

Virtues and Qualities

A contribution to professionalizing the heritage profession

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Seven SYNs as virtues.....

Syn- is a prefix in loanwords from Ancient Greek, with the same function as co- (synthesis; synoptic). It is used to mean “with,” or “together,” in the formation of compound words (synsepalous) or “synthetic” (syngas)¹. We regularly use the ancient prefix as events are rarely isolated or unrelated. Indeed, to the contrary, they are part of the delicate and infinitely interwoven tissue of life. One translation suggests that syn also implies meanings as “together with” or “united”, which again describes the interconnectedness of life.

My starting point is that, no matter how deep the heritage institutions, the “Three Cs”² of collection, care and communication stem from a scientific approach, and no matter how strong their feeling for taxonomy and the issuing division of labour, their final criterion of efficiency will be the mission and their final arbiter of quality will be life. Muse-

ums, archives and libraries, to name just the most prominent among the growing variety within the public memory sector, will merge in strategic and functional ways³.

Life, our immediate reality with its simultaneous events and protagonists, has little regard for our divisions, jurisdictions and specialisms. Built upon the wish for an orderly, rationalist understanding of the universe and the role of humans in it, public memory institutions are increasingly exposed to the obvious ambition of interpreting the world in a constructive, wise way, caring for the non-public and decisively contributing to the sustainable present. In this age of synthesis we shall either become a profession taking part in the responsible and wise management of the planet or we shall sink into the trap of a collective consciousness comfort zone and become, eventually, useless.

The great task of contributing decisively to sustainable development cannot be achieved without political awareness and social engagement. Democracy is the last utopia we have, a fortress of humanist ethics, assaulted daily and constantly besieged. Besides being a society of equal opportunities, de-

1 [HTTP://DICTIONARY.REFERENCE.COM/BROWSE/ SYN-;](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/syn-) OTHERWISE, THROUGHOUT THE TEXT THE MAIN SOURCE OF INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANINGS OF DIFFERENT TERMS WAS WEBSTER’S ENCYCLOPAEDIC UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE; IF NOT STATED DIFFERENTLY, ALL THE QUOTED PHRASES OR SENTENCES DERIVE FROM THIS SOURCE.

2 I IS A LONG STORY SCATTERED IN MY LECTURES AND TEXTS BUT THE MAIN IMPLICATION IS THAT A PHENOMENON OF HERITAGE (HAVING ITS PALPABLE MANIFESTATION IN HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS) DESERVES AND FINALLY CAN HAVE A THEORY OR SCIENCE OF ITS OWN, BE IT HERITOLGY OR MNEMOSOPHY, OR JUST A GENERAL THEORY OF HERITAGE.

3 OF COURSE, CURATORS, YOU WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE YOUR OWN COLLECTION BUT WITH LESS POSSESSIVENESS BECAUSE YOUR IMMEDIATE YOUNG COLLABORATORS AND SUCCESSORS WILL HOPEFULLY BE TRAINED FOR SHARERS IN ANY IMAGINABLE SENSE.

3 "C"



mocracy is primarily a society of rule of law and respect for human rights; it is a society founded upon virtues built in to a value system. What we now have is, alas, a version of this that retains and encourages the right to vote but, through a range of barriers, denies the right to be a well informed and educated voter. Access to unbiased and objective information along with free education as the most effective way of bettering the society is the *conditio sine qua non* of democracy. In short, public memory institutions are facing challenging times: they are called upon to make their contribution, yet this cannot be done with their former "professional" attitude and their social ineptitude. Their new virtues are as old as their vices, but only relatively recently has their extraordinary potential become clear in terms of assisting, problem solving when applied by public memory institutions. What are these virtues? There are many, but a helpful way of conveying them is through the seven "syn"s.

