Touati, G., & Moussa, A. (2017). 'The relationship between Heritage and Innovation: A conceptual analysis'. *2nd Abbé Grégoire Innovation Day*. https://www.bilanpatrimoine.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/HeritageInnovation_golivie-touati_amosa_InnovationDay_280317.pdf
- Yamabhai, J., Knoop, R., & Cusripituck, P. (2021). Participatory engagement for sustainable innovation in Karen communities. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 14(2), 195-212.
- Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu-Venedik, Asli. (2024). 'Transforming Heritage into Innovation Spaces: Exploration of Heritage Helix Ecosystems'. *Heritage*, 7(12), 7142-7164. DOI: [10.3390/heritage7120330](https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage7120330)

Senses

Senses of Home

Jules Rijssen

Biography

Jules Rijssen is an andragogue and writer and works as a network collector at Imagine IC. He is also affiliated with NL-Lab as an expert in residence on cultural heritage and inclusivity. Here he works on inclusive networking, and advises on diversity and cross-institutional research.

Senses of Home

In the *Senses of Home* workshop, conference participants from Belgium, China, Taiwan and Thailand discussed how sensory aspects such as smell, taste and spatial aesthetics can come together.¹ Based on four case studies, we will reflect on concepts of the senses and sensory perception in relation to heritage experience and memory culture. This view of heritage is also present in the heritage practice of Imagine IC, a heritage institution with an integrated approach and a holistic view of heritage. It is a mix of an archive, a museum and a place for conversation. Based on the case studies presented and other examples from museum and heritage studies literature, it appears that multi-sensory approaches and applications in museums lead to changes in the experiences of visitors/participants.

'The modern cultural environment has transformed museums into interactive spaces that go beyond simple display practices. The classic experience of gazing at artefacts through glass is no longer the primary focus. These institutions have evolved into interactive spaces that create emotional engagement through the deliberate delivery of sensory experiences. Museums now use the five senses to develop environments that both educate visitors and trigger powerful emotional responses. The emotional value of museum visits substantially grows when people experience carefully crafted spaces that appeal to their senses (Mackay, 2021; Jelincic et al., 2021). These immersive experiences strengthen visitor connections to historical and cultural artefacts and artistic displays, allowing abstract ideas to take on meaning that visual displays alone cannot achieve (Carlsson, 2020).'²

The Garden

Nadia Babazia from the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp (Belgium) talked about the collaborative project with the Permeke Library and SAAMO – an organisation for social community building – and a group of women with a migrant background. The Garden is a garden based on these women's stories of homesickness. All the herbs, flowers and vegetables in this garden are connected to these women's memories of home. This garden is located at the Permeke Library.

Through a 'homesickness box', participants reflect more deeply on the stories they share with each other. They call the garden their 'pharmacy', a place for healing. They take the time to build long-term relationships with the group of women. They invest in the collaboration and, above all, listen to each other's stories and let the garden grow. The aim is to provide space and time to reflect on the past and the present, so that a bridge can be built to the future. The workshop began with the spraying of orange blossom water on the hands of the audience as a welcome ritual and as a symbol: a sign that you belong. Homesickness is a common theme in migration and, at the same time, a universal feeling that we all recognise. Or, as was written on a response card at the end of the session: *'Sense of Orange brings you the sense of welcoming.'*



Nadia Babazia (left) and Jules Rijssen (right). Photo: Willem van Wijk



Heimweekast at Imagine IC³ - photo Jules Rijssen

The Tale from the Mountain.

Patoo Cusripituck presented *The Tale from the mountain: A narrative of a collection's journey from a remote area to a city*, a collaborative project between an eco-museum in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Karen community, whose cultural practices are under pressure. She carried out the project together with Teerawam Mingbualuang and Jitjayang Yamabhai.

Patoo told the story of Ta po po, a traditional dish that takes two hours to prepare and is strongly associated with feelings of home and togetherness. To support the community economically and make the dish more accessible, they developed an instant version, retaining the flavour and symbolism in a form adapted to contemporary life. *'With three flavours available, every bite becomes a way to taste heritage and support the continuity of the Karen community,'* said Patoo.



Patoo Cusripituck. Photo: Willem van Wijk

The collection and the Chinese garden

Jie Liu is an associate professor and curator at the National Library of China and a researcher of antique collections, iconography and curation. She presented the project *The integration of collections and Chinese garden: Cross-border curatorial practice that goes beyond the collection*.

Chinese garden philosophy states that Chinese gardeners are not gardeners, but philosophers and artists. Chinese gardens are carefully composed spaces in which elements such as stone and bamboo are placed with aesthetic and symbolic intentions. The spirit of Confucianism, Taoism and Zen in Chinese philosophy can be found here.

Conference participants were invited to consider how such gardens can be brought to life, not only visually but also socially. Various seemingly random elements from Chinese gardens were discussed, along with the symbolism of these forms.

Beyond the meaning that the designer or gardener attaches to his or her garden, what does it evoke in others who have no knowledge or understanding of the underlying philosophy? What effect does it have on people with different cultural and personal backgrounds?

That movement and stirring happens because at such moments we actively tap into the archive that is our body. This goes beyond remembering in our heads; it is about remembering in and from the body.



Jie Liu. Photo: Willem van Wijk

Aromatic Imprint: Scent as a Catalyst

The sense of smell is highly subjective, private and fleeting, but it acts as a catalyst and is anchored in memory. In collaboration with a scientific illustrator and a perfumer, Chelsea Wang of the National Museum of History in Taiwan used indigenous plants in her project *Aromatic Imprint: Scent as a Catalyst for Museum Collecting* to explore how scents can express the Taiwanese sense of belonging. This sensory approach allows for a reinterpretation of (colonial) history, tells stories that might otherwise remain outside the dominant historical narratives, and evokes deep-rooted connections to the place. In doing so, it also replaces the traditional method of simply recounting historical facts. Moreover, who writes these historical facts and thus determines history?

Reflection

Wang's subjective and highly personal approach is also in line with Imagine IC's approach and commitment to the democratisation of heritage. We also constantly strive to think about ways to reshape the conversation about heritage and meaning.



Chelsea Wang – Photo: Willem van Wijk

Reflections

Imagine IC also explores the role of smells in its collection practice. Smells related to memories of home, upbringing, neighbourhood, recipes and plants, but also related to the human body. How does our body – as the bearer of memory – behave in this regard? The memories evoked by smell are or eventually become part of our identity.

In our work practice of intergenerational collection meetings, we see the important role of specific scents. Take, for example, the case of the Bijlmer plane crash. On 4 October 1992, an El Al cargo plane crashed shortly after take-off from Schiphol Airport onto the Klein Kruitberg and Groeneveen flats in Bijlmermeer. Those involved remember not only the smell of kerosene but also that of perfume, because in addition to weapons and other items, there were also perfume bottles in the cargo hold. That specific combination of kerosene and perfume has become a carrier of the terrible memories of the plane crash. For some of them, this combination of smells is identical to the crash site. Another project launched by Imagine IC is *Groen (Green)*. This ranges from potted plants in the living room and bedroom, on the gallery or balcony, to managing small allotments. Smell also plays a role in the practice of planting flowers and vegetables, including (medicinal) herbs. Even in the home, the scents that float around are not random. Just like the interior of the bedroom, bathroom, kitchen or entrance hall, they are part of what makes the house a home.⁴

In my personal reflection, I focus in particular on the projects of Nadia Babazia, Chelsea Wang and Professor Patoo Cusripituck and her team. There are similarities between them and our work in terms of theme, although the collection methods may differ in practice.

The food and taste components of Patoo Cusripituck's project from Thailand are closely related to our Green project. For example, in a session on what people plant in allotments, the practical question was asked: 'What do you do if you have a surplus of tomatoes, for example?' Spontaneously, recipes for sauces and other uses were shared.

Investigating smells also reveals colonial traces. These vary from specific preparation methods to the export of certain products. An example of this is the types of butter that are made in the Netherlands but cannot be found in large regular supermarkets. However, they can be found in Toko's and other types of shops run by migrants. In this way, what was considered the 'average' food culture was determined worldwide. This colonisation of smells and tastes can still be found in cities around the world today.

As in the Thai collaboration project, Imagine IC plays with the concept of culinary heritage in several of its projects and how this is not fixed but constantly changing. In the podcast series *Gekookte Geschiedenis (Cooked History)*, which we produce in collaboration with Ayra Kip of Kip Republic, we talk about food culture, identity and history from the perspective of the African-Caribbean diaspora. Are specific dishes eaten at certain milestones and what is the symbolism behind this? In the last *Gespreksstof (Conversation Material)* we organised around the day on which the end of the Second World War is celebrated in the Netherlands, food in times of scarcity was the central theme: how does scarcity lead to the creation of new dishes? But also: how can food serve as a reminder and a source of hope in turbulent times?

Another interesting question is how you describe a smell to someone who has never smelt it before. Not understanding a particular spiritual ritual is often compared to describing a smell that is unknown to someone else. You can only know the smell if you immerse yourself in it. In this context, see the fieldwork by anthropologist Mikkel Rytter (2015), who uses the scent of the rose as a metaphor for a certain spiritual experience that you must undergo in the article of the same name, *The Scent of a Rose: Imitating Imitators as They Learn to Love the Prophet*.⁵

In this respect, I believe that scent can also be understood as a 'liminal space' in which you can wander. You can also lose your way there. When life confuses you to such an extent that even the scent that is familiar to you can upset your body in stressful situations. This is how British-Nigerian novelist Kolapo Akinola puts it in *The Bachelor's Ride*. In this novel, he gives the reader an intimate insight into the mind of his main character Toyosi, who is a sickle cell carrier. As a reader, you are confronted with the suffering and social exclusion that sickle cell carriers struggle with:

*"Surrounded by shelves of towels and a vanity tray with colognes, detergents and other toiletries, I smelled the scents of soaps – of shea butter, of coconut milk, of pleasant fragrance. My hands smelled of onions. My head, my heart, my feet – the rest of my body – smelled of fear."*⁶

A few lines later, when he sees two children running around and playing happily in the courtyard garden from his toilet, he sighs: *"The last thing I'd expected to smell in a toilet, in this lonely position, was love."*⁷ Art and scent historian Caro Verbeek argues that all emotions (such as infatuation, love, fear – but also things like illness) can be smelled. (...) But you can also determine the atmosphere through our nose. We know things through our nose. Only we are not aware of it. (...) Or that we don't have a relationship with so-and-so because our scents don't match. According to Verbeek, all scents are culturally determined and also belong to our heritage.⁸

The smell of love has not yet been discussed or researched in Imagine IC's practice, which is all the more reason to discuss this smell in conversations about home.

The cases presented, particularly those from Belgium, Taiwan and Thailand, can serve as mirror examples of Imagine IC's working practice and also reflect the results we have achieved with our network.

