

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup>-CENTURY MUSEUM: DEALING WITH SOPHISTICATED VISITORS IN A SOPHISTICATED WORLD

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### Abstract

The 21st-century museum is no longer perceived simply as an institution but as a living organism. The paper examines the role of the contemporary museum taking into consideration the current sophistication of the visitor, his new behaviour, and expectancies. Issues such as addressability, interactivity, the involvement of museum visitors and staff were taken into consideration when considering the relationship between cultural institutions and their audience. The discussion is based on the analysis of the perception of the Romanian museum visitors, highlighting the urge for a change in the field.

**Keywords:** museum, visitors' behaviour, tourist interpretation, heritage, identity, education

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In a society in which the access to information has become accessible to everybody, especially in urban areas, the cultural institutions which preserve and promote heritage have to improve the way to send the message due to the fact that the unidirectional transfer of information is no longer preferred by the visitors. Moreover, due to the sophistication of the public and the impact of technology on our daily lives, time has become the most valued resource for everyone, regardless of age, income, position, and other characteristics. The major change in which free time is perceived nowadays has had a direct consequence towards the choices people make on how to spend it. The long working hours together with the ones spent commuting, running the errands, etc. have recently led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of free time and, consequently, to a more difficult decision-making process regarding the choice of activities.

The need for culture is very important, and the cultural products have become increasingly diverse, marking the change from an era when production drove consumption to the consumer society where consumption drives production (Richards, 1996).

Museums are important because they are “active in shaping knowledge, using their collections, they put together visual cultural narratives which produce views of the past and thus of the present” (E. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007:2).

Therefore, they have to adapt to the new preferences of the visitors competing with cinematography, theatres, commercial centres or other cultural organisations in their attempt to attract a significant number of people.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Museums**

Museums have mainly been perceived as cultural institutions in which heritage is being preserved and promoted. However, their roles and functions have significantly changed in the last 50 years alongside with their definition, mostly in accordance with the realities of the global museum community (ICOM, 2016).

According to the ICOM (The International Council of Museums) Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria on August 24th, 2007, “a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”(ICOM, 2016). Other institutions, such as the Museum and Library Services Act describes a museum as “a public or private non-profit agency or institution organized on a permanent basis for essentially educational or aesthetic purposes, which, utilizing a professional staff, owns or utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on a regular basis.” (Dillenburg, 2011:8). Dictionaries usually offer definitions based on their role as institutions. For example, the Concise English Dictionary (Davidson, Seaton, & Simpson, 1994:637) qualifies a museum as “an institution or repository for the collection, exhibition, and study of objects of artistic, scientific, historic, or educational interest”, while the online Merriam-Webster dictionary treats it as “an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value”. This is also the case of Romanian dictionaries, which see museums as institutions to collect, study, preserve

and exhibit artistic, historical, scientific, etc. (Coteanu, Seche, & Seche, 1984; Oprea, Pamfil, Radu, & Zăstroiu, 2008).

The way in which definitions have changed over time is essential for the analysis of the evolution of museums themselves. For example, there is a significant difference between how UK's Museum Association saw museums in 1984 and 1998. If at first the focus was on the role to collect and preserve objects, lately the focus shifted on learning and enjoyment:

"A museum is an institution which collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit." (UK's Museums Association, 1984 in Sparke, Martin, & Keeble, 2006)

"Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning, and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society." (UK's Museums Association, 1998, in Sparke et al., 2006).

However, there is a paucity of literature addressing the present changes museums go through, most of the studies focusing either on the postmodern museum design (S. Macleod, 2005; Suzanne MacLeod, Dodd, & Duncan, 2015), on authenticity (Brida, Disegna, & Scuderi, 2012; Goulding, 2000; N. MacLeod, 2006) or general management or marketing issues (Hatton, 2012; McLean, 2012; Were & King, 2012).

