M COMMS

**MUSEUM COMMUNICATIONS
AT A CROSSROADS:
EMPOWERING OUR
COMMUNITIES IN TIMES
OF CHANGE AND CRISIS**

COMMS

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At the time of the conference, the International Committee operated as ICOM MPR (International Committee for Marketing and Public Relations). As of May 1, 2025, it has been renamed ICOM COMMS (International Committee for Communications, Marketing and Audience Engagement), in line with ICOM's initiative to adopt clearer and more inclusive committee names. The present publication reflects this change.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the articles are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the official views or positions of the Conference Organizing Committee or the Editorial Committee of this publication.

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MUSEUM COMMUNICATIONS AT A CROSSROADS:
EMPOWERING OUR COMMUNITIES
IN TIMES OF CHANGE AND CRISIS

PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
TBILISI, GEORGIA
5-7 DECEMBER, 2024

PUBLISHED IN 2025

CONTENT

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE OF THE ICOM COMMS 2024 ANNUAL CONFERENCE:
Museum Communications at a Crossroads:
Empowering Our Communities in Times of Change and Crisis
and ICOM COMMS Board Members

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EDITORIAL

This volume presents the proceedings of the ICOM COMMS 2024 Annual Conference, *"Museum Communications at a Crossroads: Empowering Our Communities in Times of Change and Crisis,"* held in Tbilisi, Georgia, from 5–7 December 2024.

Organized jointly by ICOM COMMS, ICOM Georgia, the Tbilisi Museums Union, and Academia Europaea Tbilisi Hub, the conference gathered professionals from diverse regions to explore how museum communication can respond to the complex challenges of our time.

The papers and reflections included here represent a wide spectrum of perspectives, addressing themes such as digital transformation, resilience in crisis, community engagement, and the social responsibility of museums. Together, they reflect the vitality and commitment of a global network working to ensure that museums remain trusted spaces for learning, empathy, and exchange.

This publication aims to serve as both a record of the discussions held in Tbilisi and a resource for continuing dialogue and collaboration within the international museum community.

– On behalf of the Organizing Committee

FOREWORD

Deborah Ziska, *United States*
Chair, ICOM COMMS (2022-2025)

Little did we realize in the early stages of planning our workshop and conference how prescient we would be in synchronizing our themes with the location.

Our annual conference, "Museum Communications at a Crossroads: Empowering Our Communities in Times of Change and Crisis" was jointly organized by ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR) and ICOM Georgia with Tbilisi Museums Union, and Academia Europaea Tbilisi Regional Hub, and hosted by the Georgian Museum of Fine Arts, December 4-7, in Tbilisi, Georgia.

We knew our meeting would occur during a turbulent period for the region. Russia had brutally invaded Ukraine two years earlier, while Georgia has been under expanding Russification of its territory, government, and cultural heritage since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Museum colleagues across the region are valiantly documenting and protecting their collections and cultural heritage, and countering false narratives about their national history and cultural identity.

I arrived in Tbilisi in late November for a joint workshop and conference on "Heritage Resilience: Safeguarding Cultural Legacy in Crisis Zones," with ICOM Europe, ICOM Georgia, and others as nightly mass protests supporting democracy and entry into the European Union began to take shape on Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Parliament Building, directly across the street from our venue, the Georgian Museum of Fine Arts.

As worldwide news outlets reported the harsh police response to the protests, ICOM COMMS board members made a conscious choice to proceed as planned with our pre-conference workshop, "Everything in a Museum Communicates," and conference planned for the following week. Nearly half of 32 registrants took part in our intensive two-day workshop hosted by the Georgian National Museum. Participants were treated to a special tour of the nearby Lado Gudiashvili Foundation given by the artist's great granddaughter.

Despite the ominous news reports, 77 attendees, about half of those who had registered, arrived in Tbilisi in time for our opening reception at the Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum. Presentations and discussions over the next two days at the Georgian Museum of Fine

Arts gained profound resonance as they shined a light on the realities of crisis management, the fragility of cultural heritage amid societal upheaval, and the need for museums and cultural institutions to act as pillars of resilience during uncertain times.

Keynote speaker Professor Dr. David Lordkipanadze, world-famous anthropologist and General Director of the

Georgian National Museum, discussed building brands on biocultural heritage at the nexus of culture, science, and exploration. Maria Vlachou, Director, Access Culture, Portugal, explored paradoxes of democracy and responses to fascism and populism.

Moderated panel discussions on the following subthemes further illuminated topics presented by thirty speakers from 25 countries:

- When Digital Projects Foster Dialogue, Collaboration, and Community Engagement
- Museum Initiatives in Conflict Zones
- Fostering Purpose
- Communicating Social Justice in the Culture Wars
- Building Community Resilience
- Safe Spaces in Museums

ICOM COMMS sponsored seven travel grantees, who added valuable perspectives. They are Dariia Sukhostavets, Vladyslava Dermanska, and Maryna Kutsenko from Ukraine; Mohammad Hekmat and Niloofar Yazdkhasti from Iran; Maria Amalia Britez Rodriguez from Paraguay; and Jessica Ramirez Rivera from Mexico.

