

European Museums in an Age of Migrations

MeLa

Coordinator:	Luca Basso Peressut, Politecnico di Milano (Italy)
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Consortium: Politecnico di Milano (Coordinator), Università degli studi Napoli "L'Orientale", University of Glasgow, Newcastle University, Museum National d'Historie Naturelle, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, The Royal College of Art. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

Project presentation

Museums, as stated by ICOM in 2006¹, are service institutions for society and their development devoted to the conservation and transmission of cultural values. Today these institutions, that work on *identity representation* or as *Identity agents*, find themselves in the middle of a process involving the construction of a pluralistic and

¹ "A non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment." (ICOM 2006).

complex civic community related with the variety of the ever-changing needs of people, as well as with the multiplicity and multi-ethnicity of contemporary culture. It is well-known that the topic of migration of peoples and cultures and the consequent “layerization” of societies and identities are not recent issues triggered by the international economy and the process of globalization: they are in fact widely recognized as fundamental elements to the establishment of modern Europe, from its onset five centuries ago until now. The results of these migration processes are unexpected melting-pots and hybridizations that can change the form of the world we know, “re-morphing” not only the geographical borders of states and nations but also all the conceptual boundaries we are involved in. As Homi Bhabha stated, “the 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic.” The dynamics of today’s multiethnic and multicultural Europe asks for a shift also in the organization, design and use of cultural institutions – such as Museums - from an approach focused on the formation of national identities to a new one based on the today’s complex multiplicity of voices and subjects involved. They should be able to foster a rewriting of the great national narratives, considering a more articulated transnational and transcultural scenario.

Existing scholars produced critical analyses of the ‘backlash against diversity’, documenting the contemporary rise of repressive State measures designed to limit access of new migrants to the National territory and citizenship. At the same time, other scholars have moved away from the idea of the Nation-State, proposing a postcolonial vision: either postnational solutions, which decouple the cultural (nation) from the political (state), or transnational paradigms, which implicitly discard the focus on the nation-state as obsolete and questionable.

In this social, political and cultural context, Museums have undergone profound transformation processes. From announcing national identities and monophonic narratives, they are now discussing the challenge whether or not to be turned into supporters of new pluralistic civic communities, capable of responding to ever-changing needs and the hunger for multiplicity seeded in today’s transnational culture. Each category of Museum (Historical, Ethnographical, Archaeological, etc.) has specific needs and character and each requires a specific deepening in order to evaluate whether or not, and on what extent, are, wish or need to be involved in these changes. And which role they can play in collaborating to define new citizenship and/or to include new Identities.

Project objectives, findings and impact

The questions of how all these remarks, these changes and these new theories influences the practice of design exhibitions and museums are of a great interest. The ‘exhibitionary complex’ theorized by Tony Bennet has to be interpreted and

exploited in the new light that postcolonial and cultural studies have cast on Museum institutions.

Therefore, MeLa Project objectives are, on the one hand, to study and deepen the over mentioned theoretical reflections and, on the other hand, to evaluate their operational effectiveness. Elaborating a critical space needed to survey, define and test consequences on the practice of curatorship, the design of exhibitions and the typology of the museums. MeLa therefore reflects on the role of museums, dealing with several complex and crucial issues such as history, socio-cultural and national identity, but also exhibition design and museography, in order to investigate how museums can respond to the contemporary challenges of globalization, European integration and achieve a relevant advancement in terms of knowledge in the field.

To fulfil its objectives the Project built a Consortium of nine European partners², including different universities, two museums, a research institute and a small enterprise, which have all been chosen for their specific expertise and skills in the fields of the project. They will lead each an individual collaborative Research Theme to produce advancement of knowledge finally converging in what could be defined the permanent Think Tank of the project designed to exploit all the different research themes findings and to develop different kinds of outcomes such as: a series of public discussions and workshops, to involve the European community of scholars and the wide public; a Critical Dictionary, plan to be a source reference to Museums scholars and practitioners; a travelling exhibition to better disseminate the research findings in a more wide and friendly way targeted to general public; a series of documents and events specifically devoted to stakeholders and policy makers.

At the same time, suggestions and recommendations elaborated will be tested by design explorations, proposing both real and digital solutions that will contribute to tune and better shape project results and outputs.