## **2.2 Audience**

A museum without an audience would be redundant. For the museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the public is essential because it is the cornerstone of its development and meaning. Alongside with the building, the location, the collection and the stakeholders, the public creates the museum. The focus on audience is definitely a proof of the attempt of the new museum to support a new approach based on "a more sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity" (E. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007:1). This need of being more market-oriented has been underlined from the 80s when Cossons (1983) predicted the improvements in visitor management and the quality of service to the public, which would demand more individualistic and participative experiences. Moreover, in his opinion, the new museums would become family-oriented, encouraging self-improvement, self-respect, self-actualization and status and ensuring access for all categories, including minority groups and disadvantaged. However, in the past three decades museums started to realize the fact that the public is made of diverse groups with different needs and views (Lang & Reeve, 2016). At the same time, museums have started to appreciate and exploit the complex relationships that are usually created with the individuals who take active roles in contributing to the activities of the museums, whether it is through volunteering, attending events or sharing information.

## **2.3 Interpretation**

The development of tourist interpretation techniques has become a must in order to provide a unique experience to the visitors, in museums' intention to generate repeated visits. Tourist interpretation was born initially out of the need to preserve and protect the heritage in relation with the public or the audience. Therefore, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to a large movement towards environmental protection that took over American organisations, tourist interpretation was used in raising awareness regarding the importance of natural areas (Goldman, Chen, & Larsen, 2001; Orams, 1996). Lately, journalist Freeman Tilden would

substantiate the approach by formulating the six principles of interpretation which became the reference point for all specialists in the field (Tilden, 1967). The shift to using interpretation in understanding and presenting built heritage had a major impact on museums - they have become the main institutions responsible for developing this field, given their constant need to communicate with and stimulate their audience (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 1999a). Interpretation is the most efficient instrument for making meaning – it is dynamic, it creates links between past and present, and it can be tailored for any kind of audience, taking into consideration its identity and the realities of the place. Interpretation invites to an open dialogue based on constant negotiations, “it enables continual checking and rechecking, revision of ideas, trying-out of new ones and rejection of the ones that do not work” (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 1999b:47). For the museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is crucial because it asks for contributions from all groups involved, stimulating ways of reading objects and identifying their significance or salient features for individuals and communities.

In this respect, this article aims to present the challenges the postmodern museum faces currently, analysing the perception of the public on the role museums have and should develop.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The paper extends its observations, data records, and analysis over a 3-year period (2014-2016). The preliminary results of the secondary data analysis have profiled the main aspects of the present research, helping to design the tools used and offering the general background for the present study. In this respect, the online course offered by the University of Leicester and entitled “Behind the scenes at the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum” was of real interest, providing a valuable context and an opportunity for interacting with the online students worldwide.

The primary data was generated by applying questionnaires and interviewing specialists in the field. The surveys targeted two different categories: general public and students. They were self-administered, combining a quantitative and qualitative approach through both closed and open questions.

To ensure representativeness, 432 questionnaires were delivered randomly to the general public and 264 to undergraduate students enrolled in Geography of Tourism at the Faculty of Geography, University of Bucharest. Students and the young adults, in general, represent the most significant segment of the audience because of two main reasons. First of all, they form a majority that is familiar with the technology, this means they are used to interact and to discover things by themselves. At the same time, they feel the need to be asked and to share their beliefs, which makes them suitable for giving solid feedback. The second reason for considering this segment of the audience is the fact that there is a lack of programs addressed to it. Museums tend to be more focused on kids and families in general, ignoring at least partially the single adults.