SYNTHESIS

*Synthesis*⁴ is a way to include all aspects of

4 FOR THE BASIC INTERPRETATION OF THE TERMS I HAVE USED ENCARTA DICTIONARY OF ENGLISH (NORTH AMERICA)

a possible approach, combining different ideas, styles or influences and, as a result forming new ideas, and a new unified whole. This is close to the definition of creativity and intelligence. This approach corresponds with Hegelian philosophy of a new idea that resolves the conflict between theses and antitheses.

Just imagine a heritage object presented to include conflicting sides' views, as we have seen in a number of new museums. Imagine that heritage institutions provide also a non-specialist approach by including the views of lay members of their community or visitors in general: much changes immediately. This is the practice of eco-museums that was so revolutionary in the seventies, but was never used to its full potential to change the rest of heritage scene.

When discussing the theme of beauty in, say, a regional museum, one should have all specialist experts working together. The *synthesis* comprises a holistic, therefore necessarily multidisciplinary approach. The result of their teamwork would be a different synthesis, close to life, and at the same time complex and understandable, because paintings would be displayed alongside spec-

imins, stones and photographs, in a creative mix reflecting the locality and the intention of “combining ...the constituent elements of separate material or abstract entities into a single or unified entity”. Though research can be carried out by specialists (because it is dominated by analysis), communication of that research can hardly succeed through a specialist approach (because it works by synthesis, because of *synthesis*).

Exhibitions presenting just analysis do exist but they do not reflect the wide communication we aim for as heritage institutions. The *synthesis* itself is “a process of reasoning in which the conclusion is revealed directly from given propositions and established or assumed principles”, which is another important point to remember in successful communication.

Therefore, moving from a scientific, expert language to the language of everyday life, we include all interested, involved and concerned aspects, comprising a non-specialist approach that will more easily allow the involvement of our users, and understanding that teamwork by a range of experts is not a management method but a way of thinking.

SYNOPTIC

Synoptic is an adjective describing a quality of approach, - offering a panoramic, inclusive view, similar to *synopsis* (which is a brief condensed statement, giving a general view of the whole of a subject). The claim I propose is that such a view would take into account doubts, questions and relevant suspicions. A panorama obviously cannot hide the environment of otherwise separate objects and so necessarily provides more a complete meaning and better understanding. By this approach, a *synoptic* technical museum would, first of all, talk about the world in which technical inventions happen as logical consequence or driving force. The *synop-*

tic museum of national history would be an easily comprehensible, simple and powerful story which would place the user in time and space, among their predecessors and in the ever-changing changing perspective, as nothing is eternal (except in one’s wishful imagination or political speeches). Some identities would be revealed to be made of combined differences and find in themselves inspiration for co-existence rather than intolerance.

Instead of scientific telescoping, in which any chosen object or group appears to be self-sufficient and complete, the *synoptic* language of life would offer a panorama, inclusive view, doubts, questions, suspicions, self-irony and wide attitudes welcoming difference and making it a source of enjoyment, not frustration.

SYNCHRONISM

Synchronism refers mostly to the simultaneous occurrence in time of two or more things, presenting “an arrangement in chronological order showing historical events that happened or people who were alive around the same time”⁵. Therefore a *synchronous* permanent exhibition would aim at showing all sorts of different things related to each other through their occurrence in time and therefore, if chosen with good scientific and communicational arguments, able to evoke the spirit of time, or the complex experience of the particular phenomenon. If applied to modern art museum the virtue of *synchronism* would mean that a painting by Degas would be accompanied by real objects and documents of the time. This would bring forth the real time relation between them, context and simultaneity suggesting that his art was very much expressing the spirit of time by its social engagement and sensibility

5 ENCARTA DICTIONARY

for the anonymous human destiny in the vortex of the modern world: getting rich quickly, rapidly changing and discovering new misery and pain. Monet's painting of Gare St. Lazare would appear barely comprehensible without the atmosphere of physical discoveries of the nature of light, without a fascination for steam and trains, without movement expressed as speed, rendering the recording of individual movements at the platform superfluous. The contemporaneousness demonstrated would explain much of what remains a mystery and prevent us from learning. There are more than good reasons for certain poetry in its simultaneousness with great events, large wars, times of poverty or, why not, changes in political systems or even climate. Things do coincide because they happen as a row of shared motives, reasons and unspoken underlying patterns. *Synchronism* is "the arrangement or treatment of synchronous phenomena or events in conjunction, as in history". Technology does not exist without its art and vice-versa.

