

CITY MUSEUMS: FROM CIVIC INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT OF DISPLAY AND EDUCATION

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City museums seem to represent a new challenge for the scientific museological debate of the 21st century. Quite every town in Europe is going to establish or redisplay museums about urban history and heritage, addressing all their efforts toward the redefinition of their role in contemporary society, especially in terms of cultural experience and permanent education.

Anyway, city museums are extremely hard to define and they seldom share universal characteristics; moreover, excepting few luckier situations located in well-known urban centres, city museums have small collections and reduced staff; major funding tends to go preferentially to art galleries, to international temporary exhibitions or important national museums; furthermore, a big part of visitors refers to city museums as a niche product, addressed mainly to scholars and not particularly attractive. "Unlike the great museums of art, archaeology and science found in our cities, the museum *about* cities are usually rather small and the public do not always understand their purpose" [Hebditch 1995, p.7].

All these problems could be strictly related to the scarcity of studies till now addressed specifically to city museums. In comparison with art galleries, information about city museums is definitely scarce, coming mainly from international conferences' proceedings and few monographic publications.

So several misunderstandings prevent to reach a unique and everywhere accepted definition of city museum: mainly, it has been often confused with *civic* museums,

especially here in Italy where this traditional typology is very common, and with *archaeological* museums or even *architectural* ones.

We should therefore analyse the main features of these diverse museological expressions, underlining the main differences with city museums in their current situations.

Civic museums, generally housed in historic buildings, collect works of art and antiquities that characterized the civic history through the centuries, as paintings, views, armours, religious ornaments, proposing a display that do not intend to present the urban history in its sequential development but limits itself to arrange objects and findings usually in a chronological or stylistic order.

They are museums greatly disadvantaged by the length of their own history, hardly modifiable and definitely little representative of the present-day urban society; some of the approaches established by these early city museums are no longer seen as useful and the current trends are moving away from museums conceived as civic "trophy room" providing a monolithic celebration of the past golden age. As Cathy Ross wrote, "in a modern urban situation fine porcelain and furniture often need a radical reinterpretation in social history terms and even then may be of only limited interest" [Ross 1998, p.116].

City museums instead propose a more complete approach to urban history, displaying and telling the full story of towns since their first settlements to present-day time, involving more aspects as urban archaeology, architecture, material

culture or social history. Moreover they use models, reconstructions, photographs and plans to present urban and cultural development of towns.

But the main difference could be found in the typology of the exhibits: if civic and traditional museums tend to display pieces of art, city museums do not present few object of high aesthetic value but different systems of findings to reconstruct past contexts of life. Quite common objects, as the majority of archaeological artefacts, associated with few valuable items, produce a perspective of everyday life, stimulate an easier relationship with the past and allow the public to approach history by its own personal experience; but, overall, they introduce the big issue that a unique and always accepted version of history, crowded by important persons and big monuments, does not exist, but uncountable micro histories traceable only by few material remains. Archaeology actually, "gives us a link to the past, and sometimes a very different past. It digs deeper for truths not found in history books and tells us of the lives of ordinary people, not just kings and queens. It does not look only at great buildings and monuments of the tourist trail, but also at ordinary houses, at rubbish, sewage and humble graves. By doing so it provides us with a sense of place, of identity and of belongings" [Thomas 2003, p.2]. That could also be the major role of current city museums.

A big part in this misunderstanding has been played by some cultural and ideological reasons that lie beneath the origins of city museums. At the end of the 19th century city museums were born to safeguard the material heritage of big parts of the ancient towns that

were disappearing under the development of the modern capital cities. Archaeological findings and architectural remains rescued from destructions and transformations were put first in municipal libraries and then in civic museums to preserve the memory of lost times. The same happened for Italian civic museums, that in their first steps were really though as city museums, based on the examples of the *Musée Carnavalet* in Paris or the *London Museum*.

But it is now evident that at the basis of these two typologies lies a major difference in the organizational structure, the city museum taking the shape of a research centre with educational aims. Involving citizens and professionals, who different levels live and plan the town, city museums could become a kind of coordination structure for different activities connected with restoration, enhancement and management of the historic urban heritage.

Furthermore city museums are not simply *archaeological* museums, even if urban archaeology represented a major improvement in the organization of their exhibitions. Strictly speaking, archaeological museums pursue an historical mission limited to particular period of the town's life, mostly the one related to the origins of the first settlement or to the moment of main magnificence, and do not intend to present the whole history to present-day time, excluding totally every contemporary matters.

The last common misunderstanding confuses city museums with some new proposals of *architectural* museums, which exhibit mainly the architectural evolution of urban centres:

they have in common with city museums a similar approach to documentation and presentation of the urban development, by using models and reconstructions, but they limit their field of interest to architecture and do not take in consideration other aspects that contributed in shaping the contemporary towns.

