

THE Museum REVIEW

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1 - 2019

WWW.THEMUSEUMREVIEW.ORG

ISSN 2574-0296



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The Museum Review

www.TheMuseumReview.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.rogerspublishing.org

Cover photo: Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, following a two-year renovation. Reopened 2018. Image: Sarah Brancato, Cincinnati Museum Center.

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The “liquid museum”: a relational museum that seeks to adapt to today’s society

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Keywords “Liquid modernity”; Society; “Liquid museum”; Governance

Abstract If society remains in continuous movement, abandoning its structure to surrender the constant flow of current times (Bauman, 2000), what is the situation of museums? And their projects? Is it worth thinking about the concept of a museum that is not stagnant in its reality and that seeks to keep up with the fast pace of time and society? The present article explores the idea of a “liquid museum” proposed by Van Oost (2012), Cameron (2015), and Marras et al (2016): a museological paradigm that seeks to accompany Bauman's “liquid modernity” (2000: 12) and relate to today’s society. The objective is to reconcile the notion of the “liquid museum” with an effective museological practice, in which the principles of cooperation and inclusion of society in the functioning of museums are essential factors for the increase of true liquid work.

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This article was published on October 17, 2019 at www.themuseumreview.org

We begin this article with a serious and problematic question: from a social point of view, what should a museum in the 21st century be? Museums can be perceived and defined in different ways, as entities that are not produced in the same way at all times, nor having a single and fixed mode of operation.

Museums have undergone profound changes in the context of postmodern society, currently occupying an ambivalent and contradictory position on issues such as knowledge and power, ideology and authority, identity and difference, permanence and transition (Van Oost 2012; Cameron 2015). The growth of the number of museums, together with the diversification of their forms and contents, their theories and practices, as well as the revision of their frontiers with other cultural institutions, are factors that promote a deep reflection on these institutions in the contemporary world; relating their identity function to their role of social anchoring (Bennett 2005).

Therefore, the conceptualization and theorization of museums are constantly debated and replaced by new premises that concern the new configurations of society in the contemporary world (Cameron 2015; Marras et al. 2016). Thus, the historical path of museums has been marked by different ways in which the conceptual elements that define them, their purposes, the strategies and expository modalities, the activities developed, or the relationship they establish with the public. These differences are a result of the nature of museums as complex cultural institutions, with a certain historical, social, and political framework, and which has implications for the negotiation, construction, and reinvention of their cultural meanings today (Appleton 2007).

The development of a field such as Museology depends on the continual revision of its foundations and premises - and a renewed critical perspective on its production. This process allows us to identify the contributions of the field and to recognize the interpretive fluctuations that enrich the structures, facilitating the interfaces between what is said and the new approaches of those who are involved.

In the last twenty years, Museology has been presenting a systematic and consistent development as a field (Chiu 2015). The definition of a museum provided by ICOM and UNESCO is the reference of the plurality of approaches to the museum sector. It is a definition that has evolved since 1946, in the need for greater precision and comprehensiveness (Marras et al. 2016). According to the 2007 version, presented at the 21st General Assembly in Vienna, the museum can be understood as “a permanent non-profit institution, at the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, communicates and exposes the material and immaterial heritage of humankind and its surrounding environment for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment.”

In this way, a museum can be seen as a public institution that provides services, where transformation occurs corresponding to the characteristics of present-day society. Growing competition in the cultural field on a global scale, demands of political powers concerned with the decline of the cultural capital of public cultural institutions, and inevitably, the new technological advances brings new and constant challenges to these institutions (Van Oost 2012; Cameron 2015; Marras et al. 2016).

Following the definition of a museum provided by ICOM, we could propose that the museum can be found within the conceptual framework of “New Museology” (Desvallées and Mairesse 2011, 62), especially when this movement tells us that the institution must go beyond its walls and expand to the social environment. In this case, New Museology contributed to the understanding that a museum needs to establish a relationship between territory-heritage-society (Desvallées and Mairesse 2011, 62).

The emergence of a new sensibility in the field of museology is observed with the introduction of a new function of the museum: the social function. This perspective introduces new focuses of interest in the field of museology that lead, instead, to a different museum design: a dynamic institution at the service of society and its development, centered on social intervention (Van Oost 2012; Marras et al. 2016).