Asked many years ago by a director of a museum of technology what her museum could do to become better I gave many answers⁶. She thought that the car department would grow more interesting by acquiring a better collection. I thought differently: they needed an art historian with some social history⁷. The cars are first of all design and social psychology and then technology. Consequently, their small, local collection would start to communicate more broadly. What does it all have to do with art connoisseurship and the delicate appreciation of beauty? Every-

thing. Some elitist museums should be the temples for contemplation, as would some exhibitions, but to communicate, introduce and to educate we must know better. *Synchronism* enables "seeing things in meaningful conceptual entities"

The language of life has to win over the dryness of facts isolated in diachrony where the only criterion is their chronological place on the timeline. Phenomena exist in their historic real time relationships, their lost context, the simultaneity which, itself, is a framework expressing the spirit of time.

SYNESTHESIA

Synesthesia in psychology is "the evocation of one kind of sense impression when another sense is stimulated, e.g. the sensation of colour when a sound is heard". In brief, we should be provoking multi-sensual understanding. At the end, if speaking about heritage presentation or communicating it, we arrive at the conclusion that true communication will be realised only by the confluence of arts and sciences, a resonance between a curator, "heritologist⁸" on one side and the artist on the other. This would be an alliance that could provide scientific arguments and forms of their presentation that could apply, if not all then to as many senses as possible. A visitor to an applied art museum seeing an Art Deco section should be encouraged to connect why would the twenties were nicknamed "roaring", why the jazz music blossomed, why the flapper redefined modern womanhood, and indeed why is it that that a world gasping for air (because it was mov-

6 MOST DID NOT INCLUDE ANY SIGNIFICANT EXPENDITURE. IT IS NOT THE MONEY THAT CAN MAKE A GOOD MUSEUM. MONEY CAN MAKE A GOOD MUSEUM BETTER, AND A BAD MUSEUM STILL WORSE.

7 IT WAS 15 YEARS AGO AND EVEN OUTSOURCING ONE REMAINS REMOTE THOUGHT; LACK OF PROFESSIONALISM AND INSTITUTIONALISM ARE ENDURING THE CHALLENGES.

8 BACK IN 1981, I PROPOSED THE NEOLOGISM HERITOLGY TO STAND FOR A MEANINGFUL AMBITION OF CREATING A SCIENCE OF HERITAGE AS, EVIDENTLY, A SCIENCE OF A PARTICULAR INSTITUTION, BE IT A MUSEUM, SCHOOL OR A CHURCH, CANNOT EXIST. THERE IS SOME LITERATURE ON THAT AND SOME PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: A CENTRE ON HERITOLGY OR SUBJECTS AND STUDIES OF HERITOLGY.

ing too fast) peaked in the Wall Street Crash. He or she should hear the noise of the jazz club as well as that of stock market. Only “a sensation produced in one modality when a stimulus is applied to another modality” will change the impact of the exhibition from learned knowledge about it, to feeling for its spirit, in fact, for the way of thinking that made it possible.

Unlike artificially created circumstances, life does not offer any situation where phenomena are in isolation: there is always some sort of multi-sensual stimulus. This can be recreated for the purposes of communication by the confluence of the arts and sciences, obtaining a resonance and provoking deeper understanding.