Scents, flavours, plants and flowers are not only seen, smelted and experienced by the participants in the discussions as something private, something stored in their inner domain, but also serve as 'glasses' through which to see and experience the world around them - from the distant past and/or the very near present.

In a gathering with senior citizens on the theme of Green, which was devoted to planting, one participant said that she was not a member of an allotment association in the Netherlands and did not have any plants in her home. She spends the winter in Suriname, where she does plant. There, she has to put her bare hands in the soil, touch it and smell it. I remember her saying that the feeling is different in the Netherlands. Is the smell of the soil the same everywhere, or is it the smell of love or the smell of fear?

In the project to preserve the distinctive Kempering garage in the Bijlmer neighbourhood of Amsterdam Zuidoost, we also learned that a neighbourhood can have a specific smell. Garages were not only places where you parked your car, but also places where informal businesses flourished, from hairdressers to moped and car repair shops. They served as (romantic) meeting places and playgrounds for children, but also as public urinals. They also served as a shelter for many homeless people and asylum seekers who had exhausted all legal remedies from the *We Are Here* movement. The smell of the garage was not just a mixture of urine and engine oil. The smell of the garage in the Bijlmer/Amsterdam was also one of youth and innocence.

Discussing these issues also requires high-quality listening skills and the attention of the participants. The ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Being given and giving space to share your heart and mind. Listening becomes political insofar as the aim is not merely to hear the speaker. It also appeals to what is not said. It is about being sensitive to unequal power relations, silence as protection and sometimes also as a weapon. All the more so because we know that words always have something intangible about them, no matter how clearly they are spoken.

But it is also about the question with which every conversation begins.⁹ The question of who you are or what you want to share about it? Perhaps also how you say it. Seeking ideas and opinions about justice. Building a just society together.

Listening to each other forces us to embrace diversity of opinion in conversation and in society. Asking questions, listening, talking, conversation. From this perspective on our actions and those of others, we at Imagine IC explore heritage practice. Senses of Home, with its multiple sensory perspectives, is part of our current heritage practice, which we will continue to explore in the coming period.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Bibi de Vries, project coordinator at Imagine IC, for proofreading, and Willem van Wijk, lecturer in Anthropology at Leiden University and PhD researcher at Imagine IC, who
- 2 made some of his notes on the presentations available for this reflection.
- 3 Aiswarya Nettoor Veetil, 'How Museums Stir Emotions Through the Senses', in: <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/architectural-community/a14002-how-museums-stir-emotions-through-the-senses/>
- 4 From 12 August to 12 October 2025, Imagine IC will be exhibiting the Heimwee cabinet from the Red Starline Museum. This cabinet functions as an open dialogue and connects
- 5 two places of arrival in the Imagine IC building: Antwerp and Amsterdam.
- 6 Coccia, E. (2024), *Philosophy of the Home. Domestic Space and Happiness*. UK: Penguin Books.
- 7 Rytter, M. (2015), 'The Scent of a Rose: Imitating Imitators as They Learn to Love the Prophet', in Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage (eds) *Affective Methodologies. Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan,
- 8 pp. 140-160.
- 9 Akinola, K. (2022), *The Bachelor's Ride*. UK: Icongate. p. 23
- 10 idem 4.p.24
- 11 How do we capture scent in words? A conversation with Caro Verbeek: <https://overtaalgesproken.buzzsprout.com/1767106/episodes/13801186-hoe-vangen-we-geur-in-woorden-een-gesprek-met-caro-verbeek>. Podcast 23 October 2023. Institute for the Dutch
- 12 Language / Genootschap Onze Taal. Season 3. Episode 2
- 13 Meijer.E.(2022), *Perhaps is another word for hope. A plea for polyphony in political and public debate*. Amsterdam: De Geus.

Senses

It starts with a feeling. To touch and being touched by museum objects

Roberto Luis Martins & Marysa Otte

Biography

Roberto Luis Martins is Curator Fashion and Popular Culture at the Amsterdam Museum. Roberto focuses on researching, collecting and exhibiting fashion and its affiliated popular culture through a sociopolitical perspective. Examples are the exhibitions 'Continue This Thread' on the power of handicrafts, and 'Grand March' on the artistic voices of the Dutch ballroom house, House of Vineyard. In the past Roberto has worked as a curator in cultural institutions as Museum Arnhem and Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, and fashion heritage platform Modemuze.

Marysa Otte serves as a Collections Advisor in the Amsterdam Museum, focusing on matters of care and conservation. She previously worked as an advisor specialising in collection management, care, and preventive conservation for museums and heritage organisations in the Province of Gelderland. Currently, she is conducting research on co-creation's intersection with decision-making processes concerning valuation, use, care, and conservation issues.

In museum settings, the risk of physical contact with objects is a significant concern. At the Amsterdam Museum, for instance, a sticker featuring an image of a hand with a bold cross is placed near displays to discourage touching. In some cases, this warning is reinforced with explicit text, such as the somewhat stern 'Please do not touch.' Despite these precautions, visitors often feel a strong urge to touch objects, particularly when clothing and textiles are presented. Clothing and fabrics evoke a tactile connection, as the sense of touch enhances our understanding of material qualities. However, physical contact with historic garments poses risks beyond immediate damage, such as tearing or breaking - it also accelerates the natural degradation of fibres. As a result, fashion exhibitions frequently present garments behind glass or within restricted display areas, limiting engagement to visual observation alone.

Yet, despite the necessity of preservation, the desire to touch is at the heart of how we experience fashion and textiles. Visitors sometimes instinctively reach out to feel materials, as touch provides a deeper understanding of texture, weight and craftsmanship - qualities that cannot be fully appreciated through sight alone. For visitors such as fashion students, tailors, reenactors and individuals with visual impairments, tactile engagement is not merely a preference but can be a crucial means of learning and connecting with (fashion) history. This raises questions as: how can museums navigate the tension between conservation and the need for sensory engagement? Also, how can we exhibit fashion more inclusively?

This article examines an exploration of unlocking a newly acquired gown, a printed cotton gown from about 1830 (see fig 1).¹ We, Marysa Otte (Senior Advisor Collections) and Roberto Luis Martins (Curator Fashion and Popular Culture) collaborated on this project and invited multiple perspectives to include in understanding how to unlock this gown to the public. In collaboration with students from various fashion related school programs (MBO & HBO)² and participants from the 2024 *Collecting with(in) the City Conference* (the joint ICOM CAMOC and COMCOL conference), we positioned this gown as the centrepiece of our initiative while actively engaging the diverse perspectives of the participants. We examine the dress by unravelling the (im)material stories associated with it, identifying user needs and assessing potential risks.



Figure 1: Gown, ca. 1830, in the Amsterdam Museum exhibition 'Unboxing. Fashion from the Archives' (2024). Photo by Monique Vermeulen, Amsterdam Museum

A historic gown for rental

The gown at the centre of this research dates from around 1830. Unfortunately, no information on its maker nor its original wearer have been preserved. The size and its cut tells us that it was probably made for a female teenager. The gown is striking for its high waistline and its voluminous *gigot* sleeves. The fabric is a printed cotton with floral motives. The delicate smocking at the shoulders and sleeves demonstrates the fine craftsmanship of dressmaking in this period.

Unlike many garments in museum collections, this gown was not kept as a carefully preserved inheritance, but as part of the rental stock of A. Serné, an Amsterdam-based costume company founded in 1866. Serné specialised in theatrical and masquerade costumes, later expanding into film and television. Many of its garments, including this gown, were altered and repurposed for performances, although hardly any proofs of later adjustments are visible in this gown. As interest in historical costume rentals declined, the company closed in 1993, but select pieces - like this gown - found their way into museum collections. It is, yet, unknown how long the gown has been in Serné's collection.

In close agreement with the donor, the Amsterdam Museum acquired this gown not as a static display piece but as part of its *gebruikscollectie* - or 'usable collection.' This collection challenges the idea of museum objects as untouchable, recognizing that some artifacts gain meaning through interaction. Unlike traditional acquisitions, these objects can be handled, and sometimes even worn, offering a deeper engagement with material culture.

This gown presents an interesting case for inclusion in a usable collection. Its historical significance extends beyond its initial creation, as it remained in active use for - most probably - decades within Serné's costume rental business. Though its exact journey is unknown, its function was to be handled and worn by multiple generations, reinforcing its identity as a garment meant for interaction. In addition, as the gown consists of sturdy cotton fabric, with no applied decoration such as lace or beads, its condition reduces the risk of damage compared to more fragile materials. While every historical dress carries unique details, this gown does not necessarily represent a singularly rare example within fashion history. Museums hold comparable pieces from the same period. In the most unfortunate case of complete degradation, this would not lead into a vital gap in museum collections. By embracing this gown within a usable collection, the museum expands opportunities for research, education, historical sensation and a more immersive experience of fashion history. It also challenges the museum field to rethink what it means to unlock fashion within an exhibition context.³

A user manual

Labelling an object as part of a usable collection is a curious concept in theory, but how does it work in practice? What boundaries need to be established? Who should be granted a tactile experience and under what conditions? What does a user manual for this gown look like? Rather than imposing predefined guidelines, we sought to explore these questions through collaboration and co-creation, gathering insights from various perspectives to develop a more informed and inclusive approach. This aligns with the findings of Jane Henderson and Ashley Lingle in their research on touching objects in museums: 'By developing frameworks designed to conceive a creative and flexible future relationship between enacting thoughtful conservation activities and enabling meaningful physical experience with cultural heritage, we can broaden the factors being considered in touch decisions.' (2023: 11).

In this first phase of the project, we engaged with key audiences to better understand the significance of touch in museum experiences. What does tactile interaction offer fashion students, museum professionals, or individuals with visual impairments? Conversely, what might be lost when granting physical access to a collection piece? To carefully unlock this gown for public engagement, we initiated dialogues with these target groups, ensuring their perspectives shaped the process. As a first step, we collaborated with about 150 students from MBO Mode, MBO Jeans School and the HBO Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI). Additionally, we hosted a workshop during the COMCOL-CAMOC conference (further referred to as the Conference), where we gathered further input on the implications of tactile engagement in museum contexts. By centering co-creation in our approach, we aimed to formulate a more inclusive, sustainable model for incorporating touch into the museum experience.

The workshops were designed to explore the specific needs and expectations of participants when studying a historical garment within an exhibition space. The historical gown in question was exhibited in the mini-exhibition ‘Unboxing: Fashion from the Archives’ in the Amsterdam Museum, where we exercised the idea of unlocking a sensorial experience with this gown. Visitors were invited to feel the gown. Together with the students, we explored how tactility enhances their understanding of fashion’s materiality, construction and historical context. Through guided discussions and hands-on interaction, we posed questions such as: ‘What has touching the gown brought you? What effect does it have on the gown?’ These sessions not only revealed the value of sensorial engagement but also highlighted the challenges of balancing access with conservation. During the Conference workshop, we expanded this dialogue, collectively exploring the same questions and reflecting on the answers.