However, the reality is that we do not seem to find a consistent clarification about the question that we started this article: from a social point of view, what should a museum in the 21st century be? Two major issues arise with this question and can help us to structure a concrete answer: first, how can we define the current society? And, consequently, what type of museological institution can be associated with this society?

Adopting the theory of the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), we can consider that the present society is a collective that is inscribed in a “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000, 12), a time that is precise by its “fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change” (2000, 83). In other words, we can see society as a collective that is characterized by the fragmentation and hybridism of traditional, modern, and postmodern worlds, by the coexistence of continuities and discontinuities, and by the generalization of concepts such as emergence, creation, reinvention, contestation, negotiation, and transformation (Bauman 2000).

Returning to the second question above, if society does not cease to be in continuous movement, abandoning its structure to surrender to the constant flow of current times, in what situation are the museums, their definition, and their projects? Is it worth thinking about the concept of a museum that is not stagnant in its reality and that seeks to keep up with the fast pace of society? If so, what forms should the museum learn from the proliferation of permanently mobile and ephemeral dynamics?

According to Hooper-Greenhill (2000), much of the literature on museums conceives the identity of these cultural institutions as a continuous and assumed manifestation from the cabinets of curiosities to the present day. The modern (solid) museum would, therefore, date back to the Renaissance: an institution that would be consolidated as a space of accumulation and demonstration of material objects with the contingent renegotiation of the meanings of the past. Disciplinarily organized, the museum would act as a device of power, controlling and supervising the subjects and objects, gathering, sorting, locating, labeling, cataloging, preserving, and exposing (Marras et al. 2016). The origin of the museum corresponds to a broad civilizational movement, assumed systematically in the sense of public appropriation of the common heritage, which is at the origin of the democratic concept of contemporary museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2004).

However, from the development of the sciences and technologies, the Industrial Revolution, the breakdown of war scenarios (World Wars I and II), and the consequent empowerment of a liberal capitalist system (Bauman 2000), contemporary cultural institutions - of which the museological institution stands out - felt the urgency of promoting new forms of action that justified their role in society, not just the premise of progress and knowledge as an existential condition (Bennett 2005). At the same time, these changes accelerated the processes of modernity and the strategies carried out brought about a movement of eternal modernization and improvement of these institutions as sociocultural spaces.

At a time when questions are intensifying about its capacity to make itself understood - questioning its social purpose and public projection, its internal functioning and its historical legitimacy and even its own authenticity and relevance - the museum should initiate a continuous questioning about its addressee, using practices that aim to open the institution

abroad, attract a broader society, seek its complicity and create a space of participation and protagonism.

We believe, therefore, that the current museum must find or construct its definition based on the understanding of contemporary society. Thus, if a human can be seen as a product of time and if we consider that this time can be understood from the “liquid modernity” of Bauman (2000, 12), by reasoning prolongation, the museological institution itself must rise in this temporal and social reality. It is in this current context that we will contextualize the museum transformation and transition, an evolution between a past and a present, between a supposed tradition and a presumed contemporaneity.

In this scenario, we can associate Bauman's theory of “liquid modernity” (2000, 12) to museological reality: if by analogy we consider that in the “solid modernity” (Bauman 2000, 7) the modern (solid) museum manifested itself as a hermetic, fixed and stable element, that holds knowledge corresponding to the structure of its collection in its coherence and objectivity; in the “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000, 12) due to instability, uncertainty, ephemerality, discontinuous and chaotic nature, we suggest the need for museological institutions to assert themselves as a liquid element, a space that aims to establish a commitment and an active and fluid relationship with today’s society (Van Oost 2012; Cameron 2015; Marras et al. 2016) (Figure 1).