SYNERGY

Synergy means simply “the working together”, be it individuals or organisations, and all the definitions imply that the expected result would be “greater than the sum of their individual effects or capabilities”⁹. Heritage institutions are no exception to the rule of maximized effects when working in synergy with one another, or working in pools and associations. There is little new to talk about because in the last three decades much has happened. Early on there were CHIN (1982) and SAMDOK (.....). Only much later are there examples of excellent organisations like MLA (2000) which stem from the already widespread conviction that working together is not only an effective way of being efficient but that it may have some additional importance. Heritage institutions are increasingly creating a cooperative system for two additional reasons: to improve financial efficiency and to upgrade their communicational potential. Their activities are complementary and bring effects which are, indeed, greater

than the mere sum of their parts through their cumulative effects.

Whenever the problem of presenting an identity arises, especially on the grand scale and with some additional arguments for public effect, cooperation and functional linking of heritage institutions is a welcome. Media, political pragmatism and growing partnerships (corporate sponsors and the tourism industry for example) have created pressure on them to coordinate their messages and produced, in a decade or two, effects that their prevailing conservative background would otherwise hold back. The cross-domain and cross-disciplinary is the way of thinking as well as the underlying pattern of any efficient mission.

In many countries the practice of these memory institutions coming together to discuss common issues is becoming part of everyday professional life, yet divisions persist and these domains behave like separate sectors. Cooperation with others in combined action brings beneficial results, avoiding overlap and sparing resources. Synergies are many as there is logic in linking interests upon common interests. Whatever the theme of an exhibition, to take one example, cooperative action brings all the different resources together. The potential this creates clearly demonstrates that the entire heritage sector is meant to be united, rather than a single pool artificially divided by the differing scientific interests.

The moment we redefine heritage institutions as primarily communicational by nature, the centre of gravity changes and a different logic opens up the gates of this disjointed army to form a new sector, - a new profession with different occupations. It is not a museological or “heritological” myth but a completely new social force, and one that is very much in the needed.

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Synergy serves the language of life by its very nature: effective networking is bringing together that which should not have been created as separate, but as a cooperative system by definition. It does lead to interesting consequences as a new configuration may result in a new truly profession whose voice may be both informed and transparent in a shattered world.

SYNCRETISM

Syncretism is unity of different approaches in theory and in practice, an “attempt to reconcile contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of various schools of thought. The term means ‘combining,’” . It strives for the reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices or parties in philosophy or religion. It was originally applied to various mergers in religion and beliefs, but it became widely used in culture and politics (where, bizarrely, it originates). Erasmus used it for theological purposes, advocating unity and coherence. In today’s use with regard to heritage institutions it may be a term to denote the claim for a concord in making these institutions impartial, all encompassing and permissive in attitude toward others’ heritages and identities. “Syncretism tends to facilitate coexistence and constructive interaction between different cultures”, making possible the “successful communication with people of other cultures”.

One is tempted to see syncretism as describing an undivided state, a unity of different parts, the probable state of arts at the beginning when its whole was formed from music, movement and speech. Syncretism could be understood as a way of communication preferring unity of all expression and means of interpretation. As a way of approaching the working process, it could be a constant effort to reconcile different teachings for the sake of communicating a possible whole, with the aim of better communicating the

basic concepts, in a clearer and usable way. A museum of particular religion is possible but probably unnecessary. Yet a museum of religion is not only possible but also needed and very much syncretic, because its mission could be to explain the need for religion and different concepts of understanding spiritual reality. Needless to say, no religion’s orthodoxy would be content with it because any orthodoxy (at least secretly) believes that their understanding of divine is the one and only. That would be, basically, the general direction of any syncretic museum. Most history museums are nationalist, because the curators and their managers believe that such an approach is like a virtual battle. They see nationalism as a way to protect national identity: our arguments against others. A syncretic approach would boldly prove that nationalism is a waste of time. Identities are out there, and they should be helped to survive and see clearly how different and similar at the same time they are. A syncretic approach would enable us to build museum(s) of nationalism, because museums are not only to serve some identity but also to interpret the world as a context to live by.

The point is that wherever life carries on, unbothered by too much politics or religion, and tries to arrange human destinies, wisdom prevails. When people see that getting along despite their differences is a rewarding approach to life, it is language of life that suggests that.