Mixed feelings?

Following workshops and interviews with various groups, a broad range of emotional reactions and reflections emerged about the significance of touching the gown, along with concerns about its preservation. A central theme was the connection participants felt with the gown through tactile engagement, which made their experience of fashion history more personal.



Figure 2-3: Students from MBO observing the gown in exhibition ‘Unboxing. Fashion from the Archives’ (2024)
Photo’s by Marysa Otte, Amsterdam Museum

Students

For the students, touching the gown offered immediate insights into its materiality and construction: ‘By touching, it told your eyes something different.’²⁴ Feeling the fabric allowed them to notice design details, like hand-stitched seams and the softness of the cotton, which were hard to detect visually. Touching was often combined with flipping up the lower part, revealing the inside and construction of the gown (Fig 2 & 3). The tactile connection sparked an emotional response beyond technical aspects of fashion design. Many students expressed a sense of intimacy with the past, feeling that touching the gown allowed them to connect with its original wearer and maker: ‘You get more appreciation for the maker of the dress’ and: ‘You can imagine how a child would have worn it’. Or, projecting it on themselves: ‘You can better imagine what it feels like to wear something like this’. Some students found the gown more real and tangible when touched, bringing them closer to the historical context.

There was a small group who described the experience as ‘underwhelming’. They stated that it did not offer them new perspectives and that this particular gown was not very interesting to them. ‘Touch is not as important if a garment is already analysed and presented with museum research’. And: ‘The gown could have also been shown inside out, so we wouldn’t have needed to touch it to see the techniques’. These last responses came from the groups following a HBO educational program. The various groups were too small to draw conclusions about differences between answers from MBO and HBO students. However, it is noticeable that the MBO groups seemed more emotionally impacted by the gown, while the HBO groups thought more critically about the whole experience, suggesting alternatives for using the garment.

Even before the question of what consequences touching might have for the gown was raised, some students mentioned that it felt strange to touch something so old and that they were concerned about whether the gown would withstand it. One group suggested that - should the gown become dirty and worn - the museum could use it as a kind of educational warning of what happens with collections when you touch them.



Figure 4: Conference attendees answering questions on touching the gown during the visit to the Amsterdam Museum. Photo by Françoise Boleschowski.

Conference attendees

The attendees of the Conference were invited to touch the garment during their visit to the Amsterdam Museum (figure 4). They were initially presented with a different question than the students: *What emotion or feeling does touching the gown evoke in you?* The second question was the same as the one posed to the students, asking participants to reflect on what the act of touching the gown brought them. This approach allowed respondents to first identify their immediate emotional reaction before considering its deeper significance. The concept of a ‘first’ emotion was introduced as it would serve as a valuable element in the Conference workshop on the following day, which includes an ‘emotion networking’ session. An overview of the answers on both questions is given in table 1.

1 Emotions	2 What did touching the gown brought you
Unexpected, feeling closer, superlative	It takes away something: a museum object becomes a piece of clothing. 1830 is brought to my clothing closet. Difficult to leave my ‘work state of mind’. I already gained a first new ‘insight’ (perspective) in this conference!
Nothing special	Not special, because the kind of fabric is well known. So: I don’t need to touch it.
Concern, amazement	Information about the technique and material used in 19 th century.
Surprised	The fabric is in such great condition. But: the interaction with the interviewer is more interesting than the object.
Excited, incredible to touch the collection	And a little sad, the owner is gone.
-	I was more interested, it became more real.
Makes me more curious	Makes me more interested in the dress.
Calmness	It’s amazing to have the chance to touch the ‘history’, especially the ‘museum-object’. It’s a new way to create ‘collective memory’. Even though I am from a different cultural background, I feel I am part of history.
Care! Respectful	I have said in my mind: ‘Nice to meet you’ to whom the dress belonged.
Confused	Confused, because history is ... something not real or allowed to touch.
Makes it real, feeling of connection	More focused

Table 1. Responses of the eleven conference attendees on the first two questions

The responses from conference attendees indicated relatively less interest in the construction of the dress than the students. Instead, participants described various forms of connectedness, including the experience of feeling a sense of connection across cultural backgrounds through the act of touching. Some responses also reflected uneasiness about handling museum objects. One visitor provided an answer that appeared ‘underwhelmed,’ similar to a response from one of the student groups. However, this individual has (practical) knowledge of historic fabrics and garment construction, suggesting that understanding the gown may not require tactile engagement. In most cases, the initial emotional response is closely aligned with the second reflection. In some instances, the first emotion differed, for example shifting from concern and amazement to a more analytical focus on technique and materials. Six conference attendees responded to the third question regarding the impact of touch on the dress. The most common concern was the garment becoming dirty. One participant speculated: ‘Perhaps the deterioration is accelerated by just two minutes?’

Visitors

Finally, four museum visitors answered the same questions as the conference attendees. Since the answers are diverse and express other reflections than the students and the conference attendees, we present their reactions in table 2.

Seeing the variety of answers here, it is worthwhile to interview more visitors, or to give them the possibility to react on reflection cards in a next presentation of the gown.

1 Emotions	2 What did touching the gown brought you	3 What does it do to the dress
Nostalgic feeling (my Indian grandmother wore something like that)	Touching enhances feeling It feels different from what I expected	It will change after lots of touching
Lovely, princess-like	It reminds me of the cradle for my daughter in Laura Ashley fabric and her baptism clothes. It is so soft! You are getting more feelings, emotions because of touching	It gets more value, because you can touch it
Thrilling, nostalgic, grateful	Seeing details better, impressed by how it is made Everybody learns different [touching is one of the possibilities]	In the long term it affects the wellbeing of the dress. It has more value now
Happy	You think about the child who wore it and the person who made the dress	Maybe the dress likes it! Some parts will wear out

Table 2. Responses of four visitors on the three questions

Similarities, differences and perspectives

For most respondents -whether students, visitors, or conference attendees- being able to touch the dress made their encounter with it more engaging and real; they felt more connected.

Among students, interest was naturally centred on the construction process and the techniques employed. Across all groups, connections were drawn to history, the wearer and the maker of the garment. Some responses suggested an inclusive perspective. One respondent noted that touching the dress helped her feel more connected, despite coming from a different cultural background. For another interviewee, the fabric evoked a sense of nostalgia, as it reminded him of the clothes his grandmother used to wear in India. One participant highlighted that individuals have different learning styles, with tactile engagement serving as a valuable means of both learning and connecting. This may account for the particularly enthusiastic response from the more practically inclined vocational students.

Across all groups, some of the participants voiced concern regarding the potential degradation and contamination of the gown through physical contact. These concerns appear to be more present in the museum conference group. One conference respondent suggested that the interaction and dialogue surrounding the garment were, in fact, more engaging than the act of touching itself. This focus on sharing thoughts brings us to the workshop on touching this historical gown during the Conference.

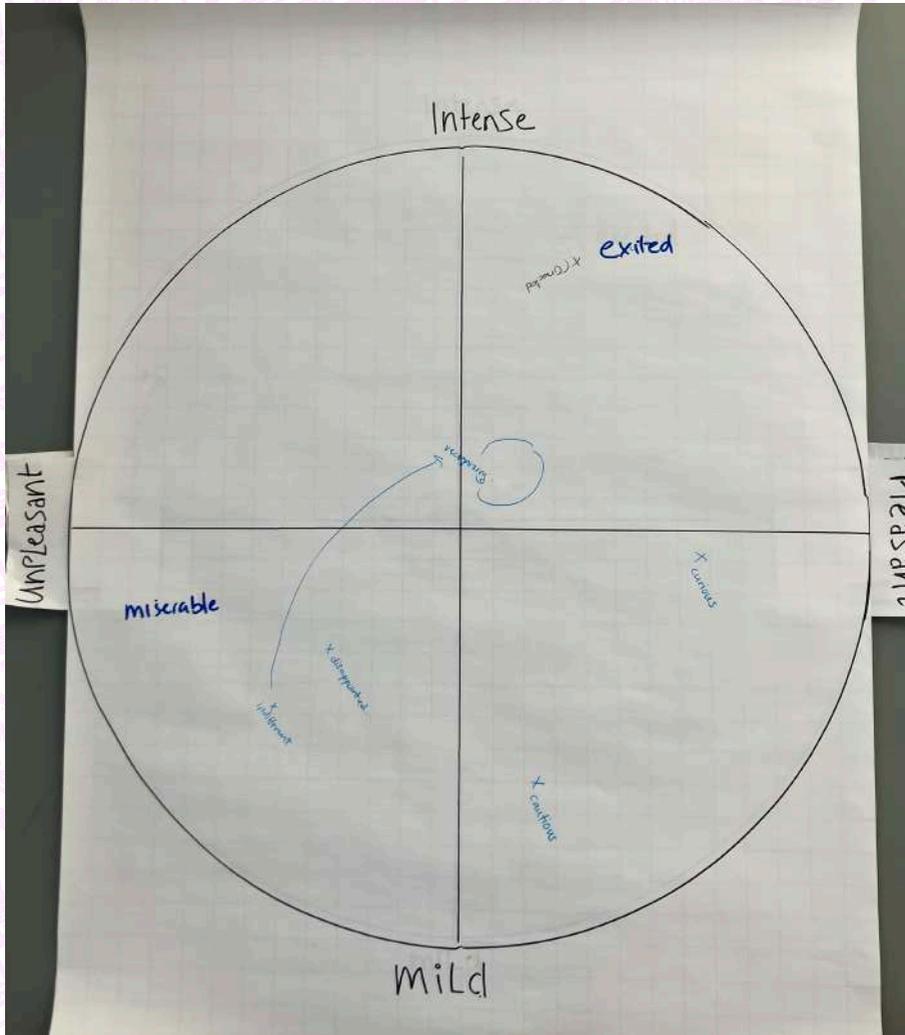


Figure 5: Mapping the responses during the Emotion Networking workshop, where it is visible (indicated with an arrow) that someone's emotion changed from 'indifferent' to a more positive emotion. [The words 'miserable' and 'excited' were written down before the workshop started as an example where to place emotions in the circle]. Photo by Marysa Otte, Amsterdam Museum

Shifting emotions, an Emotion Networking workshop with the gown

With no historical dress at hand during the workshop and only a few conference visitors who actually touched the gown the day before, we decided to use the answers of the diverse respondents and the *Emotion Networking* method for this workshop. Hester Dibbits' short description of this method:

In an emotion networking session, people are invited to share their feelings on a specific object or theme and discuss any changes that occur in these feelings during the exchange.

Changes may occur because of something a participant says, or in response to information introduced during the conversation, in the form of a text, image, or recording. Such an 'introduced voice' can shed a whole new light on the object or theme, moving the entire constellation. But it could also be that nothing or almost nothing changes. (2024: 5).

The workshop members were asked to write their first upcoming emotion(s) in a circle with axes from unpleasant to pleasant and from mild emotions to intense emotions.