Interviews (11) were unstructured or semi-structured conducted according to and in relation to the specifics of the environment and the subject being interviewed (curators, guides, other museum staff).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 The role of museums

The museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is unarguably an institution that continuously negotiates its role in society. Just like cities which nowadays are struggling to turn into more attractive and hospitable places by becoming eventful (Richards & Palmer, 2012), museums are repositioning themselves by changing their function (van Aalst & Boogaarts, 2002). If traditionally they were focused on conservation and restoration of collections, nowadays they are becoming an exhibition space and a platform for dialogue and communication in general. It is one of the reasons why unconventional museums such as football museums are undergoing expansion at a time when most of the European cultural institutions are under economic pressure (Appel, 2014). Actually, the economic pressure along with the need to attract even more visitors forced museums to find solutions. The general setting placing culture as a core element in the economic and touristic development was of great importance. Today, the most notorious museums become tourist attractions and tend to be more focused on the entertainment role than on the educational one. But these museums are just a few. In the ex-communist countries, where investing in culture is not a priority for the state, there are a lot of museums that struggle to keep their doors open. Though, even if their collections are not that famous, they directly contribute to the promotion of local identity and to the cultural image of the cities. In this context, here and in many other places, a possibility for surviving and obtaining visibility is creating cultural clusters. These clusters represent a network of museums and other private institutions such as NGO's, that are working closely together in order to create different types of cultural products (Tien, 2008). Sharing resources and creativity and combining different tools in creating a powerful product can improve visitors' experience with a museum.

Moreover, in Romania, the cultural sector was revitalised through a different partnership between private and public institutions. Most of this collaborations were, in fact, cultural events and other celebrations that were addressed to all the community. The biggest such event is The European Night of Museums, where museums, NGO's, libraries and other cultural institutions assume their entertainment and educational role.

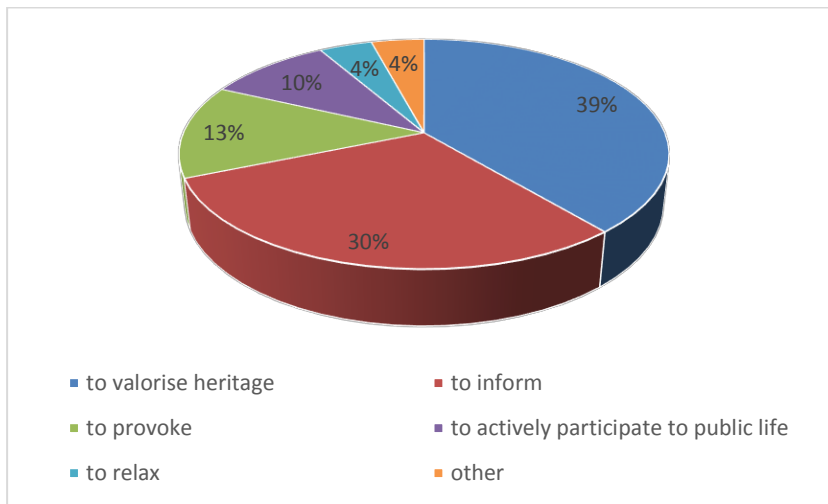
#### *4.1.1. The role of museums in Romania*

Currently, Romanian museums find themselves in a transitional period. It started after the fall of communism, but the necessity to make a step forward now is more visible than ever. Romanians are facing plenty of changes in the cultural sector in the last years: there is a different approach regarding partnerships and collaborations, there are way different ways of communication with the public and community itself, there are different expectations when it comes to cultural products and there is also a wide variety of cultural approaches. On a colourful scene full of possibilities, museums need to find their places in order to become more visible at a local level and abroad.

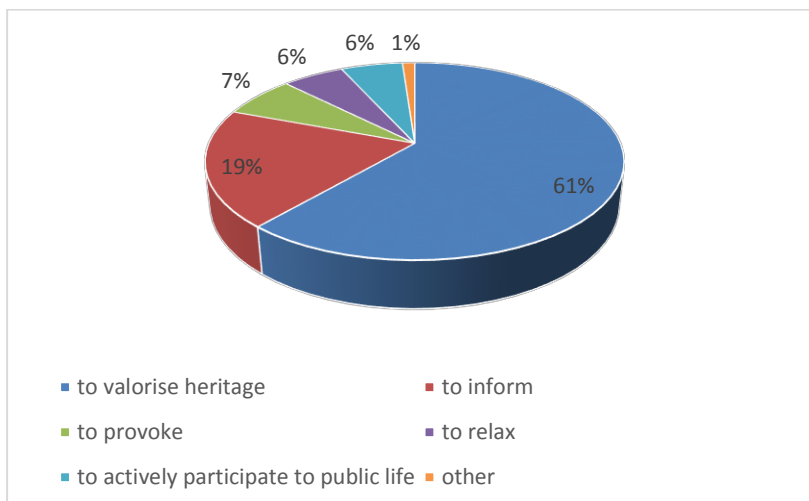
According to the research conducted in Romania, the main role of the museum both for the general public (39%) and especially for students (61%) is to valorise the heritage – see **¡Error! La autoreferencia al marcador no es válida.** and