SYNTONY

Syntony, like many other expressions we use, comes from other sciences. Originally, in physics, syntony is “the state or condition of being adjusted to oscillations of the same or a particular frequency”. In Psychiatry, it is “denoting a personality characterized by normal emotional responsiveness to the environment”. Therefore, for our purposes in the heritage industry, it means that heritage institutions that are syntonic are at-

tuned to their prevailing and specific circumstances, in harmony with their own environment, which, in its turn would mean their real-time participation in the real problems of the actual citizens, who are their users and visitors: in other words, an institution that is “emotionally attuned” to its environment. By this we should not imagine the heritage industry attacking the visitors’ emotion, taking advantage of their shallow fascination for financial gain. It is the affective mode which is result of loving ones’ users, caring for them and their needs, seeing to their problems and worries, and trying in an obvious and effective way to contribute to their well being.

Again, unlike the language of institutions, which tends to be the expression of their scientific concern, the language of life refers to living people and their concerns and probably even problems. The conservative attitude that advocates institutions as separate from their immediate reality, claims that museums are not political institutions and cannot be socially active by taking part in current matters. A syntonetic attitude would see resonance with the wider world as a means of being relevant and accountable, indeed, needed and useful. In the long run, it is the secure way to provide oneself a good job, as any sound marketing plan would recommend. Namely, marketing sees this relationship exactly as syntonetic, as an exchange in which museums offer their quality product based upon the needs of the users, and in return they get the attention, impact, favourable working conditions and importance that stems from a realised mission.

...and seven advices for a quality

In discussing the qualities desired in heritage institutions, one certainly occasionally ends up with a degree of overlapping and repetition. This should not be a problem in

itself since it allows one to consider the phenomenon from several sides, and yet some may have a different, more practical aspect¹⁰. How should a public museum become good and successful? It is neither simple question nor would it comprise a simple answer. For the sake of brevity, one could say that to be successful, a museum, or some other heritage institution should be:

CONTEMPORANEOUS as to deal with real time, real people, real problems; offering an overview and insight into reality

Your role is to inform and equip users to take part in daily decision making; make sure that you show what is on, yet from a distance, as any information centre would, filtering out however that which deserves little or no attention at all, but giving nevertheless a balanced overview.

VERSATILE as to be open, accessible, quick to react to changing circumstances, communicational

Become a mirror of the swift changes around you. Become a place one can access easily, knowing and expecting that the visit will be fulfilling, an experience worth the expense and the effort, special, with innovations that make it different from all others and therefore distinctive when facing competition from other cultural (or any other) offers.

WISE so that it offers knowledge, inspiration, enriches the visitor’s experience and becomes a help in living by creating sensibility and understanding

10 AFTER A PRACTICE IN A MUSEUM SECTOR, THE NEED TO ELABORATE SOME CRITERIA OF QUALITY WERE MY FREQUENT TASK COMPRISED IN TEACHING THEORY OF HERITAGE AND FUNCTIONING AS A CONSULTANT.

Your users want to be more satisfied with their lives; they dislike being ignorant, uninformed, manipulated or kept away from that which is fundamental to their appreciation and enjoyment of the only world they have, and the only lives they live. So an art museum should care less for the special knowledge or meaning of particular objects or collections but instead use them for the sake of providing visual literacy, enabling enjoyment of arts, putting art at our disposal for pleasure and for its beneficial effects. The users want to be conscious of the values around them, they want to know and feel the uniqueness of their environment and understand its nature. The joy of understanding can have a healing effect on the community, decreasing fear and hopelessness, and adding meaning to their life. The proverbial wise grandmother is exactly the epitome of a good museum because the process is the same - the transfer of socially formed human experience in an affective relationship. The term encompassing all who describe or advocate sustainable development is wisdom. Unlike some recent authors who justify the selfishness of the current inhabitants of the planet, heritage tells us differently: the planet cannot survive without responsible knowledge, without humanist ethics (and that is, by definition, trans-generational). Would the medievalisation of the current world happen if we were aware, through our heritage institutions and their messages, that we are suffering an evolution, a sort of civilisational reiteration?