After that, exchange with the other members in their group and the introduced voices from the written answers of students, conference attendees, museum visitors, textile experts and a conservator, sometimes gave them new perspectives, ending in shifts of emotions.

One of the members said that her feelings of caution of touching a historical object shifted to a positive feeling, when she heard the explanation why we had chosen this historical gown for this purpose, by listening to other group members and by reading the answers of diverse respondents.

The value of working together with diverse groups in co-creation became evident during the workshops. By listening to the needs of the different key audiences, we were provided with valuable insights on how to unlock the gown. Ultimately, the exploration of tactile engagement with the 1830s gown raised important questions about the role of touch in museum practices. It highlighted how museums can offer more inclusive experiences that engage multiple senses while navigating the balance between conservation and access. Involving various groups - from students to conference attendees to museum visitors - opened the door to new ways of interacting with fashion and history in museum settings.

After being touched : what is next?

We invited Hanneke Kramer, the external textile conservator who collaborated with us on the gown's presentation, to share her reflections on how working with the dress impacted her:

Using a historical costume as a tactile object initially goes against everything I have learned about preventive and active conservation. A costume that can be touched by visitors requires more attention than a 'regular' costume for museum display; it needs more frequent condition checks, potentially more frequent conservation treatments and a sturdier and more extensive mounting than when a costume is placed in a display case. For a conservator, this is an interesting case study from which I can learn. In hindsight, I would have mounted it differently, considering how the gown is being touched in the exhibition.



Figure 6: Conference participants during the workshop. Photo by Francoise Boleschowski

The response reveals two key insights: using a historical dress requires extra effort to maintain it in a presentable condition and it necessitates careful consideration and execution of new display methods. After the presentation, the conservator re-examined the gown, focusing on potentially delicate areas. It was found that these areas had remained largely unchanged, except for a small hook that had partially detached. Additionally, distinguishing new dirt from existing dirt and the gown's natural yellowing proved challenging.⁵

Conclusions

Our project on the historic gown led to meaningful conversations and interactions with a range of people and groups. While the outcomes aligned with our expectations, we were struck by the diversity of emotions and perspectives we encountered. Initially, our focus was on creating a user manual together with the users. However, by first listening to many individuals and groups, we expanded our understanding - and, in turn, the possibilities of what to include in a 'user manual.'

Visitors and groups deeply appreciated the chance to engage in tactile experiences, often highlighting both tangible and intangible values. This underscores that touch can play a role in fostering inclusivity. Collaborating and co-creating with diverse participants provided valuable insights into a broader spectrum of values and effective presentation methods that honour them.

The conservation of a usable collection may necessitate alternative approaches to preservation, support and protection. It is essential to consider the specific efforts, time and financial resources required to enable the museum and the communities involved to engage with these collections in a meaningful manner.

We selected fashion students as one of our main groups, as our museum aims to engage with them in mutual learning processes. The second group consisted of attendees from the Conference, as our museum was one of the hosts. Additionally, we gathered opinions from museum visitors, who sometimes provided unexpected insights. Moving forward, we would like to expand our outreach to include individuals with visual impairments. Since our previous discussions were conducted through conversations, we are also interested in incorporating reflection cards to explore whether they yield different responses. By sharing our findings with the CAMOC and COMCOL community, we hope to enhance co-creativity within and between museums, fostering mutual learning. We would greatly appreciate your feedback and suggestions to support this ongoing process.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the collaborators in workshops and interviews, Hester Dibbits for sharing her knowledge and for her assistance during the Conference workshop, Hanneke Kramer for her work as conservator on the gown, Floor van Hulsen for collaborating during the workshops and the team of CAMOC and COMCOL for inviting us to present the workshop in the conference.

Notes

- 1 Gown, 1825-1835, inventory number 7338, see <http://hdl.handle.net/11259/collection.116729>
- 2 The Dutch school program Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs (MBO) translate in English to Secondary Vocation Education, the Dutch school program Hoger Beroepsonderwijs (HBO) translate in English to University of Applied Sciences
- 3 Important to note that this paper, nor this research implies that we want to challenge museums to provide visitors physical access to 'all' their collection pieces. Naturally, when an object is collected to be preserved, we don't believe in 'reframing' it to a user's collection. Also, when there is a matter of uniqueness, or rare example, we believe in prioritizing the preservation of its condition.
- 4 Some of the student's responses were in English, other in Dutch. We translated the Dutch answers into English
- 5 It would be interesting to measure dust and dirt accumulation, but that would require specific measurement techniques and much more time from a textile conservator and/or technical researcher than was available now.

References

- Henderson, J., and Lingle, A. (2023). 'Touch Decisions: For Heritage Objects', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 63 (1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2023.2175983>
- Dibbits, H. 'Emotion Networking: A Heritage Practice'. In *The Critical Visitor: Changing Heritage Practices*, vol. 3, NMCW, Amsterdam, 2024, pp. 211-231. NMCW Work in Progress. <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/critical-visitor-changing-heritage-practices>, assessed 20 March 2025
- Serné, A. (1995). *De firma A. Serné & Zoon in arendsvlucht*. Amsterdam (no publisher)

Senses

The Archive of City Imprints: Collecting Textures of Memory

Lana Bede

Biography

Lana Bede is the senior curator pedagogue at the Karlovac City Museums (Croatia). She is responsible for developing and managing museum's educational programming including the awarded Touch of Idols and Ornament in Folk Costumes, as well as co-creative and participatory projects including Museum Bee Garden and Raise your Gaze. She has curated and co-authored a range of displays including Seeing Through Touch, the inclusive art exhibition adopted for the visually impaired (the SEGD Global Design Merit Award 2020, ZGDW Winner 2020 and 2021, the Croatian Museum Association Award 2020 for the best exhibition). Her recent work focuses on urban architecture, community participation, activist museum practice and multiperspectivity.

Bede holds a MA in Art History from the University of Zagreb. Previously worked at the State Archive in Karlovac on the collections of posters and blueprints. She was presenter at the ICOM CECA Conferences, DEMHIST Open Talks 2024 and the School of Museum Studies, the University of Leicester.

'The act of remembering is never neutral.'
- Frank Vagnone

Following the principles of the Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society and the new Prague ICOM museum definition, in 2022 the Karlovac City Museum in Croatia began the public engagement program titled *Raise Your Gaze*. Program's goals were raising awareness of the value of the city's architectural heritage faced with imminent destruction and recognition of this heritage as a public good and an element of the human right to culture. The program aimed to inform, educate, inspire and empower local communities. It consisted of various activities such as architectural guided walks, lectures, research and restoration workshops that implemented place-based education, on site teaching and provided as much hands-on experiences as possible. It was carried out in collaboration with researchers from the Department of Art History from the University of Zagreb, conservation specialists, independent researchers, the Karlovac State Archive, local public library, local schools, non-profit local organisations and local residents. The program was conceived and organised by me in my position as senior curator pedagogue at the Karlovac City Museum.

As a sequel of *Raise Your Gaze* next year, in 2023, the Karlovac City Museum started a co-creative, participatory and inclusive art project *The Archive of City Imprints* in collaboration with the visual artist Saša Martinović Kunović. *The Archive of City Imprints* project was inspired by and based on the concept of Saša Martinović Kunović's solo exhibition of the same title held 20 years ago (April-May, 2005) at the Zagreb State Archive together with the senior archivist Branka Molnar. In her solo exhibition Saša made different imprints of the city of Zagreb on clay (terracotta) tiles and Branka sorted them according to archival principles into wooden boxes, creating connected units such as wall imprints, floor imprints, drain imprints, metal fence imprints, imprints of objects from her studio yard, tree imprints, shaft imprints. The artist explained: 'I imprinted, in other words, I appropriated individual places that may seem banal in everyday environment. The streets and places where I move intensely, which are imprinted in my memory. By moving them to a different context I want to show a change in their meaning or in case of shafts, a completely imperceptible network, almost invisible to the eye but necessary for human functioning' (Martinović Kunović 2005).

Despite a considerable passage of time between Martinović Kunović's original art project and Karlovac City Museum's project, the idea behind the *Archive of Imprints* is equally fresh and relevant, easily applicable to the context of another city (of any city as a matter of fact) and scalable to museum project aiming to include a number of individuals. Also, this phenomenological approach considers the influence of a variety of senses, such as haptic and corporeal experience, not only vision, in our understanding of urban space. Haptic perception is defined as a combination of an active sense of touch and kinaesthetic perception since we explore the world through motor capabilities of our hands, fingers and bodies.



Figure 1: A blind man with his assistant making imprint of the 18th century cistern wall integrated into pavement



Figure 2: Workshop participant taking imprint of the toes of Frano Kršinić_ First Steps

According to Pallasmaa, the sensory experience should be understood as an embodied thinking (2009). Faced with an increasingly digitized and sedentary lifestyle, it was beneficial for participants to focus on haptic exploration of textures and surfaces of historic urban landscape as well as city nature, in all phases of *the Archive* making: observation, selection of motives, creation of imprints and reception.

In a series of open-air museum workshops held across the city during 2023-2025, participants of all ages (from children to seniors) and different backgrounds, some of them with disabilities, used simple and accessible clay tiles to create imprints and document various city loci that resonated with them personally. A call for participation was published on the museum's Facebook and Instagram profiles, the web page, local radio, Tv and news portals.

Workshops took place at various heritage sites in Karlovac: in the historic city centre, at Dubovac Castle (See figure 1), on an iconic pedestrian timber bridge on the River Korana erected in 1936, near the favourite bathing spots in Karlovac and a listed public city garden *Vrbanićev perivoj* featuring outdoor bronze sculptures from the second half of the twentieth century by Croatian sculptors Frane Kršinić, Ante Despot and Macedonian sculptor Tome Serafimovski (See figure 2). Every participant was given two or more raw clay tiles to use and short instructions on how to make the imprint. Participants made imprints of their own choice: mostly trees (See figure 3), floors, walls, doors, windows, different parts of urban furniture, graffiti, outdoor sculptures and anti-fascist public monuments that recently became part of contested and unwanted heritage. The freedom participants had, brought some surprises and unexpected moments such as opting for documenting scars from graffiti on the listed trees or scars of an explosion on the remnants



Figure 3: Workshop participant taking imprint of the toes of Frano Kršinić_ First Steps

of once monumental anti-fascist memorial in the city park (Vanja Radauš and Drago Ibler, *Central Monument to Fallen Partisans and Victims of the Terror of Fascism, 1955*) (See figure 4). This monument was vandalised and demolished by an explosion in the 1990s at the beginning of the Homeland War as part of the purge of unwanted heritage associated with the communist regime and state propaganda of the former Yugoslavia. Perceived as ideologically charged, sculptures were not allowed to maintain the position of physical, visual and symbolic authority in the city. However, they were not displaced and de-contextualised as in the Memento Park (Szoborpark) in Budapest (Vagnone 2024a) but removed by acts of violence. An empty backdrop wall with empty pedestals is still left as a ruin on a prominent focal point in the city - a tip of a former bastion in the park area. Once a city landmark and a great communal pride, it has become part of the contested heritage, at the same time a site of shame, a site of hate and a site of commemoration for different community members, proving that 'permanent monuments often serve less as authentic vehicles of remembrance and more as tools for controlling historic narrative' (Vagnone 20024a). (See figure 4)

Participants could also document selected motifs with photographs (but they did not opt for that) and record their personal memories and intimate reflections in writing (which was the preferred method), thus exploring how individual and institutional heritage and identity narratives may or may not overlap on different memory sites in the city. In the future oral testimonies and interviews with the participants will be added to the archive. We hope that this project will influence and facilitate the process of mediating heritage dissonance. Dissonance and plurality of interpretations are intrinsic to heritage since meaning is a social construct with culturally and politically conditioned interpretations. Within this framework Kisić introduced the concept of 'inclusive heritage discourse' in which 'dissonance is understood as a quality which unlocks and challenges the sedimentation of a single discourse and opens the space for negotiation of

meaning via diverse actions and agencies' (2016: 24). Vagnone talks of 'fluid memory' inspired by Simon Schama's view of landscape as accumulation of layers of cultural meaning over time that is not fixed but evolves as societies reinterpret their relationship with particular space (Vagnone 2024b). Re-considering the places through tangible sensation of physical features, prompted workshop participants to share their memories and emotions. 'The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me' (Pallasmaa 2005: 40).