To a better look, all these misunderstandings represent particular aspects of city museums and all contribute to create a more complete presentation of town's history. The synthesis of all these different approaches outlines an exhaustive framework for city museums; their temporal wideness, from prehistory to present-day time, presupposes a sort of fusion of all of them, and the museum exhibitions involve archaeology and social history, architecture and fine arts. Modern age acts as a turning point: if previous periods are mainly represented by archaeological disciplines, since the end of the Middle Ages other forms of historical evidence are available and museum exhibitions become more addressed to present social history and civic art. Moreover, current city museums open their doors to contemporary issues, to multiethnic societies, to the new communication technologies, in order to propose an exhibition that could be visited as a cultural, educational but even recreational experience.

During the last fifty years, actually, city museums have been undertaking important reassessments, taking more and more the shape of a public service, offered to a not elitist use and addressed to present-day needs. They became complex systems of communication

where the relationship with the public plays the major role in their process of updating, often letting collection policies on a second level of commitment.

As Max Hebditch expressed, "city museum is a mean of mass communication: more will see a "book on the wall" exhibition than will ever buy an equivalent book" [Hebditch 1993, p.3].

In addition, the acknowledgment of the complexity of the urban phenomenon and of the cultural and social differences present in our cities substantially modified the approach of museums towards urban history, involving not only the past but also the diverse and many-sided aspects of the present. They propose stories that personify more than ever multicultural and global issues, which do not allow presenting a unique and always accepted version of the past.

So, if defining city museum is a hard task, since they have to exhibit urban history the problem shifts to the severe difficulty one finds in defining what cities really are.

"There is not one "word" or "image" of the city but uncountable millions", wrote Gaynor Kavanagh in his introduction to *Making city histories in museums* [Kavanagh 1998, p.2]. Cities are complex and many-sided situations, they are lived and analysed under multiple aspects often influenced by subjectivity; personal and emotional experiences lead to define cities in different ways, strongly consequential to which kind of relationship one establishes with them. "The museum finds itself in the mist of these and other ways of making meaning within, and

histories from, cities. It works with and through the views of the city as expressed by historians, geographers and archaeologists: operates within and is enabled by the political climate; expresses histories in the creative juxtaposition of objects, words, sounds and space; and meets a host of alternative versions that the public brings with them" [Kavanagh 1998, p.2].

The main conclusion is that city museums have a multidisciplinary aspect: in addition to urban, architectural, economic and social history and archaeology, the field of interest has been widened to a series of not strictly conventional research matters connected with the diverse artistic expressions of contemporary times, with anthropologic and ethnographic approaches and so on.

City museums are taking the shape of dynamic institutions whose main aims are not only research and preservation but also education, entertainment and enhancement of cultural heritage of towns.

All the different attempts proposed to define city museums are, at the end, not completely exhaustive; the only way to analyse and manage city museum is therefore to include all the aspects it could assume: so "a city museum can be a theatre, community centre, library, university, school, fairground, archive, pageant, information centre or workshop, mixed in any proportion that seems most suitable for the particular city the museum serves. City museums can reflect on change, inform debates, celebrate experience, challenge misconception, present new histories, provide new experiences, involve

citizens, preserve icons. ... city museums should collect whatever they find useful. Although objects demand endless care and attention, once acquired from "out there", "in here" they are powerful tools in the city museum's mission" [Ross 1998, p.131].

Considering now the Italian situation in relation to European trends, we have to point some differences out.

All the European most well-known city museums, even if very different one from the other, are deeply involved with visitors and public authorities and strongly committed in presenting an image of the city suitable for present-day time.

In Italy deeply established museum traditions and, overall, the predominance of civic museums, didn't leave place for an easy development and diffusion of this new proposal. Here almost every medium-sized town and big city has a museum dedicated to the conservation and the presentation of civic art and history; the origins of these institutions go back to the second half of the 19th century when, during the establishment of the Italian unitary state, quite every urban community aimed to rescue and preserve the material memories of previous periods and to safeguard its own historic and artistic identity by recovering and collecting findings and fine arts objects in a civic museum or library.

Now, it is becoming more and more clear that, in order to remain in touch with the transformation of the towns and the present-day society, Italian museums must find some measures of evolution and modernization; since the Second World War

civic museums have been undertaking significant changes but the most important turning point has been happening in these last ten years.

Even if early attempts of city museums opened during the Sixties in Rome and Milan, they remain still deeply tied to the museological principles of the traditional civic museum, presenting a social history collection scarcely related to the town outside their walls.

Nearly twenty years after these beginnings, to deeply transform Italian civic museums toward modern institutions that will answer new museological and educational needs becomes more and more a strong request. Several museum directors start to discuss about a new type of museum that will illustrate the history and the developing shape of towns in a more complete approach, including the latest information coming from urban archaeology. So, during these last years several Italian town councils are supporting the establishment of new museums addressed to the presentation of the urban history, and we have been assisting to increasing occasions of debate and study about city museums and to a sort of boom in the opening of renewed civic institutions.

In 1998 in Brescia opened the new museum named *Santa Giulia. Museo della Città*, that is perhaps the Italian most complete realization of a city museum. Housed in the premises of the ancient *Monastery of San Salvatore-Santa Giulia*, founded in 753 after the will of the Lombard king Desiderio on the remains of a residential villa of the Roman age, it offers to visitors an heterogeneous display, made up by

archaeological and architectural findings, small pieces of art and materials of great dimensions and, above all, it offers the incomparable possibility to enter in directed contact with the materiality of the ancient city, its road system and its spaces, by expositive solutions that bring to light the architectural stratigraphy of the medieval building and its superimposition on the roman structures. Its permanent exhibition covers the period from the end of the 4th millennium BC to the 19th century.