USEFUL

contribute to the wisdom necessary for balanced development; make the users better and ennobled;

Give visitors not only knowledge of art facts and artists, but create the opportunity for independent encounters with aesthetic or any other challenges a heritage institution can

offer: spiritual, rational, emotional; widen the views of the users and convince them that all living beings are artists, and that we only differ by our place in human creation; make a museum that is able to prove that quality development cannot do without collective memory, without the accumulated experience of dealing with the problems and the challenges we face, without art or without knowing what is a coherent aesthetic system; art is the reality of parts that we combine into aesthetically appealing, spiritually ennobling wholes. The problem of our modern world is that we have failed to convert the accumulated heritage into the experience useful for our development. On the planet there is nothing new, just facts discovered anew in different and yet, the same, circumstances.

HONEST

be sure the curators know who is the "owner" of the museum, and that the museum stands for common values and contributes to common good

Create a museum that defends and affirms an acceptable system of values, that gives people the feeling of security and self-respect; that stands for its community and their benefits. It may require quite a change of the mindset to accept the guiding principles in which we serve the users, the community, and not the politicians, corporate partners or the board. Yet, in taking this into account, things change entirely¹¹. Honesty would refer also to a natural ease, lack of pretension and to simplicity - denying that a museum is a temple of anything but life and that eternity

11 TEACHING INTERNATIONALLY I WAS OFTEN ASKED WHAT WAS THE MUSEOLOGIST AND THE SHORTEST ANSWER I HAVE INVENTED WAS THIS: A CURATOR WITH THE MIND OF VISITOR; I GUESS A HERITOLOGIST WOULD BE CLOSER TO THAT CLAIM, BUT THE POINT WAS FROM A ZEN BUDDHISM: ONE CANNOT MISS THE TARGET ONE MAKES A WHOLE WITH.

does not live there, much as God does not live in any church. Any institution has the opportunity to be honest and museums, being by definition public and socially minded (if they are indeed museums) have this obligation.

EFFECTIVE

enable a museum to create information, messages, knowledge and wisdom in a persuasive and usable way, with immediate consequences for attitudes and behaviour

Communication should be delivered in clear and humorous way, for the obvious benefit of the users so that they can easily accept the museum offer; and the general ambi-

ance should be that of a forum, not that of a temple or shrine. Effective would mean also direct, obvious and usable in the sense of doing the job. Some efficiencies would result from well used strategies and equipment, but for the most part, an effective heritage institution is the one that does things, puts its guiding values into circulation and realises, if possible, daily the intentions expressed in its mission statement.

COMFORTABLE

so that it cares for the comfort of the users to be a pleasant, encouraging environment for the exchange of values

When respect and the material contribution

SEVEN ADVICES FOR A QUALITY HERITAGE PROJECT

1. Contemporaneous

→ AS TO DEAL WITH REAL TIME, REAL PEOPLE, REAL PROBLEMS; OFFERING AN OVERVIEW AND INSIGHT INTO THE REALITY

2. Versatile

→ AS TO BE OPEN, ACCESSIBLE, QUICK IN REACTION TO THE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES, COMMUNICATIONAL

3. Wise

→ SO THAT IT OFFERS KNOWLEDGE, INSPIRATION, ENRICHES THE EXPERIENCES AND BECOMES A HELP IN LIVING BY CREATING SENSIBILITY AND UNDERSTANDING

4. Useful

→ CONTRIBUTE TO THE WISDOM NECESSARY FOR THE BALANCED DEVELOPMENT; MAKE THE USERS BETTER AND ENNOBLED;

5. Honest

→ BE SURE THE CURATORS KNOW WHO IS THE "OWNER" OF THE MUSEUM, AND THAT THE MUSEUM STANDS FOR COMMON VALUES AND CONTRIBUTES TO COMMON GOOD