After the workshops, the tiles were collected and transported to the *Vjekoslav Karas* Art Gallery (part of the Karlovac Museums), air dried for a few months and then baked in the kiln of a local ceramic artist Lidija Maček. Baked tiles are permanent and can last for thousands of years. Baked tiles are organized into feature series, signed and stored in the museum in custom-made wooden archival boxes made by a local handyman Vladimir Vojak for preservation and future display. These small city fragments, symbolic and tangible at the same time, testify to our need to preserve ourselves through documenting and collecting. (Figure 5)



Figure 4: At the site of the destroyed central antifascist monument in Karlovac



Figure 5: At the site of the destroyed central antifascist monument in Karlovac

The Archive of City Imprints is (still) not a part of the official museum collections of Karlovac City Museum but a part of the documentation collection of the museum pedagogue. This is no accident. The acquisition process in the Karlovac Museum is hierarchical and traditional, governed by the acquisition committee consisting of three curators, aimed at maintaining collections based on traditional academic disciplines and 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith, 2006). The concept of authorized heritage discourse is the dominant way of understanding and governing heritage whereas meaning of heritage is understood as a single, embedded truth waiting to be recognized and deciphered by the professional authority (Kisić, 2016: 23-24). The authorized heritage discourse favours politically desirable narratives, 'often plays a pivotal role as a reservoir for articulating identities and meanings used as arguments to justify political interests' (Kisić, 2016:27) while ignoring or censoring alternative, critical or marginalized interpretations.

Participatory approach of heritage making employed at the *Archive of City Imprints*, its democratic nature and willingness to embrace contested interpretations, brings change to the traditional heritage practice and is therefore easily seen as potentially subversive or a threat to the existing museum practices and power positions. Indeed, the first workshop of the Archive was almost cancelled despite the allocated budgeting, due to museum deputy director's last minute instructions that Karlovac City Museum has no need for such a project and can't provide technical support. The workshop, however, did take place but in the Museum's social media follow-up, the only omitted photographs among those sent to the administrators were those featuring the demolished antifascist memorial. Multiple ban attempts were experienced a year earlier related to *Raise Your Gaze* program's architectural guided walk in the historic centre of Karlovac titled *The Life and Death of Monuments in the Star* [Zvijezda]' (name of the listed conservation area of the Renaissance star-shaped fortress) which critically examined degradation and loss of architectural heritage due to maintenance neglect, failed restoration and unfortunate aspects of urban development that favours demolition of historic houses.

Another subversive aspect of the *Archive of City Imprints* is revealed in the context of the Karlovac City Museum's tacit agreement to neglect the collecting of the contemporary city for the past three decades by the museum's History Department and Cultural History Department. Reasons behind such practice are manifold as are the implications, but most of them are directly or indirectly rooted in the fear of dealing with multi-layered, often dissonant and contested interpretations of the post-conflict period, resulting in self-censorship and perpetuation a status quo within the heritage field. Kisić's general analysis of museum field practitioners in the European South East region (2016: 20) pinpoints the situation at the Karlovac City Museum

"most did not have access or interest to embark on deeper post-modernist, constructivist or critical approaches within their field. They continued practicing their vocation perpetuating traditional processes of heritage selection, preservation and communication, without much reflection on their political position, societal ethics and engagement in issues of social justice, inclusion and pluralism. Those who do try to engage with critical theoretical,

political or social issues within heritage practice face numerous walls – walls built by those who protect the heritage profession as traditionally practiced; walls built by mismatching the expectations of citizens who are used to boosting their identities and self-image by visiting memory institutions; walls built because of real or imagined risk of reactions by politicians and founders [...] – all of which make space for change quite limited.”

In consequence, there is ‘a wall’ of unwillingness to accept a bottom-up alternative heritage discourse since it is seen as a deviation from the legitimized top-down way of defining, taking and collecting heritage from the point of view of the museum acquisition committee and museum staff.

Therefore, to accept and include *The Archive* within the official museum collections would require a conceptual shift in understanding heritage on behalf of the curatorial team of the Karlovac City Museum and appropriation of the inclusive heritage discourse as a new conceptual framework (Kisić, 2016: 26). Since there are no indications of such changes, the current survival strategy to preserve the Archive project is to keep it low-key, small-scale and within the conceptual and operational framework of the museum education programming which is regarded of lower status and less value, until more favourable conditions arise.

References

- Augé, M. (2001). *Nemjesta* [Non places]. Karlovac: DAGG.
- Čapo J., and Gulin Zrnić, V. (eds.) (2011), *Mjesto, nemjesto*. Interdisciplinarna promišljanja prostora i kulture [Place, Non place. Interdisciplinary Reflections On Space and Culture], Zagreb-Ljubljana: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research and Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies ZRC SAZU, <https://www.academia.edu/5330270/Mjesto_nemjesto_Zbornik>, accessed 4. September 2024.
- Kartal, A. (2021). ‘More Phenomenology Less Visual: A Haptic Narrative and a Proposed Haptic ‘Sensemarks’ Database of Istiklal Street, Istanbul’ *archiDOCT*, 17(9),1. <<https://archidoct.scholasticahq.com/article/25352-more-phenomenology-less-visual-a-haptic-narrative-and-a-proposed-haptic-sensemarks-database-of-istiklal-street-istanbul>> accessed 20 February 2025.
- Kisić, V. (2016). *Governing Heritage Dissonance. Promises and Realities of Selected Cultural Policies*. Amsterdam: European Cultural Foundation
- Kunović Martinović, S. (2005). ‘Arhiv otisaka grada’ [The Archive of City Imprints], Zagreb: Državni arhiv u Zagrebu, <<https://daz.hr/arhiv-otisaka-grada/>>, accessed 1. June 2022.
- Nora, P. (2006), ‘Između pamćenja i historije. Problematika mjesta’ [Between Memory and History]. In M. Brkljačić and S. Prleđa (eds.), *Kultura pamćenja i historije*, pp.21-45. Zagreb: Golden marketing.
- O’Neill, M. E. (2001). ‘Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing’ *Journal of Architectural Education*, 55 (1),pp. 3–12. <<https://doi.org/10.1162/104648801753168765>>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2005)[1996]. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

- Pallasmaa, J. (2009). *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*. New York: Wiley
- Smith, I. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. New York: Routledge
- Vagnone, F. (2024a). ‘The Disputable Monument. Finding Truth In Transient Memory’, *Twisted Preservation*, 11 November 2024, <<https://twistedpreservation.com/2024/11/11/the-disposable-monument-finding-truth-in-transient-memory/>>, accessed 15 February 2025.
- Vagnone, F.(2024b). ‘Fluid Memory’, *Twisted Preservation*, 24 November 2024, <<https://twistedpreservation.com/2024/11/24/fluid-memory/>>, accessed 15 February 2025.
- Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Faro, 27. October 2005. <<https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfndmkaj/https://rm.coe.int/1680083746>>, accessed 20. February 2024.

Folk Perspectives

Saryan Museum arising out of ashes of Hargeisa

Saeed Husein

Biography

I was born in Hargeisa Somaliland in 1953, I came from middle class family in the context of my community. I was enrolled in school on 1961 and had completed my primary education in 1968, I Finished my high school education in 1973. During this period my country Somalia was ruled by Marxist regime and students were forced to conscription. I escaped from the program and travelled to UAE in search of employment, after 2 years I applied to the State University of NEWYORK that offered me an acceptance letter and visa procedures. I graduated 1980 and proceed home so from there on; I was employed by the United Nations at various occupations on development & Humanitarian services. I retired on 2016 and I established SARYAN Museum as founder and Director of the museum. I am currently working on my Museum and par time job with government on consultancy basis, my interest falls on Museum Management and; ICOM –Comoc participations if I am invited.



Introduction

In 1988, after a long lasting bitter civil war occurred between the Military Socialist Somalia Government, and the resistance armed groups (SNM); Hargeisa city was demolished by carpet bombardment of the Somalia's National Army Air force, and within days, Hargeisa turned into rubble and ashes. Jets, piloted by mercenaries, were taking off from Hargeisa airport to bomb down town Hargeisa. As a result of these indiscriminate actions, at least 400,000 of Hargeisa residents fled to Ethiopia for safety of their lives, and crossed the border to Ethiopia as a safe haven. During the course of the shelling an estimated 50,000 were killed and over 80% of the residential areas, hospitals, water system and electricity were devastated.

How the museum started

The essay focuses on the scenarios before and after establishing the Saryan museum. Hargeisa City was flourishing, it was a commercial city centre that had links with many other African, Asia and Europe cities, it had international banking services, schools, libraries, mosques, theaters and City Centre Museum. Sadly, all of a sudden, these grand developments instantly disappeared, Precious artifacts, Arts, documents, valuables and libraries were lost.

Meanwhile, looking at the aforementioned scenario, I was hurt, and could not bear any longer to observe, and tolerate how the city that I grew up in ended up into this critical situation. Interestingly the notion of recording about the unique history of Hargeisa was spinning in my head for a good number of years. Finally, my inner emotional feeling gradually transformed into reality. When I retired from my long professional services with the United Nations, and I saved enough to start the project, I decided to allocate some of my pension savings to establish a private museum in Hargeisa, Somaliland. My contribution was not a "show case" or, but rather a voluntary service and dedication to restore history for the coming generations.