Some of the Project central questions include the following:

- How are cultural negotiation processes re-mapping museum and curatorial practices as site, institution, category, organisation, set of social processes?
- How do museums deal with the challenge of representation of cultures in the contemporary society?
- How can museums play the role of mediators in cultural exchange?
- How do museums take the commitment of dialogic, participative and multisensory forms of visitor engagement that challenge the authoritarian and mono-centric form of existent didacticism?
- How does multiculturalism result in museum displays, if any?

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- What different kinds of cultural objecthood are produced by the reconfiguration of the relations between objects, and between objects and persons, within museums where such concerns predominate?
- How can the visit to an exhibition be transformed also into a journey into the other-than-self, introducing a comparative vision or multi-vocal narration?

Some of the Project foreseen key findings can be listed as follow:

- to develop and advance knowledge in relation to the state of the art about the topic of museums in the multi-national society, improving the understanding of their new sustainable and innovative roles, missions and potential forms in citizenship processes and policies;
- to investigate, explore and systematize the relevant possibilities, opportunities, limits, critical urgencies and needs of new museums and exhibition roles, in theories and models of good practice in order to empower museums to define and evaluate criteria, approaches, formats and indicators as appropriate for their exhibitionary complex;
- to critically elaborate scenarios & proposals for new forms of museums and exhibitions suitable to respond effectively to the challenges of the present age of cultural complexity and layerization. Also testing how physical forms, spaces and their organization can possibly affect this change of role and scope (new architectural expressions, new interiors, new models of exhibition spaces, etc.).

The research outcomes are intended to be factual tools not only for academic and cultural institutions in rethinking and reorganizing themselves, but also for museums practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers.

Some of the Project foreseen key potential impacts are:

- Impact on stakeholders and public awareness by developing a common understanding of strategic issues and a shared vision of Museums, Galleries and Libraries' new role in Contemporary Society, their objectives and their priorities
- Impact on relevant Museums and Libraries' community, practitioners, policy makers, educational institutions, by promoting diffusion of relevant issues pursued during the Project development and by its final Outcomes.

Some of the Project foreseen key potential contributions can be described as:

- Contribution to the raising of Public Awareness about Identity Complexity and its representation within the EU cultural arena and agenda:

one of the most important expected impacts is devoted to the necessity of becoming a milestone or a reference research project in the field of Cultural identity and Heritage complexification, stratification and hybridation in the contemporary multi-cultural society of migration

- Contribution to re-defining Museums and libraries' missions: new Collections and Archives "use values" for the migration society:
the consortium will take the challenge of envisioning and evaluating new Museums missions contributing to design innovative collections and archives exploitation modalities which are closer to people and social expectations to paying special attention to cultural diversity.
- Contribution to Cultural Policy Makers & the Museum/Library Community:
for policy makers the project will bring contributions and give advice on planning modalities of cultural heritage an museums contents appropriation by diverse, marginalized and moving communities and therefore on inclusive education and access to knowledge.

Contact details

MeLa Project (www.mela-project.eu)
DPA/Politecnico di Milano
via Golgi 39/block 21
ITALY

Luca Basso Peressut,
Full professor
luca.bassoperessut@polimi.it,

Gennaro Postiglione
Associate Professor
gennaro.postiglione@polimi.it

Luca Basso Peressut, is Deputy Director of the Department of Architectural Design and Full Professor of Interior Architecture and Museography at the Politecnico di Milano. He is director of IDEA Master in Exhibition Design and of the International Workshop "Premio Piranesi-Villa Adriana" and Board member of the PhD in

“Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design” at Politecnico di Milano. His research activity is focused on Museums and Exhibition design and actually is the Project Coordinator of the EU funded project MeLa.

Gennaro Postiglione is Associate Professor of Interior Architecture and Board member of the PhD in “Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design” at the Politecnico di Milano. He seats in the editorial board of magazine ‘AREA’, in the Advisory Board of the Journal 'Interiors' and in the External Advisory Board of ‘IDEA’ Journal. His main researches focus on preserving and diffusing collective memory and cultural identity, connecting the museographic issues with the interior ambit. He is the MeLa Technical Manager.