Figure 2. This is a very important issue given the fact that Romania is a country that still needs to embrace its communist past and to cope with its contested identities (Dumbrăveanu, Tudoricu, & Crăciun, 2014). Attributing this role to museums means considering them community development catalysers and social platforms where negotiation of values happens. Therefore, the 21<sup>st</sup> century museums could become effective instruments for defining, preserving and promoting identity during transition periods from one political system to another. This is also underlined by the fact that 57.63% of the general public and 52.27% of the students consider that Romanian museums manage to promote local and national values, making a statement regarding their importance for society. However, just 9.72% and 13.63% respectively see museums as social mediators.

**Figure 1.** *The role of museums (general public's perception)*



**Figure 2.** *The role of museums (students' perception)*



The second role highlighted by the interviewees is related to providing information to visitors, hence to the educational role of museums. While 30% of the general public considers this role as being essential, only 19% of students agree, marking the important paradigm shift that recently happened in education due to technology and globalization. Youngsters want to

learn by doing, by experiencing and while having fun. They do not need to get (even more) lectures and to be overwhelmed with information they can access remotely, they want to experiment new things, to be stimulated and provoked (6%). However, no matter the change museums have suffered through time, education has always been a priority, which makes impossible categorising them as educational and non-educational (Hein, 2005).

Initially, museums were a form of public education, an expression of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment which stimulated equality of opportunity in learning (Wittlin, 1949) and that has gradually been transformed "from a place for the conservation of culture to a tourist destination where consumption is the primary mode of behaviour" (Ibelings, in van Aalst & Boogaarts, 2002:198). And it is not only about cultural consumption, but also about spending quality leisure time. As van Aalst and Boogaarts (2002) mention, museums are taking on a commercial function, becoming a cultural supermarket, with museum stores selling designer products, cafés, and restaurant facilities, subtly sliding from education to edutainment, or learning while having fun.

Unfortunately, the stage reached by museums in Romania does not make them essential tourist attractions yet. Even so, 29.16% of the general public and 36.36% of the students interviewed appreciate them for their drawing power. However, in their opinion, it is unlikely for museums in Romania to reduce seasonality of tourism, even if this is a commonly accepted fact in Europe (Cuccia & Rizzo, 2011).

An important impact museums managed to have on Romanian market is by organising or contributing to cultural events (30.14%). Whether it is about events dedicated to their collections or about participating into major events, museums manage to attract a wider audience and to make a difference on the cultural scene. For example, European Night of Museums has become one of the most successful cultural events in Romania due to the fact that institutions decided to step out of their "comfort zone" and become exhibits themselves, transforming the city into an open museum (Dumbrăveanu, Tudoricu, & Crăciun, 2017). This type of events create a better perception of the sense of place and its importance and also manage to put in scene different identities, from personal to collective, in a more authentic way. For the community, it looks more like a colourful celebration, being a symbol of cultural revolution. The secret of its success in Bucharest lies in the fact that each museum involved has to perform, to interact with people and to entertain them more than they use to do it apart from this event.