After the war, Hargeisa Somaliland's capital no longer had a Museum or places of historical interest. Therefore, establishing a museum became a necessity. In addition, a new concept in Somaliland, why? Because the war effects changed social values, it created unexpected generational gaps. And the indigenous Hargeisa residents were overwhelmed by a massive new influx of displaced rural villagers and gripped the land. The villagers had an opportunity to spread and occupy wherever they could settle including government buildings including the old museum building although prior to that physical damage it was looted by the defeated by the government forces like they did to the theatre, and libraries. During that period the vast majority of Hargeisa residents dispersed to all over the world.

Therefore, as unforeseen societal changes came into being, nevertheless, to overcome all challenges and to revive remnants of civilization, the Saryan Museum establishment as 2017 was imminent. The absence of museum(s) for a long time cost Somaliland the loss of its historical and cultural heritage. Somaliland lost artifacts of incalculable value. Therefore, urgent needs to act swiftly to capture the narratives, collect, protect, preserve and promote the history and culture of Somali society. This applies to all the Somali peoples occupying the Horn of Africa.

The establishment of a museum allowed for the safeguarding of Somali heritage and stopped the illicit trafficking of cultural property that has gone on unabated for years. As mentioned before, the areas mostly affected by this widespread devastation during the conflict included the Museum, archives and places of marked historical moments and archaeological sites of great interest. Therefore, under the prevalent situation, Saryan Museum attempted to initiate extra efforts to ensure, and address the gravity of the situation at the same time explored remedial solutions to impede further damages.

The Role of the Saryan museum

Saryan museum to cope with the situation it played and plays vital angles pertaining educational and communicative roles in the country included researching. The Saryan Museum is a repository of collections of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, expertise and skills. "The museum therefore, has the duty to make its resources available to all potential users. The delivery of these resources becomes part of the museum's educational activity.



Material re-collection:

While most of the lost treasures cannot easily be retrieved, but the Saryan Museum has committed to collecting, and securing the remnants of the national wealth for the benefit of the coming generations and for prosperity. It also desires to restore, salvage the affected areas, train personnel (custodians) and facilitate capacity building for other heritage managers in the country; however, the museums is hampered by lack of funds to pursue at higher expectations.

At any rate, while the conditions unchanged, the Saryan Museum succeeded in raising funds to preserve up to 2,500 objects ranging from ethnographic objects, archives, documentations, historical maps, archives, coins, photos of celebrities, photos of heroes and citizens. The museum occupies on a land space donated by the government to an area of 3,000 Sq meters and it facilitated two large display halls. Reception office. Administration offices, theatre with capacity of 150 audience, library building and recreation garden.

This creation of the museum has given me personally an immense self-satisfaction, and secured a needful achievement for my people. Nevertheless, the other side of the coin was annoying, which showed contradictory opinions.

Challenges and Critical Views:

The critiques' opinions specifically, emanated from close relatives, who innocently blamed me that I wastefully invested my money where it was not necessary. Instead, they suggested business enterprise. Anyway while the ideas from traditional kinsmen had its own concern, yet their naïve thoughts looked weird to me, nevertheless it never stopped my dedication to continue the journey as long as my vision stands for higher achievements.

On the contrary all the negative attitudes did not last long, (seeing is believing), when people saw that the number of museum visitors is marginally growing, particularly from the school children visits, Somaliland diasporas holiday makers and also the international tourists frequently paying visits. While the visitors' turn out of the museum was increasing for a good period, However it was unfortunately impacted by the pandemic of Covid 19, same like it impacted all the other museums in the world.

The Social Role of the museum.

The Saryan Museum witnessed of the communal change. Its approach has been to identify the micro changes in the community, identifying their causalities and extrapolating the effect of these changes. The Saryan Museum proactively acts to justifiably inform and analyze the changes occurring. It has taken up the role of a thought leader and chaperone to the community for which it serves. It has provided an apolitical platform for intellectuals to propagate their message. It has also sought to reinvigorate Somali culture and to inculcate a sense of identity and pride in it. Despite the challenges, City Museums must be proactive and must find ways to help their communities transition, bridge factious antagonisms and build an environment that encourages the pursuit of shared communal progress.

The Saryan Museum objectives were not totally confined with the collection and safeguarding tangible treasure & wealthy artifacts only, but it gave important community interactions, and collected stories in open air and even conducted under the tree sessions. One of the most exciting stories Saryan collected is an extract about consciousness related charges of an advocacy intellectual group from Hargeisa. The details of the story pertains to how the imprisonment of qualified intellectuals who voluntarily engaged in self-help schemes of Hargeisa hospitals in 1982, for patriotic intentions sabotaged and rewarded them to long years of imprisonment. Saryan museum hosted the survivors for group discussions of their experiences in the prison. They were actually released in 1989, however after long years elapsed we got an opportunity to assemble at Saryan Museum compound under an acacia tree and chatted.

Within the conversation, it was noted that the prisoners experienced horrible mistreatments including physical and psychological torture occurred during the solitary confinement environment. Meanwhile the most attractive piece of the discussion entails as to how smartly the group developed communication links among themselves, in the following paragraphs I intend to paraphrase about a book called the mourning tree authored by one of the inmates called Mohamed Barud Ali. Following is an excerpt from his book Mourning tree.

“Walls Have Ears.” Quoted.

“When you have so little, you find joy in insignificant things,

The most important and useful means of communication between us was through the cell walls. We use to knock off the walls of adjacent cells to inform neighbors that we are still alive. The invention of an alphabet similar to the Morse Code started to develop from this. An inmate called Yusuf Gadh was familiar with Morse Code. There were two sounds one could make on the walls. A higher frequency rap made with knuckles of the middle fingers and a low drumming note produced by the side of the closed fist. The high frequency note represented (.) and the low one (O).

For example, good morning (o.o.o.o.o.o.o.o.;ooo.o.o.o.o....o.o.o.....o...o.o.o) it took us a few hours to learn this alphabet and since we have nothing else to occupy us. We were able to use it the same day.” “As the writer told me, they continued daily conversation through the wall for almost 7 years they remained in prison”

*I believe, this valuable piece of communication, and discourse among the group experience shared in solitary confinement cells, reflect brilliantly, how human intellect is capable of producing a significant method of survival in difficult situations As the conversation proceeded between Saryan Museum and the group. They told us that through the wall information transmission they benefitted a lot to an extent they read books. Apart from the human touch, they also noted that they obtained spiritual uplifts, endurance, patience, prayers’ and sense of being inside the cell. I asked them how other inmates outside their group survived, and they told

me, all other prisoners were individuals arrested for various reasons, therefore, they could not communicate for obvious reasons, due to lack of trust and confidence building, and most of them had no means of communication.

Museums and Community Social Responsibility: The Role of the Museum in Human Rights Advocacy

Saryan museums are more than just institutions that preserve history, culture, and heritage; they serve as spaces for critical engagement, education, and social responsibility. By curating narratives of injustice and resilience, the museum fosters awareness, encourages dialogue, and inspires action on human rights issues. We have the power to connect past struggles with present realities, helping societies reflect on their values and the lessons learned from history.

For instance, Saryan Museum’s exploration of the horrific experiences of UFFO prisoners highlights the vital role museums play in confronting abuse, injustice, and inequality. Through exhibitions, storytelling, and interactive discussions, museums ensure that such historical atrocities are neither ignored nor forgotten. By documenting these events, they contribute to truth-telling, justice, and the collective memory of a society. This helps prevent the repetition of past wrongs and reinforces the importance of accountability in governance and human rights protection. Some critics argue that human rights advocacy falls outside the traditional mandate of museums, viewing it as political interference. However, this perspective overlooks the evolving role of modern museums, which no longer function as passive archives but as active participants in shaping societal discourse. Around the world, museums have become platforms for amplifying marginalized voices, addressing difficult histories, and confronting contemporary injustices. Whether through exhibitions on colonialism, genocide, or civil rights movements, museums play a crucial role in fostering a more informed and conscientious society.



Source from: Ali Eid Omer

Ignoring human rights violations or failing to address them within museum spaces risks perpetuating silence, impunity, and historical erasure. Museums should not shy away from tackling difficult subjects but instead embrace their responsibility as agents of education, awareness, and advocacy. By doing so, they reaffirm their commitment to truth, justice, and human dignity, ensuring that future generations learn from the past to build a more just and equitable world.

Children's Artifacts & Drawings

To foster an engaging and enriching environment for children, Saryan museum has dedicated a special space for artistic and creative activities, including drawing and other forms of artistic expression. This initiative aims to enhance children's enjoyment, satisfaction, and talent development while encouraging them to interact with the museum in a meaningful way.

The children's participation in museum activities has garnered significant attention from local kindergarten and primary schools, many of which have incorporated visits to the museum into their educational programs. These visits provide young learners with hands-on experiences that complement their classroom education, allowing them to explore history, culture, and artistic expression in an interactive setting. Through drawing and artifact-related activities, children develop a deeper connection with their heritage while refining their creative skills.

Additionally, the museum has become a popular destination for children from the diaspora who visit during holidays. These young visitors show great enthusiasm for the museum experience because it offers them a dual advantage. Firstly, they gain an opportunity to learn about their ancestral history, cultural heritage, and traditional ways of life. This helps them bridge the gap between their current environment and their roots, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Secondly, they actively participate in the museum's children's programs, where they can showcase their artistic talents and engage in creative activities alongside local children. This exchange of experiences enriches their understanding and appreciation of their heritage while fostering cultural connections between local and Diaspora communities.

By providing a platform for artistic expression and cultural learning, the museum plays a crucial role in nurturing young minds, instilling a sense of pride in their heritage, and inspiring future generations to engage with history and the arts.

Conclusion

The museum attracts visitors from all over the world, with the majority coming from the United States, Europe, and Asia. Visitor evaluations consistently rate the museum between 3 and 5 out of 5, reflecting their varying interests and experiences. The feedback collected serves two key purposes: it provides valuable suggestions for improving displays and coordination, and it enhances staff morale by recognizing their dedication to excellent service.

Folk Perspectives

Diving into the living heritage of cities: The Case of Old Tbilisi

Ana Shanshiashvili

Biography

PhD Art historian, Ana Shanshiashvili is a founder and the Executive Director of Georgian Heritage Crafts Association uniting more than 300 artisans from different regions of Georgia. As a Silverware and Crafts Researcher, she is an invited lecturer, participant of a number of international projects, conferences, symposiums, she is the curator of a number of exhibitions, craft festivals and the author of several articles and books on the history and present of Georgian crafts. In 2019 she was a Director of Georgian State Museum of Folk and Applied Art. In 2016-2022 She was a National Board Member of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Georgia. Since 2020 Ana has been leading the documentation projects including the production of short video stories about the living heritage in Cities. Ana is a Member of the Cultural Council of Michelangelo Foundation; Board Member of ICOM Georgia and recently joined the UNESCO Global network of ICH Convention facilitators.



