MUSEUMS IN THE LIFE OF THE PUBLIC

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Abstract

The present paper aims to emphasize how, in the latest years, more and more events and museum practices focus on the identification of new ways of engaging more individuals into the museum life, even exploring the possibility to extend and adapt the museum activities in the life of communities, according to the actual realities. In this regard we selected a number of relevant institutions in the field (museums, cultural forums etc.) and analyzed their innovative museum practices regarding the visitors and their engagement into the life of the museum. The results revealed that to attract more visitors and to increase public engagement, a museum must to be as a living entity who adapts its needs to the present cultural, economic, social, educational and technological context.

Keywords: Heritage; Communities; Refugees/migrants; Display; Interaction; Participation; Dialog; Digital technology

Introduction

In the current global cultural, social and economic context, marked by globalization, economic crisis, terrorist groups, migration, explosive evolution of smart technology and tools, the museums have evolved from the platforms for ethnocentric collection and display to a shared intercultural space of collective cultural memory [1]. The museum has become a place *open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment* [2], a space that makes possible a deep understanding of the identities complexity and of the dynamic nature of culture. In fact, the realities of the global museum community require an intercultural exchange (peoples and cultures, information and knowledge) based on complex knowledge systems, outlining innovative practices to involve and attract both immigrants and the general public [3, 4].

Public participation through smart technologies

Nowadays, the museum is a space for intercultural dialog based on accessibility to the smart technology which creates new opportunities to increase the virtual distribution of heritage assets and values. In this context it is very important to note that before being available in the virtual space, an artifact travels a long route from its discovery, involving a variety of professionals in the field, as we can see in the figure 1.

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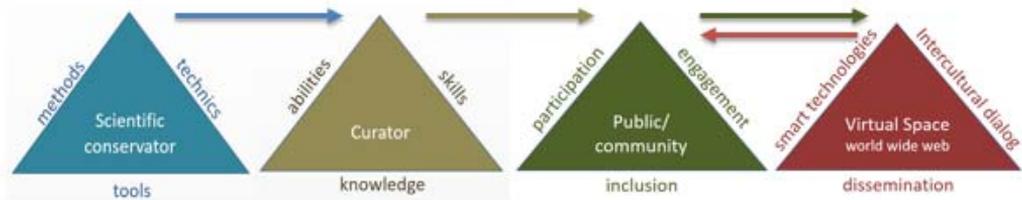
Fig. 1. The scheme of the main professionals and actors involved in the artifacts route
from discovery to public display and virtual dissemination

After discovery, the conservator initiates a scientific investigation of the artifact, using specific methods, techniques and tools necessary in processes of authentication, evaluation, establishment of conservation status, compatibility studies, monitoring behavior interventions for a given period and in continuous monitoring of developments of the conservation state [5, 6]. The results obtained are used in other specific activities, such as: typological classification and cataloguing, passive preservation (preventive), active preservation (curative), restoration and hoarding.

Once ready to be displayed, the artifact goes to the museums, and the curator is the professional in charge with its valorization (museistic and touristic), protection (guarding against thefts, vandalism, fire and disasters) and maintenance (cleaning, acclimating, lighting, etc.).

For this purpose, the curator uses his abilities, skills and knowledge regarding the conservation of the cultural heritage, of display systems and ambient reintegration methods, to provide an interactive presentation on the data of the archaeological discovery context, the manufacture, the period of use, up to the abandonment of an artifact etc.

The museum is a cultural and educational space and for this reason the curators often combine exhibitions with other activities (interactive workshops, intercultural meetings etc.) to attract, engage and include a broad audience, mixing generations, cultural backgrounds and interests [1, 5] extending in this way the accessibility for minorities and migrants and even stimulating the volunteering into cultural heritage activities.

According to *The Art Newspaper,* the most visited museums in the world are in the cities of *London* (British Museum, National Gallery, Tate Modern, Natural History Museum, The Science Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum), *Washington, D.C.* (National Museum of Natural History, National Air and Space Museum, National Museum of American History, National Gallery of Art) and *Paris* (Louvre, Musée d'Orsay, Centre Pompidou) [7] but the visitors choices on the virtual museums and cultural platforms are more varied. In fact, in the virtual space, a visitor can be in all these cities (and in any other city in the world) in just a few minutes. For example, the *Art Project* platform created by Google includes well over 150 collections (over 45,000 works of art) from 40 countries (over 250 museums worldwide) and it enables people to use the tools for exploring, sharing on social networks, rating and creating collections on the Education section [8].

Another example we find on *Europeana Collections* - a portal of over 48 million artworks, artifacts, books, videos and sounds from across Europe, sourced from well over 100 institutions such as The European Library, Europhoto, the National Library of Finland, University College Dublin, Museo Galileo and many, many more, including contributions from the public at large [9].

In the virtual cultural space there are always platforms and forums which provide a space for cross-sectoral engagement, reflection and learning (*Platform for Intercultural Europe*) [10], for working on European cultural policy issues (*Culture Action Europe*) [11] or for developing the public quality of European museums (*The European Museum Forum*) [12].