The *City museum of Mantua*, opened on 19th March 2005, is probably the best exemplification of the Italian situation: it is a “modern civic museum” that attempts to combine the traditional civic institution of the 19th century with a more up-to-date city museum. It displays, in the 16th century residence of Francesco II Gonzaga *San Sebastiano Palace*, a selection of material coming from the collection once exposed in the civic museum, established in 1852, redisplayed on the basis of new museological requirements. The city museum of Mantua tells the artistic and social culture of Mantua during Renaissance in its public and private aspects, in relation to the court of Gonzaga (1328-1627); it is organized in seven thematic sections that do not follow a strictly chronological: they constitutes a relatively short but very accurate exposition that privileges the history of the Gonzaga court rather than the full commentary of the historical development of Mantua.

In addition to these new city museums, in Italy other towns are

involved in the realizations of new projects, as happens in Carpi and Venice.

The re-displaying plan of the *City museum of Carpi* was born within a deep reassessment of the civic museum, in a wider vision about its mission and the use of its historic building, that during the last fifteen years has been involved in an important change in spaces and cultural destinations, in order to make several internal spaces of the palace again available and to give a proper destination to its immense historic and artistic heritage, that spans from the 14th to the 20th century.

The future city museum of Carpi, scheduled to open between 2007 and 2008, will be organized in the second order gallery of the inner court of *Palazzo dei Pio*, a fortified complex of medieval origin transformed at the beginning of the 16th century in a rich renaissance palace by the humanist prince Alberto III Pio. It will propose a journey to the discovery of the art, the culture and the society of Carpi from prehistory to present-day time, tracing the development from first settlement to the urban centre.

Beyond this re-displaying plan of the Palace, a process of definition for a system of communication and visual identity also started: it has to integrate the didactic information of the museum route with the wider concept of city museum and to make it more visible from the outside, including the architectonic complex of the Palace in the present-day urban pattern.

Finally, in Venice a new museum dedicated to the presentation of the city's history through archaeology is

now taking its first steps in its museographical organization: the *Archaeological Museum of the City and the Lagoon* is a project coordinated by the Archaeological Board of Veneto, scheduled to open by 2010.

It will be located in the *Lazzaretto Vecchio Island*, in the south part of Venetian Lagoon, near the Lido. The previous destination of this island was, as the name suggests, an hospital for the recovering of plague victims: it was the first lazaretto open in Europe in 1423 in order to isolate and to treat this epidemic disease and to accommodate people and goods coming from the Mediterranean Sea; this role ended at the beginning of the 19th century, and now all the buildings that formed part of the ancient hospital are about to become the home of the new museum of the city and the lagoon. By the moment the entire island is interested by restoration works of the buildings and the installation of facilities and by the archaeological investigations, which are discovering burial sequences relevant to the historic destination of the site. Some of these archaeological areas will be presented in situ as part of the museum route, that will present the geological and historical development of the lagoon landscape and of the urban settlement in relation with the anthropology of the Venetian population.

This new museum will act as the main branch of a museum network spread in the Lagoon and will be the starting point for the visit of a wider landscape museum that includes other sites and other islands dislocated in the territory.

Drawing a conclusion for the Italian situation, we can say that the first factor that clearly emerges from these new museums is that they are not born as independent institutions, but they are deeply involved in the traditional system of civic museums: anyway, these institutions are now undertaking a deep transformation towards more up-to-date documentation centres about urban history in its wider context. The strong will they express is to transform their expositions and their mission following contemporary education requirements, especially in terms of public involvement.

The idea that comes from this situation is therefore that the city museum in Italy is going to shape itself as a "modern civic museum": a civic museum that reevaluates its condition in town and develops a new relationship with citizens and visitors in general; that means that beyond the "inherited" collections, it presents recent findings resulting from a new vision of the historiographical process, more facing material culture than contemplating the beauty of fine arts.

Modern Italian civic museums are moving from a place in which the town is reflected through the accumulation of goods and collections coming from the

19th century bourgeoisie to a city museum in which the urban pattern and the civic society are explored through memories, materials and images of a wider part of population. The common characteristics of these new museum experiences are therefore an organisation deriving from new interpretations of the urban heritage, innovative displays and the use of the new technologies of communication.

These museums remain however mainly housed in historic buildings. The choice of this localization is extremely important and reflects a strategic wish of enhancement of the urban built heritage, presented as one of the main exhibit in the collection. In this way, Italian current city museums will act as gateways for wider museum systems that include other smaller institutions, in order to preset the city and its material heritage in its entirety.

This seems the key point of the question about city museums: to go out the museum walls to involve citizens, to make the contemporary city in all its controversial and fascinating aspects part of the museum exhibit and to start new fundamental consideration about their role in the management of present urban centres and in the development of their future shapes.

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