#### **4.2 The 21<sup>st</sup> century museum – a profile**

In our attempt to determine what the postmodern museum means to the public, we asked the interviewees to describe it and we analysed both the answers provided by them and the ones provided by the online students enrolled in the course "Behind the scenes at the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum"<sup>4</sup>. Most of them focused on the fact that it should be visitor-oriented, stimulating and collaborative, but also subtle and innovative (Figure 3). At the same time, the professionals in the field insisted more on the sustainable dimension of the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum and on its complexity (Figure 4).

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<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/museum>

**Figure 3.** The 21st century - students' opinion

”The 21<sup>st</sup> century museum is more complex – it has to respond to the needs visitors have, keeping its educational role and taking care of the collection. It should embed technology and new media; it should be friendly, but find a way to stay sober at the same time.”

”The new museum has to be an impersonal storyteller. It should bring the past to the present in a pleasant way, it should captivate the listener and deliver information smoothly”

”It is diverse and multi-layered. It should provide experience, information and be popular with the members of the public. It has to be an open space for debates and dialogues in general”.

**Figure 4.** *The 21st century museum - professionals' opinion*

”It should encourage people to reflect and question. I think that this is a very important function in a healthy democracy - public debate and engagement with contemporary life - and museums could play an important role in this process.”

”I think the 21st century museum should be an immersive and engaging experience where audiences can explore and discover stories about the world around them, past and present. Museums should awaken or renew an audience's enthusiasm about a topic and inspire them to want to discover more.”

”A 21st century museum is a place that transcends the building. The museum should engage with the community in which it exists, by communication and programs outside the collection.”

”The new museum should be about being provoked instead of being taught. It should be a trigger for information more than a learning platform.”

”Modern day museum is an attractive space that allows you to interact with the exhibits, prepares you for a journey that's full of fun and inspiring and you never know that the message of the artist leaves with you and, at the end, that's what you learn.”

”I think a 21st century museum should be able to adapt to technology and be innovative in how information is presented. They shouldn't just be about the past but should also be relevant to current society.”



### **4.3 The challenges (and the opportunities) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century museum**

As mentioned before, the process of interpretation in museums should be developed in accordance with different roles that museums are supposed to have in relation with society, at a certain point. Still, there is one most important role that remains, and the others represent just different ways to make it happen. Since Tildens' principles of interpretation until now, conserving and preserving heritage is still the most important thing to do. The only thing that changed is the way in which museum workers and other specialists choose to approach the audience. In other words, by trying to interpret not to inform the visitors about something, the perception regarding heritage and its importance changed. Of a great importance is facilitating the contact between visitor and the object, encouraging people to explore and touch heritage in order to understand and feel its value.

#### *4.3.1 Switching from information to provocation*

This different approach became mandatory in the last years of technological progress. Driven by the wild enthusiasm of tasting different types of experiences than before, consumers worldwide rapidly changed their tastes when talking also about cultural products. The audience sophistication is clearly visible among young adults, which represent that specific segment of population who can actively contribute to the rebirth of the modern museum, if carefully and constantly listened to. Moreover, in order to stimulate their interest in museums, they need to be provoked. There's no need for instruction when the internet is full of information. Museums need to become important social actors and for that, they need to involve not only individuals, but also groups of people who share similar beliefs and identities.

#### *4.3.2 Permanently adapting to new realities*

Even if nowadays museums benefit from better performing conditions than before, a paradox happens. Despite the efforts made in order to increase museums' popularity, there are less people than before that visits museums. In the 90's, museums were considered as first-class places, visited only by the upper class (Burton, C. and C. Scott; 2003).

There is definitely a need for education through museum programs, but the way in which the process happens, needs to be adaptable. Museums became not only cultural centres but also important economic actors. They need to become self-sustainable in order to gain a certain independence in creating their own strategy. In this way, museums can become better social performers by approaching problems such as poverty, migration, gender inequality, etc. The 21<sup>st</sup> century museum is a living organism that finds resources to adapt to different realities rather than follow a specific path. In this situation, museums should be prepared to generate controversies, to provoke, to ask questions and to take a strong position in creating and preserving heritage.