The smart technologies combined with virtual space resources represent a very powerful environment that increases public participation (Fig. 2).
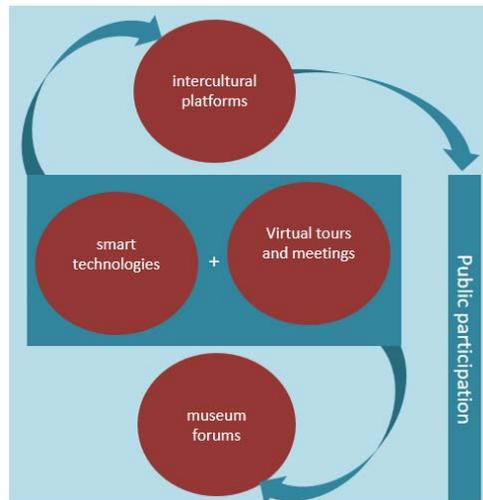

Fig. 2. The scheme of how the virtual space attracts and involves the public

In order to identify new ways of engaging more individuals into the life of the museum, there are several innovative approaches proposed by a number of institutions that adapted their spaces and strategies to current trends and replaced their traditional dioramas, artistic and photographic montages or background images (drawings, photographs, paintings, etc.) audio-guides with multimedia guides that incorporate the latest in digital technology (360º, beacons, 3D prints, 3D virtual experiences - augmented reality, virtual reality, etc.), mobile devices, tablets and special glasses [13, 14,15, 16]. Such museums are:

- The *Metropolitan Museum of Art* (The Met) from New York which proposes a digital journey during the museum visit (being in contact *with what artists see when they look at The Met*) and an interactive map *(#Met Kids)* designed for children [17].

- The *Prado Museum* presents a new website where ten itineraries are organized to explore the museum's classical artworks with contemporary music selected by music experts [18].

- The new installations in the galleries of the *National Archaeological Museum from* Madrid incorporate a comprehensive array of technical and communication solutions designed to enhance public appreciation of the collections and to encourage a greater understanding of the museum's exhibition discourse, now updated and reinterpreted in the light of new scientific discoveries [19].

- The *Gaudi Exhibition Center from Barcelona* which proposes an exhibition, occupying an area of 1,000 m^2, about the architect Antoni Gaudi entitled Walking *with Gaudi*, exploring the possibilities of virtual reality in museums (180º video introduction, an interactive

augmented reality exhibit, audio-visuals created specifically for the exhibition, multimedia content, holograms and more) opening the way of a new type of ultrarealistic display [20, 21]

- The *Museo Thyssen - Bornemisz* from Madrid has extend its digital content on different social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo and Flickr; also, they offer the possibility to make a *virtual visit* to the galleries with *Street View* technology [22].

- The British Museum from London proposes audio guide systems for creating your own visiting apps, available in 10 languages [23].

In order to share the experiences and spread the results by using smart technologies in museums there are already a number of events and meetings announced for the following period, among which we mention: the international meeting organized by The National Archaeological Museum at Madrid*: Digital tools for visiting museums: from audio guides to apps, on February 15, 2016),* the *European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) 2016 – What matters in museums today* that will take place in Tolosa, Basque Country, Spain on April 7 – 9, 2016, *the 24th ICOM General Conference* that will be held in Milan, Italy on *July 3 - 9, 2016* and the theme of the conference will be *Museums and Cultural Landscapes* and the *Arts & Audiences*, an annual conference for cultural leaders, artists, artistic directors, curators, producers, learning managers, communication managers, cultural architects and strategists who wish to explore new ways to extend audience engagement*.*

The museum: A space of collective memories

There is a trend at the global level in the development of *migration museums* which seek to help visitors imagine the journey migrants or refugees experienced. European and non-European countries have created such venues to facilitate the intercultural dialog in a space where the migrants can share their cultural values and personal stories. Migration museums are particularly well placed to encourage reflection and debate on questions of integration, solidarity and national community and intend to be lively meeting places created not to bring in the professionals and ordinary visitors of museums, but to attract the general public, those with preconceived ideas on immigration and the migrants themselves [24, 25, 26].

Around the European countries there are some innovative strategies and positive examples of projects valorizing the museum space and its resources. Among these, worth mentioning are the *St. Martin's Cloak* project, which sensitizes the communities in hosting countries, working in partnership with the mass media, NGOs and cultural centers in order to foster mutual understanding and a more successful two-way integration, the *Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp* project, who tries to put the visitor in the shoes of the immigrants because even today immigration is not always a choice of the person[24, 27], the experience of the Museu da Emigração e das Comunidades founded in 2001 in Portugal, all of which highlight that it is necessary to create permanent structures, Migration Museums where the present and future generations may explore their own social, cultural, family related and geographical roots [28]. The is also the exhibition entitled *Zuwanderungsland Deutschland* (Germany as a country of in-migration) of *Deutsches Historisches Museum* (2005) where they present the history of immigration to Germany since 1500 [25].

The most recent and extraordinary initiative we found was the first underwater museum in Europe called: *The Museo Atlántico,* located on the Spanish island of Lanzarote, that will be open to the public on February 25, 2016. The impressive Jason de Caires Taylor's collection of sculptures depicts refugees and offers a powerful reminder of the refugee crisis [29].

Conclusions

Starting from the current definition of *museum* adopted by ICOM we understand that a museum is an entity that evolved in accordance with the current needs of the society, respectively of its citizens. This is why with the possibility to incorporate the latest smart technology, tools and software into multimedia guides (360º, 3D, augmented reality, virtual reality, beacons, mobile devices, tablets and special glasses etc.) the museums reach a new stage in their evolution, becoming more open to the public than ever. Practically this essential educational space is extended to a very wide scale and it makes intercultural dialog accessible to anyone interested (not just the specialists in the field or traditional public, but even the wide public, including the migrants and refugees).

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