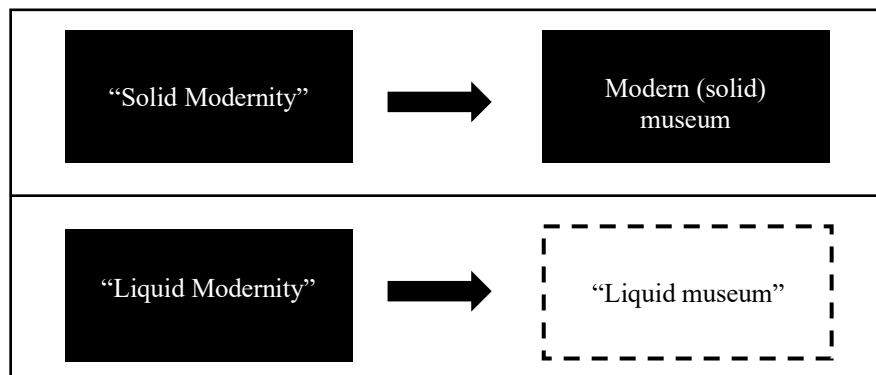


Figure 1. Correlation between types of modernity and museological typologies.

According to Cameron, the modern (or solid) museum would be “based on hierarchies, dualisms between culture/nature, truth perceptions, objectivity, certainty and modernity experience; linear forms of communication and production of scientific and social facts that resulted in an institution largely separated from society operating above it as a project focused on past values and practices” (2015, 345). In this way, the “liquid museum” stands as a project of postmodernity, which aims to keep up with the pace of the accelerated changes of society, trying to integrate them in its museological exercise. In other words, if society is seen as a liquid product (Bauman 2000), the museum will also have to lose its solid structure to adapt to the social reality.

In what corresponds to its performance, the “liquid museum” can be interpreted as a structure whose constituents seek to produce and manifest constant liquidity. This process of liquefaction, which represents the institution's attempt to establish more horizontal and less hierarchical relations between the museum, its collections and patrimony, and society,

corresponds to the constant updating of the practices, techniques, theoretical foundations, and ideological aspects of the institution (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. "Mobile Museum" project. Carlos Machado Museum, Azores.



Figure 3. Exhibition "Coming Out. What if the museum went out?" 2016, National Museum of Ancient Art, Lisbon.

A "liquid museum" is, therefore, an institution with porous borders and as such, clearly relational: a dynamic force that refuses any institutional rigidity and seeks to organize multiple "capacities, opinions, values and experiences and different rationalities, technologies and techniques that enable their action" (Cameron 2015, 357).

However, an important factor of the "liquid museum" is its governance model. In this dynamic, there are two types of governmental actions that can be adopted by those who have the

power: a traditional administration that focuses on unilateral action in which government and society interact separately, and an updated administration which allows operational freedom for institutions to work more closely with society. Examining the modes of administration in relation to the museum typologies, it is possible to observe that the practices of traditional administration present as a corollary to a so-called modern (solid) museum, and an updated administration seems to outline the development of a “liquid museum” (Figure 4).

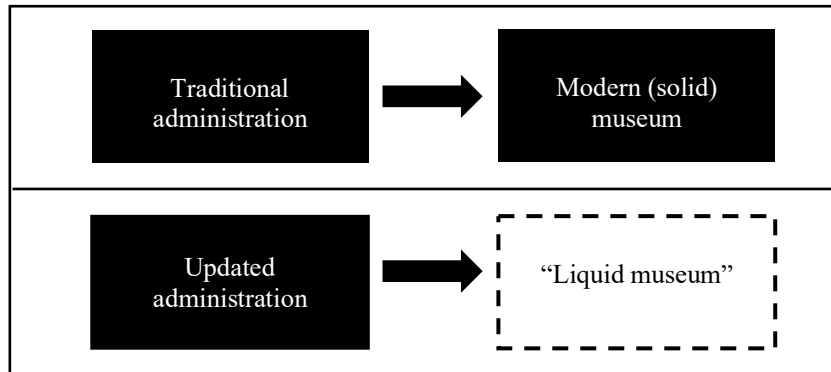


Figure 4. Correlation between types of administration and museological typologies.

When a traditional administration is cultivated, factors such as the hegemony of institutional procedures are manifested, total and hermetic dependence on the political decisions of the guardianship without consideration for contributions coming from outside the organization, a concern to ensure mere existence as opposed to achieving goals, the distance from citizenship that is seen as passive, and the hierarchy of the institution can create a rigid and inflexible organization (Cameron 2015).