6. Effective

→ MAKE A MUSEUM ABLE TO CREATE INFORMATION, MESSAGES, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM IN A PERSUASIVE AND USABLE WAY, WITH IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES UPON ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

7. Comfortable

→ SO THAT IT CARES FOR THE COMFORT OF THE USERS TO BE A PLEASANT, ENCOURAGING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE EXCHANGE OF VALUES

of users is needed in exchange for the quality product they are offered, the museum must be many things, but first of all, it has to be a pleasant environment for an individual, family or collective visit. Since museums depend upon the decision makers, it is their qualities that will be reflected when elaborating the qualities of the institution. If “comfortable” for a board or politicians means the luxury of marble and expensive equipment, so it will be in the museum. Public institutions do suffer from this form of showing off as a rather primitive form of legitimisation, but in the end, we all know that the performance and final impact of any heritage institution does not depend upon the luxury of its outfit and appearance, but on the richness of its professionalism, upon the quality of the programme, upon the profoundness of understanding of what public welfare means and what far-reaching objectives it has.

Conclusion about virtues and qualities

To do our job well, be it in a tiny museum or the huge institution, we have to master four areas of expertise and insight:

KNOWING WELL THE NATURE OF THE WORLD IN WHICH MUSEUMS OPERATE AND OUR USERS LIVE,

HAVING A CLEAR PHILOSOPHY OF THE PROFESSION AS A TOTAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE MUSEUM AND HERITAGE IDEAS

PERFECTLY KNOWING OUR USERS

KNOWING WELL THE SET OF TECHNIQUES, METHODS AND PROCEDURES KNOWN AS THE MUSEUM WORKING PROCESS

The dilemma here is that these areas suggest the need for obligatory professional training, as only the fourth expertise can be learned on the job, although it is not advisable, because it is too long a process, risky and expensive. However, for the professional training to be effective we have to have the heritage sector ready, legislation making it obligatory and a theory that complies with

the expectations of our grand future.

Once heritage institutions are prevailingly seen as communicational by their nature, they are already re-conceptualized, re-programmed and only they may postpone the turn of the switch. That however cannot be a click, but is a long process of professionalisation in which some have advanced well and others are far behind. The future will, however, prove that we are in the decades when beginnings of a heritage (mega-) profession emerge into reality. The irony is that we all call ourselves professionals, be we curators, librarians, conservators or archivists, whereas we are just occupations with all the logical consequences of our status. But that, however, is a much longer story. The claim is that these virtues, be they seven or many more, concern all activities in the working processes of heritage institutions. They provide a simple structure: so much so that it seems like an over-simplification. Most things that that we live by or live with, that we need to be able to live in harmony, cannot and are not taught in schools and cannot be learned in schools nor even faculties. The usual knowledge derived from scientific interests implies that we should all be given a chance (or be forced into it), to become (however pale) a copy of the geniuses that produced that knowledge. In fact, most of the knowledge in the standard schools in standard countries and standard cultures is either unnecessary or badly presented. No one teaches us how to raise a credit with a bank, how to choose a husband or wife, or choose our friends, or what is the meaning of human existence and how we are constantly led up the garden path or sold down the river. Who will explain that democracy, as presented by politicians, corporations and their media, is a mere manipulation system in which freedom and welfare are not objectives? Of course, heritage institutions, and museums as the most communicative among them, will not

save the world but they can contribute to the solution. Defining them through the virtues and qualities that make their mission a plausible one is a worthy task.

Temples of science, knowledge or communication¹²

The term “material evidence” used in explaining what museums contain is referring to the objects, revealing a sort of aberration. History and culture are treated similarly to an outcome of a scientific experiment that can always be proved. Yet, the choice in collecting or the very interpretation (though entrusted to science) derogates the claim to the extent of denial. Instead of the broad overview of wisdom as derived from the past human experience, be it in culture, civilisation or nature, we have a bureaucratic hearing of evidence similar to a judicial procedure. In the absence of the true protagonists, the main witness is the respective scientific discipline.

