

MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

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READER

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Looking inside the "Cabinet" twenty-one years after

Stephen E. Weil's *Cabinet of curiosity. Inquiries into museums and their prospects* was first published in 1995, making it twenty-one years since this curious and brilliant mind organized part of his writings into a proper publication [1].

This Memorial Lecture may sound somewhat didactic to some of you, but I am convinced that it is important to review Weil's thoughts. The 24th General Conference of ICOM hosted by Italy, with the theme "Museums and Cultural Landscapes" provides a welcome opportunity to reconsider his thoughts. Weil's work was never translated into Italian.

Museums and Cultural Landscapes

I am sure this conference theme would have fascinated Weil, because in his meditations he outlined cultural landscapes in which museums have a specific and consistent role to play. His landscapes were mainly those of "advocacy" and "legacy", and we reflect on the role of museums in the cultural landscape, and as cultural landscapes, themselves.

What has changed in the years since Weil's meditation on museums and the museum field? How have things developed? Which are the main issues and questions that are on our agendas?

Nothing has changed and everything has, one might say: Nothing, because some issues are still debated and we might never hear the "final word" because these issues are at the very core of what the museum is and what it is for;

Everything, because the world has changed dramatically since Weil's departure, and so has the contextual cultural landscape.

Obviously, the degree of transformation of the museum field depends on the point of view from which one wishes to consider the surrounding context.

Nowadays, the points of view are many, because, despite globalization, they depend essentially on geopolitics, or, if we prefer, on a geo-cultural approach, an approach for understanding why acceptance and application of models may differ significantly around the world [2]. Nevertheless, a multi geo-cultural point of view is essential if museums wish to establish a fruitful dialogue with and between their visitors and their communities. In fact, our cities and our societies increasingly host greater numbers of people coming from different places and specific cultural backgrounds, who, with their fellow travellers, recreate a form of geo-cultural "aggregation" in the areas they moved to. Sometimes, this leads to tension with neighbouring communities. Museums, with their ability in collecting, elaborating and narrating histories, can definitely be places that encourage intercultural communication between people of different backgrounds and cultural heritage. In fact, the contribution museums can provide by assuming the role of "mediator" may help to reshape relationships among differing parts of society, passing on the results, and creating a better social environment.

Museums essentially political instruments

Devotion to such a mission – we cannot deny this – makes museums essentially political instruments with a political mission. Educational programs, reciprocal community engagement, planning for empowerment and wellbeing of visitors, are political acts. In some Western countries, these activities are carried out following Enlightenment's legacy. This is also reflected in ICOM's definition of "museum" as '... permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment'. Elsewhere, similar activities may engender a more nationalistic interpretation of cultural heritage. In fact, each geo-cultural group interprets and enables the mission of advocacy of its museums, exerting the right to decide what is considered valuable and why, in the attempt to harmonize, at least at a local level, "aboutness" and "isness" of art and culture [3] – as Weil termed it, reflecting on Susan Sontag's essay *On Style* (1965). The world has witnessed the saddest and most tragically distorting confirmation of this self-determination of cultural heritage since 2014: the systematic destruction, looting and pillage of some of the most relevant sites to human history. This was foreshadowed in 2001 by the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas [4]. On a completely different, less dreadful level, the flourishing of local and community museums, eco-museums, and other types strictly connected to their territories can be considered positive developments.

Often, these processes are sustained by good practice of marketing in the field of culture, as Weil ▶

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entreated. In fact, territorial marketing, urban design and the concept of urban bias [5], active citizenship and participatory democracy have contributed to the development of a trans-disciplinary museological approach. The newest trends here, a holistic comprehension and multifaceted vision, have provided multiple narratives for the museum subjects displayed. With this, today, we are closer to Weil's idea that museums should offer not a "banquet" of ready-made courses but a menu of ingredients among which visitors can choose what to prepare for themselves.

Museum Studies and Museology

If museums are to be "moderators" in this sense, must then people who work there be the facilitators of choice and guides of taste, as Weil envisaged? If it were so – in our time when specialization reached the infinitesimal degree and generalization moved beyond the physical dimension into the virtual, and the augmentation of virtual reality to the nth degree – Museum Studies courses should provide a broad range of skills for the students. This means that a single ideal profile for THE museum professional may remain a daydream, and interdisciplinary skills and staffs are required more than ever before. Although universities aim at doing their best, experience is still what makes the difference, helping to find the best possible solutions within varying cultural and technological contexts (i.e. in communication, restoration, analysis, archiving, not to mention innovations in conservation, intellectual property, reproduction, management of unpublished

materials, royalties and copyrights – Weil, the lawyer would have enjoyed working on these subjects).

As it is difficult to define one single appropriate professional profile, we might better recover the old term "museologist". This could be used to cover all the aspects of the multifaceted profession, as well as defining the "function" in society, and the space the person works in, but not specifically the professional activity. But would this term be acceptable or rather be misunderstood and misleading?