In an updated administration, a “liquid museum” can emerge, stimulating factors such as the perception of social change and the need to adapt to the contemporary conditions, the reconceptualization of the institutional social function, the process of institutional democratization, an approach to people and institutional openness to the environment and society, the emphasis on participation and involvement of the individual, the enhancement of the institution as an instrument for the creation of personal and critical consciences, the emphasis on service delivery, social co-responsibility, the use of new information and communication technologies to the individual, and the institutional contribution to social development.

Therefore, if the liquid hypothesis advocated here approaches the fluidity of the museological institution and the extension of its performance and social position, an updated administration presupposes the adoption of a new philosophy of political action centered on the principle of horizontal and solidarity relations between rulers and groups of individuals promoting, as a last resort, the capacity for sustained territorial development. Following this approach, we can highlight two significant aspects that come directly from the principle of an updated administration and which are indispensable for the exercise of an institution that wants to be liquid: decentralization and autonomy.

Decentralization seems to be a democratic requirement of contemporaneity, and this can be affirmed at the center of administration action. It will be through decentralization of decision-making that the distance between power and the individual is reduced, stimulating the proximity between them and the effectiveness of services in the pursuit of the interests of individuals while encouraging their participation. In terms of autonomy, and following decentralization, we can see that from the implementation of a growing autonomy, reinforcing the idea that administration is not an end *per se*, but rather a means to achieve the democratic objectives of development. Autonomy may lead to the promotion of the emancipation of society and individuals in their human development process centered around the question of identity.

The museological action of this “liquid museum” should reflect the work and effort of the museum to adapt to today’s society, making sure that their involvement allows them to provide the means of recognizing themselves. In this model of a museum, the entire staff plays a major role as actors of territorial development, being activists of social action that the first obligation of the museum and its professionals is to detect and respond to society correctly and effectively.

Distancing itself from the action promoted by the traditional (solid) museum model, the museological action promoted by the “liquid museum” reveals other concerns that incite the participation and involvement of society, serving as an intervention tool capable of mobilizing efforts for resolution of common problems within society. Although in this proposal of a liquid model spaces and collections do not necessarily fall into the secondary plane, the individual and/or collective person assumes the primary role in the museological process.

Anchored in the context of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000, 12) and the context of an updated administration which relays decentralization and autonomy, the “liquid museum” competes for the image of a disconnected space in any form or rigid structure, a naked space that becomes changeable and constantly adaptable. Hence the importance of a current reflection on the image that the museum tries to formulate of itself, but also an observation on the image that the museum tries to produce in the actual society.

For this reason, to feel properly represented and provisioned, the “liquid museum” will have to correspond in a logical follow-up to the expectations of today’s society. Essentially, we consider that the museum should open itself to the social environment that surrounds, allowing people to participate democratically in the cultural heritage (material and intangible) that belongs to it: a museum that does not live in parallel with society, but rather seeks to submerge in her daily life (Cameron 2015). Such a situation will enable museums to organize, among other possibilities, more interesting exhibitions (the “radical themes” referred by Cameron 2015) and achieve the public interest for their financing (Marras et al. 2016).

Several intellectuals declared the end of museums (Harrison and Wood 1992); the truth is that the idea of the museum should be radically transformed. A transformation that is guided by the constant revision of transition and transformation which society can be associated with. To address the question presented at the beginning of this paper: from a social point of view, what should a museum in the 21st century be? we understand that the “liquid museum” may not present itself as an effective solution - there will always be other ways that permeate

museums' capacity for reinvention - rather as a plausible response that accompanies contemporaneity and to understand museology in a more creative way.

We conclude this article with a well-known Chinese proverb: "When the wind of change blows, some people erect walls, others build windmills." Based on this adage, we may consider that although many museums may not have the same capacity to adapt to the constant changes of the present times, such institutions should oppose the construction of walls that negate its capacity to reinvent itself in the face of an unstable present and an increasingly uncertain future. It is in this context that, we can also metaphorize the "liquid museum" as a windmill, an institution that seeks to respond to the challenges of the proliferation of an unstoppable life and builds its own identity from the continuous relational process it seeks to establish with the external environment, more specifically, with the social environment.

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