#### *4.3.3 Using identity as a core value*

If heritage is what museums values more, identity is what the audience assumes as being important for the individual and for the community as well. A museum can't protect what the community doesn't value. The connection between the visitor and the object is only possible if there is a powerful experience that gives the visitor the sense of place and the importance of

that specific object as part of his personal identity. Working with identities is of a great importance for every museum institution but at the same time, it can be really challenging. For the Eastern-European countries, interpreting controversial identities such as communism has always been a difficult mission. The way in which museums were perceived in the last decades influenced the manner in which interpretation was conducted. For example, in the National History Museum of Romania the communist period was hardly mentioned immediately after 1989. Moreover, the galleries that presented Ceausescu and his regime were closed. There was a lack of interest in interpreting that period even for foreign tourists, despite the interest they manifested for the topic (Light, 2000). In the case of The National Museum of Romanian History, the fact that it was opened just to serve Ceausescu's ideas and party's beliefs, created a lot of confusion regarding the position this museum had in the last years.

In nowadays Romania there is still a lot of uncertainty in interpreting controversial histories, but the new wave of museology and the actual cultural setting may give new perspectives. It is mandatory for museums to use identity openly, in the benefit of the community they serve.

#### *4.3.4 Becoming sustainable*

Sustainability has become a major challenge for most of the institutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new demographics, the changing patterns of government, corporate and individual support, as well as the new ways of creating, preserving and sharing information are major issues to take into consideration while speaking about sustainable development for museums (Friedman, 2007). Whether it is about financial, intellectual or social sustainability, the cultural institutions need to make considerable efforts in identifying their needs and addressing the issues.

In post-communist countries such as Romania most of the museums are still state-financed, and only a few made a step forward towards a sustainable management, more market-oriented. One example is Grigore Antipa Museum of Natural History, which recently benefited from a €13 million refit and managed to attract in the first month of opening the amount of visitors it used to attract in one year – 59.835 individuals (Mitran, 2011). It is also the reason why Antipa museum was the only one mentioned by the sample questioned (2,27%) when asked to mention the first three things that pop in their minds when thinking about the word “museum”, given its recent drawing power and notoriety.

Obtaining intellectual sustainability is even more difficult to project than financial sustainability because it mostly refers to the way the institution is immersed in the field it treats. It involves assessing the level of professionalism of the staff and their capabilities to adapt to change, to the needs of audience and to the current discoveries in the field and then creating strategies to reach a certain level.

Social sustainability can be obtained only by improving the situation of the organisation in the broader social context, in relation to the audience, funders, and other stakeholders. A social sustainable museum is representative for the community and recognised by it as an important asset for preserving and promoting their shared values, as well as a platform open to discussions and creation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Initially, cultural production was designed and controlled by the elite. However, the past century has been subject to a real cultural explosion, facing significant growth in variety and accessibility to cultural products. This period was also marked by a museum boom in the 70s all around Europe, museums which mostly focused on providing information to masses, conserving heritage and promoting ideas. In communist countries they were often used for manipulation and segregation of communities.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought along among others the fall of communism, hence many challenges for the cultural sector, which has become increasingly competitive and complex.

Museums have to go through dramatic changes because they need to adapt to the realities of the moment, characterised by high-tech and significant market segmentation. Therefore, museums will have to take into account the sophistication of their audience, trying to respond to all of its needs and requirements, gaining widespread appeal. In this respect, the post-modern museum has to be visitor-oriented, constantly checking the profile of its consumers, meeting their expectancies by applying new learning techniques.

Given the fact that its most important role is the educational one, the new museum has to be innovative and use communication technologies in order to send the message. Focusing on stories rather than on scientific information seems to be more efficient for the new generation of visitors. Interpretation techniques should be attractive and subtle in order to provoke the public rather than inform it.

Last but not least, the museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should serve as a community place. It should be a meeting space that invites to dialogue and debate in its attempt to facilitate the process of defining a system of values that lies at the core of the group's axiological system.

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