Museums are still perceived as elitist and many, in spite of novelties in practice and changed public perceptions, remain “of interest only to those who are initiated into the mysteries of these silent cathedrals of learning”¹³. In many countries “museum days” and “museum nights” create massive one-off, annual public visiting, encouraging many to come back - needless to say - but changed little in the practice of many museums. Real change would be offering a changed product: a needed and useful one, that responds positively to the daily reality of their communities.

¹² THIS CHAPTER HAS BEEN BORROWED FROM MY RECENTLY WRITTEN BOOK ON THE CRITIQUE OF HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS: ETERNITY DOES NOT LIVE HERE ANY MORE, AS YET, UNPUBLISHED.

¹³ MCLEAN, FIONA. *MARKETING THE MUSEUM*. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 1997. P.27

A conventional museum will please a scientist and interest a student, but will also tire out and discourage a layperson. An average visitor likes to find out things that are connected with reality and so that they can relate these to his or her own experiences, appropriating thus a valuable sense of understanding and of being informed. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake cannot offer this. The safest formula of professional orthodoxy in the issues regarded as the very domain of museums, which, at the same time, represents dignity beyond criticism, is scientific work. Even though their activities should be based on scientific criteria, museums are not, with rare exceptions, quintessentially scientific institutions. Although museums have a scientific base, they may even produce more knowledge, but what we rightfully expect from them is more wisdom.

K. Hudson categorically criticised museums for becoming temples of science by saying that a scientist reacts with brain, not with the sentiments, but most of the visitors are neither scientists nor intellectuals, a fact, he added, that museums have not grasped for a very long time. If this seems to be a piece of criticism that is becoming less justified since museums do change, there are still enough arguments for making objections: once turned into a public institution, the museum is bound to be democratic. So far, it has had to choose its democratic orientation regarding the level of information it could or wanted to diffuse. On one hand the museum has been accused of its elitist approach and orientation to high social classes, and, on the other of populism renouncing ambition. By using modern technology for researching, processing, storing and presenting information, the museum can simultaneously function at multiple communication levels.

In the age that had a new need for retaining memory of the evasive past reality, for which

myths no longer presented a recourse, everything needed to be proved by material facts. Learned societies were protagonists and creators of the myth of science by affirmation of analysis, often forgetting the whole while studying the parts. Their approach offered the elegant truth, hiding esoteric knowledge. Observation, experiment and control, as the path towards truth, still dominate as the genuine agents of truth. Their inherent value will remain but complemented with the humanist breadth of vision. Putting the needs of the community of users at the centre of some, formerly rather exclusive, scientific institutions will change them. Those needs can be fulfilled by adding back to their discourse that which has been extracted during the process of analysis: the poetry of myths, the emotional intelligence, the (art of) creative language, making it thus a genuine communication. The presentation of reality as it is done in museums is not necessarily the only or the best way. It can happen that one learns more about spirit of certain time or place in one extraordinary theatre piece than in some unchallenging year of life, let alone during a visit to a museum. But applying creative language to facts and experiences is not a forbidden land. Many have accessed it, feeling or knowing that the future of public memory communication will grow upon the confluence of curators and artists. Surviving upon conviction that public will evolve is an illusion, as is the notion that they will educate themselves and agree on the conventional discourse of museums as theirs. There is no point in ignoring popular beliefs as, even when wrong, they are a legitimate reality to work from, to work with, to work for and against, - in brief take into account as decisive circumstances. Without users, any museum is but a store of dead objects.

When about communicating, there is, above all, an art inaccessible to the most but the talented and wise - simplicity. It is so com-

plicated to keep the things simple! As for wisdom, it usually grows from the humus of great knowledge and humanist ethics. Ethical ignoramuses are usually useless, but unethical pundits often become dangerous.