The Multi-Ethnic Tapestry of Old Tbilisi

Tbilisi has evolved over the millennia as a vibrant multi-ethnic city, which has been a cultural and economic centre of the entire Caucasus for centuries. The city especially flourished in the 19th century, when it became the hub of craftsmanship and trade, where local marketplaces - the culturally diverse bazaars brought together the different types of income generating activities, ranging from hairdressers and bakers to urban musician bands performing on the wedding and festivals, water- and wine-sack carriers, sulphur baths' scrubbers, craft workshops producing and selling the plethora of handmade goods and vendors offering customers clothes, shoes, various types of textiles, rugs & carpets, ceramic tableware, equipment, gold, silver, stone and wood works of different origin from local to Armenian, Persian, north Caucasian and beyond.

After Sovietization the rapid industrialization accelerated rural to urban migration and subsequently, the change in the lifestyle and cultural practices. The culture of artisanal guilds, local festivals and urban folk performances gradually became adapted to the new context, shifting from streets to the stage, from workshops to professional schools and academies. The most dramatic changes, however, are related to the eventual demise of the Soviet Regime in the late 1980s, followed by the decades of transitioning as a post-Soviet society. Many of Tbilisi's inhabitants, like other Georgians, have been obliged to partake in diverse income-generating activities to find new ways of supporting their families through difficult periods, and in many cases, to settle in the city through rural to urban migration, bringing their traditions with them. And today, new construction projects in the old part of the city and the growing tourist demand in the recent years has led to higher costs of living and growing gentrifications, which obviously, have a strong impact on the local living heritage on one hand giving impetus to certain developments such as re-emergence of crafts workshops and small marketplaces, but on the other hand, bringing on additional threats of commodifying the existing living heritage in Old Tbilisi.

Empowering Communities as Stewards of Their Heritage

The project "Community-based Inventorying of ICH in the Urban Context of Tbilisi, Georgia" was implemented within UNESCO's "Intangible Heritage and Creativity for Sustainable Cities" Program and received generous funding from Yong Xin Hua Yun. This initiative sought to address several interconnected goals: pilot testing UNESCO's community-based inventorying methodology in Old Tbilisi, building local stakeholder capacity in community-based inventorying techniques, identifying key challenges facing Living heritage in urban contexts, developing recommendations for safeguarding income-generating activities, and raising public awareness about the contribution of Living heritage to sustainable urban development. At its core, the project aimed to empower local communities to identify, document, and promote their own cultural heritage, focusing particularly on traditional income-generating activities including crafts, performing arts, festivals, and other traditional occupations in Old Tbilisi. This community-centered approach represented a significant departure from top-down heritage management practices, acknowledging that cultural heritage can only be effectively preserved when the communities who practice and transmit these traditions are actively involved in the process.

Adapting to Challenges

The project unfolded in several stages, beginning with broad stakeholder engagement and capacity building. The official launch in November 2020 brought together 40 participants representing diverse sectors including heritage workers, professional associations, museum representatives, non-governmental organizations, universities, and local authorities. This initial brainstorming session identified more than 15 cultural elements that would later be included in the inventorying activities.

However, the project team immediately faced significant challenges when a COVID-19 lockdown was announced across Georgia just one day after the launch event. This necessitated a rapid pivot to digital platforms and alternative methodologies. The team developed a comprehensive plan for online activities, demonstrating remarkable adaptability in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

Despite the restrictions, the team organized a fieldwork practicum as a part of the training program led by the international facilitators, where participants could interview living heritage practitioners remotely, with technical support provided by the organizational team while adhering to COVID regulations.

Extensive Documentation Efforts

The project team undertook extensive database compilation, drawing from multiple sources including GHCA's database of craftspeople and local museums, ICOMOS Georgia's list of endangered skills practitioners, the State Folk Centre's records of musicians and instrument makers, the other professional Association's contacts, and local ethnic diaspora networks.

The role of local museums, such as the Museum of Musical Instruments or the Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov Museum of Azerbaijan Culture in Tbilisi, deserves special mention. These institutions maintain vital connections with relevant musicians, luthiers, and practitioners, serving as important repositories of knowledge and artifacts upon which the project was built. Their collections preserve cultural heritage, while their networks of relationships with artisans and performers create living bridges between historical traditions and contemporary practice. By collaborating with these institutions, the project gained access to authentic source materials, expert consultation, and community connections that significantly enhanced both its scholarly foundation and practical implementation.

This comprehensive approach resulted in the identification of approximately 40 living heritage elements and a database of more than 500 bearers in Tbilisi.

This meticulous documentation process culminated in the 11 inventory entries for potential inclusion in the National Inventory and production of 20 short videos¹ featuring living heritage bearers discussing their work, hereditary traditions, challenges, and visions for the

future of their professions. These videos covered diverse traditions including metal inlay, rug and carpet trade, bath-related traditions, Georgian bread making, duduk and argan music, goldsmithing, blacksmithing, musical instrument making, wooden balcony construction, and the Ashug (Ashik) tradition.

From Documentation to Safeguarding: Practical Recommendations - As the project approached completion, a wrap-up workshop brought together local facilitators, the project team, researchers, and practitioners to discuss lessons learned and draft recommendations for safeguarding measures. The discussion centered on challenges specific to urban environments, strategies for reaching wider audiences, enhancing recognition of bearers, and addressing transmission challenges.

The project results were presented to the wider public in a hybrid format presentation. To maximize public engagement, the team organized an "TBILISI ICH WEEK" online film festival in July 2021, sharing all 20 videos across multiple platforms including the GHCA website, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and specialized social media groups focused on Old Tbilisian themes.

Practical Recommendations

Based on discussions with the community, facilitators, and researchers, the project team developed detailed recommendations for safeguarding the living heritage of Old Tbilisi. These recommendations included incorporating endangered urban living heritage elements in the National Inventory list, supporting apprenticeship programs and integrating living heritage elements into formal and informal education, recognizing bearers through honorary citizenship or national living treasure designations, raising public awareness through media outreach and festival participation, and enhancing income-generating activities through product marketing support and connections with ethical travel companies.

The knowledge and experience gained through this project helped us find answers to several critical questions:

What are the specific issues when approaching living heritage in cities?

Unlike rural areas, cities are vibrant centers characterized by significant migration and dynamic cultural exchanges, which directly affect living heritage transmission. In urban environments, the influx of new cultural elements occurs continuously, creating both challenges and opportunities for traditional practices. The rapid pace of urban development often threatens traditional spaces where heritage practices once flourished. Therefore, when approaching living heritage in cities, we must consider these migration dynamics, the pressure on traditional spaces, and the constant evolution of urban cultural landscapes. The heritage elements themselves frequently adapt to these changing conditions, sometimes blending with new cultural influences in creative ways that demand flexible safeguarding strategies for living heritage.

How to identify living heritage elements and reach out to bearers in urban environments?

Identifying heritage bearers in densely populated, multi-story apartment districts presents significant challenges, as modern urban architecture often restricts the traditional connections between neighbors. Some areas of Old Tbilisi, where inner courtyards and connected balconies unite various apartments, still maintain the tradition of close neighborhood relationships that facilitate cultural transmission. However, in most urban settings, these community spaces are disappearing.

To effectively reach bearers in urban contexts, multiple data collection methods must be employed:

- Face-to-face meetings with community members in remaining traditional neighborhoods
- Engagement with professional cultural institutions with established networks
- Collaboration with various diaspora community representatives who maintain connections to their heritage
- Utilizing social media and digital platforms to identify practitioners

What could be the role of museums in safeguarding living heritage in cities?

The role of museums with specific profiles—such as those dedicated to musical instruments, folk art, or specific ethnic groups—is immense in maintaining vital connections with relevant musicians, luthiers, and practitioners, serving as important repositories of knowledge. To fulfill this role effectively, museums must embrace a more dynamic, community-centered approach to knowledge preservation and transmission, which includes:

- Living Connections with Source Communities - maintaining ongoing, reciprocal relationships with source communities. Developing exhibitions that demonstrate traditional techniques, explain cultural contexts. Creating opportunities for community members to interact with collections, share knowledge, and participate in programming, including access to/use of museum collection as a source for inspiration.
- Active Knowledge Preservation – moving from passive repositories to active knowledge preservation centers that capture the stories, techniques, and cultural contexts that give objects meaning.
- Educational Programming and Knowledge Transmission- Employing intangible cultural heritage bearers as teachers and educators; This might include master classes, workshops, or residency programs. Creating programs that facilitate knowledge transfer between older practitioners and younger community members;

- Community-Centered Commerce i.e. Museum shops prioritizing selling authentic crafts made by traditional practitioners from relevant communities, providing economic support while maintaining cultural authenticity. Providing information about the makers, techniques, and cultural significance of items sold, transforming commercial transactions into educational opportunities.

How do we perceive urban living heritage as opposed to intangible cultural heritage practiced in rural areas?

Living heritage elements in cities often include practices that are integrated into everyday urban life—crafts connected with the repair of furniture, clocks, shoes, and other daily necessities. These urban practices are frequently undervalued compared to the more visibly distinctive intangible cultural heritage elements practiced in rural areas. We must recognize these urban professions as valuable components of our heritage worthy of documentation and safeguarding. The very ubiquity of these practices in urban environments often masks their cultural significance and the specialized knowledge they embody. Reframing these everyday urban practices as living heritage helps us appreciate the full spectrum of intangible cultural expressions across rural and urban contexts.

How can living heritage contribute to preserving tangible heritage in urban environments?

Living heritage bearers play a key role in maintaining the original function of certain buildings or neighborhoods, creating a symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible heritage. Living heritage often gives function and meaning to traditional buildings and spaces. For example, the *kesemaster* (traditional bath attendant) is an indispensable part of the sulfur bath culture in Tbilisi, embodying knowledge and practices that give cultural significance to the physical bath structures. The presentation and preservation of tangible heritage often depends on maintaining the historical function of buildings or districts in cities.

When buildings maintain their traditional functions through living practices, they avoid becoming mere architectural shells or tourist attractions divorced from their cultural context. This functional preservation approach creates more sustainable and authentic urban heritage landscapes that remain meaningful to local communities while also attracting cultural tourism that can support both the practitioners and the maintenance of historic structures.

Conclusion

By adopting a community-centered approach and adapting to unprecedented challenges, the project has not only documented valuable traditions but has also empowered local communities to take an active role in preserving their cultural identity. The project's findings suggest that effective safeguarding of urban intangible cultural heritage requires recognizing the value of everyday urban practices—from bath attendants to clock repair artisans—that are often overlooked despite their cultural significance. The symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible heritage emerges as particularly critical in urban contexts like Old Tbilisi, where traditional practitioners give original function and meaning to historic structures.