This leads us to the importance of professional language – the "power of wording". This professional language, besides using terms specifically related to museology, should be based on shared common concepts, like: democracy, human rights, common good, dialogue, participation, peace, solidarity, sharing, equality or inequality. These are "political" concepts which might need an advocate, and are dealt with by museums and museum people. Here, museums have the right to help elaborate – through "historical processes" – a strong legacy to society. Weil was aware that the ultimate goal of a museum is to improve people's lives, often dealing with the extremes of the human condition. In fact, he taught us that museums don't need to exhibit things that are palatable to everybody, because – and this is important to state – "art often bites".

The museum, a hub of creativity?

Museums may aim to have social impact and to be hubs of creativity in their cultural landscapes. They can provide the basis for social and cultural advancement of the communities, helping to create critical mass, when developing shared concepts while elaborating their contents [6]. But many museums have a very aesthetical approach, and most of them strive to find a balance between the two aspects.

Museums have always been called to foster art, both inside and outside their physical boundaries. This can raise questions about the acquisition of collections, historical, or contemporary, or purpose made, or about expropriation of art, and brings ethical principles to attention. These issues may concern restitution of looted artworks, the alienation of parts of or entire collections, or ownership of crowd-funded pieces of art, open data copyright and ownership as economy of knowledge teaches us – issues, which Weil might have been keen to meditate on.

How to evaluate museums?

We have become familiar with the idea that institutional growth and management behaviour is guided by numbers. But too often performance indicators lack certainty, while qualitative indicators have not yet been unequivocally decided upon. Some of the suggestions which Weil provided however are now considered in evaluation processes: ▶

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- Museological activities and museological services (as also asked for by Kenneth Hudson, another museum thinker whose centennial is this year)
- Length of visit, but also the impact of activities on visitors and communities
- Significance of the collections of different institutions (not all collections are equally important)
- Grants received
- Professional quality of personnel
- Staff education and lifelong learning programs
- Publications by the museum and its staff
- Salary and salary scales in comparison with other professions

These are issues we must learn to evaluate, but often we rely more on the perceptions or sentiments of visitors on these subjects than we do on objectivity of statistics.

Funding is still at a standstill, certainly in the case of the public sector. New models for private sponsoring have been developed. But do they work? How can this be measured effectively? Will we ever stop demonising private money? Some countries are trying to find effective ways of integrating public and private spheres. Will we ever find a common strategy for public funding and the private sector in order to sustain museums as part of the welfare of a community? Also here, geo-cultural barriers and peculiarities suggest not forcing a "prefab" model without analysing the reality on the spot, even if the model has performed well elsewhere. Museums can be profitable, but for whom? Museums can play an active part in economic recovery, on the local, national and international levels, including

manufacturing processes besides the tourism industry. This can be a win/win situation. However, in many countries, this is not the case. For example in Italy, this remains problematic as the dialogue between the many cultural sites and tourism industry is worsened by the complex topography and the conservative condition/politics.

Thus, questions remain unanswered: Will the time ever arrive when the past will help shape a better future through the interpretation of the present, and, can museums be the best advocates for this legacy, helping to promote democracy and dialogues between cultures?

These issues become apparent when looking back into the "cabinet" under the guidance of Stephen E. Weil, with sharp eye, brilliant mind and his all-encompassing curiosity.

Notes

[1] Stephen E. Weil, *A Cabinet of Curiosity, Inquiries into Museums and Their Prospects* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); *Making Museums Matter* (Smithsonian Books, 2002), *Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations* (Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 1990), *Beauty and the Beasts: On Museums, Art, the Law and the Market* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983).

[2] Weil's concepts can be termed 'liberal American'. We cannot overlook the difficulties which a market oriented "American" approach is causing in Western societies, least in other parts of the world.

[3] Weil 1995, 47–50.

[4] We may condemn such behaviour, but we cannot deny that even in most remote archaeological times, sacking and destruction occurred with the aim of affirming the power of the conquering civilization over other cultural entities and expressions.

[5] The concept "Urban bias" refers to an economic argument according to which development is hampered by groups, who, by their central location in urban areas, are able to pressure governments to protect their interests, a structural condition of over urbanization (cf. Michael Lipton, *Why poor people stay poor: urban bias in world development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Greg Downey, 'Being Human in Cities: Phenotypic Bias from Urban Niche Construction', *Current Anthropology*, 57, Supplement 13 (2016), 52–64.

[6] Cf. Richard Sandell, 'Communities and Museum Consequences', in *Memory and Creativity = Social Change, ICOM Memorial Lectures 2013 Reader*, edited by Hadwig Kraeutler [Vienna 2014; <http://icom-oesterreich.at/publikationen/icom-memorial-lectures-2013-reader>], 16–20.

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