The methodologies tested, relationships built, and awareness raised through this initiative provide a foundation for sustainable heritage management that balances preservation with the evolving realities of urban life. As Tbilisi continues to develop, the insights and recommendations from this project offer valuable guidance for ensuring that the city's intangible cultural heritage remains a living, vibrant part of its identity for generations to come.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNEyomugFhWMR1cIN9vuKJHq9EcqTsKW8>



Conference team, from left to right: Gian Louis Hernandez (moderator), Kaatje Bosma (production assistant), Roisín Douglas (production leader), Emma Waslander (curator public program Amsterdam Museum) and Lola Abbas (production assistant)
Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Poster presentations. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Moderator Gian-Louis Hernandez reflects on conference. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski



Presentation of newest edition of CAMOC Review. Photo: Francoise Bolechowski

Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions

Annemarie de Wildt

& all the writers of conference cards

The joint 2024 CAMOC and COMCOL conference in Amsterdam brought together heritage professionals from around the world to explore the evolving relationship between museums and its diverse communities. Under the theme *Collecting with(in) the City*, the conference explored how museums can collect *with* and *in* the city, and how they position themselves within these dynamic urban environments.

What made this conference particularly engaging was the use of conference cards to capture (or collect so you will) not only formal insights but also emotions, moments of inspiration, critique, and personal resonance. One could call it intangible Rapid Response Collecting, the equivalent of the instant collecting practices in response to important moments, that was coined in 2014 by the V&A Museum.

These handwritten reflections served as a form of affective annotation, allowing participants' voices to enter the proceedings with immediacy and authenticity. They offer a method of documentation that honours both intellectual and emotional knowledge. In this way, *Collecting with(in) the City* itself became a model of inclusive curating—where the event, like the museum, was shaped by those who experienced it. As one card eloquently noted, “Time is collective heritage.” Let us listen more deeply, act more boldly, and imagine more collectively.

This text is an effort to reflect on the rich and multifaceted insights shared on the conference cards, weaving a narrative around the lived experiences, questions, and tensions that emerged across sessions. It aims to articulate new perspectives for the future of museum collecting practices, rooted in collaboration and care. But not without the disclaimer that this synthesis is not a neutral effort nor a complete reflection of the depthness or maybe other meanings behind the words written on the card. They are interpretations through the eye of the writer.

Museums Are Not Neutral: Positioning and Politics

“Be more political because museums are not neutral!” read one of the more urgent notes scribbled after a session on collecting activism. The movement “Museums Are Not Neutral”, started in 2017 by art worker La Tanya S. Autry and museum educator Mike Murawski, changed the way museums are seen by both museum professionals and visitors.¹ It also forces us to define what we mean by this. The sentiment of non-neutrality echoed widely throughout the conference. Discussions on collecting politically charged materials—whether from progressive or conservative movements—highlighted the reality that museums cannot pretend neutrality. One

participant remarked, “The museum is a political institution, born to it as a base of modernity.” Another contributor expressed concern about double standards: “I found it typical to hear that museums have no problems publishing materials from the left but find it difficult to work with right-wing protests.” This sparked deeper reflection on the ethics and implications of platforming activism. “What story do you want to tell?” one asked. “Even documenting is not neutral.” The debates pointed toward the need for value-based curatorship and open dialogue, especially in cities facing political polarization.

Care Is Also Collecting: Ethics and Emotional Labor

Several sessions explored the invisible yet essential emotional labor behind inclusive museum practices. “Emotional labor is rarely included in our job descriptions,” a participant observed. Another wrote, “We don’t save lives, but we save memories.” These sentiments framed care not just as a theme, but as a core practice in museum work.

Participants emphasized the responsibility of museums to welcome diverse communities—not just through programming, but by cultivating trust and emotional safety. “A challenge for everyone: How can there be value for the groups we co-create with if they don’t feel welcome in the museum space?” one asked. Others underscored the importance of continuity: “The knowledge I gained from this session is to remember to care for the relationship when the museum moves on to new projects.”

This sense of emotional investment extended to the role of museums in moments of crisis. “It was emotional to hear that museums are needed in pandemics like COVID,” one participant shared. “We are no doctors, but we keep memories safe.” Another observed, “We pressure people’s memories”—a powerful reminder of the responsibility institutions bear when shaping narratives.

Digital Collecting: Technology as a Bridge Builder

Digital innovation stood out as both opportunity and challenge. Tools such as mobile apps and AI-driven archives help broaden access and participation. Yet various reflections struck a cautionary tone: “Personal contact and trust are always needed to take full advantage of digital collecting.” And “Question: The use of AI when making living histories and communities. Is AI inclusive? Is AI problematic?” Technology, while powerful, must be grounded in human connection and inclusivity. Or in poetry: “I loved to experience the projects from China and Japan. I loved the poetic way they presented their cities in the digitally animated world.”

Participants pointed to disparities in institutional resources, noting that “we have vastly different budgets, expertise, and experience.” There was a clear desire for collaborative networks that pool expertise to develop digital strategies that are accessible, sustainable, and community-centered.

Decolonisation: Revaluating and Redistributing Knowledge

Decolonisation of museums has become a container concept in recent years. However, the meaning of decolonizing is being debated. It may refer to research into and repatriation of objects, expanding the perspectives beyond those of the dominant cultural group as well as recognizing and valuing different forms of knowledge and expertise.²

“80 percent of the Earth is taken care of by Indigenous peoples,” one participant noted. This statistic anchored many reflections on the urgency of decolonizing museum practices. “We are not there yet—still talking more about them instead of with them,” one card stated. But act in a careful way: “Don’t pressure people to represent an entire community”. And be aware of the harm museums can do: “Do museums play a role/ have a part in making communities a minority by presenting them as such and thereby making their position more difficult?”

Decolonizing efforts must go beyond repatriation to involve Indigenous groups in decision-making and interpretation. As another participant wrote, “The process of repatriation should be handled in a manner that involves Indigenous leaders... Museums should make it a priority.” Another asked provocatively, “Can you pray in a museum?”—challenging institutions to reconsider how objects function and are experienced in space. These discussions called for museums to rethink ownership, replace “object-based” logics with “relationship-based” models, and center the concept of stewardship.

The conference was attended by people from countries. One card called for discussion of regional differences: “How we in Western Europe work in a privileged position in what we can collect and exhibit. How can we as CAMOC encourage discussion on ‘bubbles’ and getting out of them.”

New Forms of Collecting: Fluid, Participatory, Iterative

“Collect now, determine relevance later,” one participant suggested, highlighting a shift toward more open-ended, responsive collecting. Many called for structures that allow museums to act in real time and evaluate significance collaboratively over time, such as this urgent appeal: “That we need to document activism in Slovakia actively, right now! Don’t wait 2 or 3 years! We have culture strike in Slovakia right now, we have to collect it – that can be our role”

Questions were raised about accountability and selection: “Are choices collaborative? Who is at the table? How do we ensure broad and fair coverage?” Another noted that “deaccessioning should be seen as a strength—it lets us collect more courageously.”

This experimental attitude extended to the idea of in situ collections—where objects stay embedded in communities rather than entering traditional storage. “Try to collect in a participatory way and with an open mind,” one comment urged. “Not first museum-worthy affects.” Another participant emphasized, “We should keep collecting because urbanization and political shifts can change everything quickly.”

Throughout the conference ethical questions were raised: “How do we care for intimate collections; how do we keep a robust policy on sensitive stories we share and are shared with us?”

Sensory Experience, Emotions, and the Feeling of Home

“Your fullness is my happiness,” read one particularly moving comment from the session *Senses of Home*. Participants explored how heritage lives not only in objects but in sensory memory, shared meals, gardens, and gestures of care.

Workshops engaged deeply with questions such as, “Why is the sense of touch or smell considered less than the sense of seeing?” Another participant shared, “why is the sense of touch or smell, less than the sense of seeing? Could the dress be worth more if the audience can touch the dress?” referring to incorporating sensory interpretation into exhibitions and workshops, rather than the usual ‘don’t touch’. These reflections reinforced the need for museums to create environments that are emotionally resonant and sensorially inclusive.

Conflict, Trauma, and Representation

“History or now? Nations or different populations?” These questions surfaced in sessions exploring how museums represent conflict. One card asked, “How can we connect past and present conflicts without traumatizing those who come directly from these areas?”

The idea of “implicated communities”—those indirectly affected by conflict—was discussed as an ethical frame for representation (Rothberg 2019). “Narrative and memory can implicate communities connected to conflict,” one attendee observed. Others probed how to handle opposing narratives: “What do we do with interpretations that conflict with the larger goals we’re working toward?”

Another reflection drew attention to linguistic diversity in urban representation: “Languages, social/cultural languages—these shape how we understand each other and the past.” One participant asked, “Who has the power to define a community?”—a question that resonates deeply in cities shaped by migration and plural histories.

Revisiting Collections: Who Decides and Why?

Who has the power to define what gets collected? “Who decides on what, how, and to whom?” a participant asked pointedly. The call for transparency and co-ownership resonated throughout the sessions.

Several participants suggested public storage visits and collaborative cataloguing as ways to democratize collection practices. “To collect in another way—not in a (museum) depot, but with the people themselves,” one noted. Others advocated for incorporating sustainability and inclusivity into collection policies: “Using the platform of the city as a working desk,” as one speaker vividly put it.

Another emphasized: “Meaningful: senior community groups, co-curation and museum staff.” There was also reflection on invisibility: “Many interventions assume visibility is always good, but stories are often intimate, sensitive, and complex. Can we accommodate for this?”

Conclusion

Collecting with(in) the City revealed museums not only as spaces of memory, but as catalysts of imagination, care, and transformation. “We are made of memories,” one participant wrote. “And preserving memories is to preserve the community.” Throughout the conference however various examples were presented of the importance of memories initiating dialogues to give meaning in the now and for the future. Many participants stressed the need to be bold as well as playful. “The main message is: don’t be afraid of playful topics of exhibitions.”

As museums navigate the complexities of contemporary cities—polarization, inequality, migration, digital acceleration—they are called to act not as neutral observers, but as ethical actors, collaborators, and listeners. The conference offered clear directions: be more political, more caring, more responsive, and more transparent.

Notes

- 1 *Museums are Not Neutral with Movement* Co-Founders La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, Podcast Monument Lab, episode 26 <<https://monumentlab.com/podcast/museums-are-not-neutral-with-movement-co-founders-la-tanya-s-autry-and-mike-murawski>> accessed, 4 August 2025
- 2 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums>
<https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>
<https://icom.museum/en/committee/working-group-on-decolonisation/>

References

Rothberg, M. (2019), *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press

Co-Creation Conference Card

Break-Out session: 1. Collecting activism

What new insight, perspective and/or knowledge did you gain from this session that you would like to share?

-> We have to be more
courageous
-> more political
because =
museums are not
neutral!

ISBN 978-2-487970-26-7

AMSTERDAM X MUSEUM

imagine
ICOM

ICOM International
Council
of museums

MI CAMOC

ICOM
International Committee
for the Collections and Activities
of Museums of Cities

MI COMCOL

ICOM
International
Committee
for Collecting