We are deeply grateful to Lana Karaia, Chair, ICOM Georgia; Dr. Nini Sanadiradze, then the General Director of Tbilisi Museums Union; and the many volunteers in Tbilisi who made us feel welcome during their own national crisis. We thank Tamar Sopromadze of Blue Shield Georgia for the informative pop-up exhibition, presentation, and videos about preservation of intangible heritage of internally displaced people in Georgia following the 2008 invasion by Russia.

I am also deeply grateful to the dedication of ICOM COMMS board members Natia Khuluzauri (Georgia), Luis Marcelo Mendes (Brasil), and Anna Dentoni (Italy), who spent many hours to ensure the success of our workshop and conference, as well as to newly elected board members Carolien Mertens (Belgium) and Niloofar Yazdkhasti (Iran) who helped moderate. Even though they were unable to join us, our new treasurer Vinod Harikumar (United Arab Emirates) managed post-conference finances and travel grants and our new secretary Carolyn Mwenda (Kenya) produced the minutes from our hybrid board meeting.

While daily protests in Tbilisi opposing Russian influence in Georgia's democracy concurrent with ongoing destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine and Georgia resonated deeply with everyone who made

the decision to attend the conference, our excursion to Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archaeological Museum and cultural heritage sites, including Bagrati Cathedral, gave all of us a deeper appreciation for Georgia's long and complex history.

We hope that our themes resonated as our streaming video over two days received some 230 views on YouTube. Presentations and keynotes are accessible on our YouTube page at @icom-comms.

Our biggest takeaway might be how important it is to continue to communicate and engage with our communities to prepare for massive transformation in the twenty-first century. ICOM provides us with many opportunities, such as workshops and conferences, to strengthen the capacity of museums around the world to respond to change and crisis both natural and man-made.

PROGRAM

MUSEUM COMMUNICATIONS AT A CROSSROADS: EMPOWERING OUR COMMUNITIES IN TIMES OF CHANGE AND CRISIS

A JOINT CONFERENCE FROM ICOM MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS, ICOM GEORGIA, AND TBILISI MUSEUMS UNION, WITH ACADEMIA EUROPAEA TBILISI REGIONAL HUB AND GEORGIAN MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

**5 – 7 DECEMBER 2024
GEORGIAN MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
TBILISI, GEORGIA**

3-4 December
Everything in a Museum Communicates Workshop takes place at other venues

Wednesday, 4 December
15:00-19:00   On-site Registration and Check-In:
Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum
Address: 7 Ivane Javakhishvili str.

Tours:
16:00 – Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum
Address: 7 Ivane Javakhishvili str.

17:00 – Kote and Soso Tsereteli Museum
Address: 2 Dimitri Uznadze str.

17:00 – Galaktion Tabidze House Museum
Address: 4 Kote Marjanishvili str.

19:30   Opening Reception for Conference/Closing Reception for Workshop
Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum, address: 7 Ivane Javakhishvili str.

Thursday, 5 December
9:00-10:00   Welcome Coffee & Registration
On-site Registration and Check-In:

10:00-10:30   Opening Remarks
Lana Karaia, Chair, ICOM Georgia
Dr. Nini Sanadiradze, General Director of Tbilisi Museums Union in 2026-2025
Deborah Ziska, United States; Chair, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR), introduces

10:30-11:30   Keynote Session
GNM: At the Nexus of Culture, Science, and Exploration –
Building Brands on Our Biocultural Heritage
Prof. Dr. David Lordkipanidze, General Director of the
Georgian National Museum; Academic Director of AE Tbilisi Hub

Moderator: Natia Khuluzauri, Georgia; Board Member, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

11:30-13:00   Session One | When Digital Projects Foster Dialogue, Collaboration,
and Community Engagement

Moderator: Niloofar Yazdkhasti, Iran; Vice Chair, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)
Transformative Frameworks for Sustainable Futures: The Role of
Curators as Systems Designers in the 4th Industrial Revolution
Christiana Kazakou, Greece/UK

Examining Place and Action Memories through Experience and Games
Ebru Güç, Turkey

Harnessing Data Tracking for Museums: Promoting Civic Engagement
and Innovative Communication
Manuel Scortichini, Italy

From Artifacts to Experiences: Transforming Museums into
Interactive Centers
Alok Bhasin and Puja Anand, India

Enhancing Inclusivity and Dialogue in Museum Theatre through
Digital Transformation
Foteini Venieri, Greece

13:00-14:00   Lunch at Museum | Video projection

Intangible Heritage of Occupied Didi Liakhvi Valley – Georgia (18:00 min.)
Accompanies exhibit on display: *Traditions of the Great Liakhvi Valley:
Village Kekhvi.* The four video sketches (Wrestling, Fishing, Beer Brewing,
Angels Day) were designed to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of
the occupied Tskhinvali region. The project is organized by the National
Committee of Blue Shield of Georgia and financially supported by a grant
from the U.S. Embassy and Cultural Emergency Response
(CER, the Netherlands). https://blueshield.ge/?cat=943&lang=en

14:00-15:30 Session Two – Museum Initiatives in Conflict Zones

Moderator: Deborah Ziska, United States; Chair, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

Engagement in Museums Dealing with Difficult Pasts: A Focus on
Conflictorium and Partition Museum
Aakanksha Tated, India

Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve as a Symbol of Unity for Displaced
Communities
Mariam Lomsadze and Salome Kasabishvili, Georgia

Building Bridges: Collaborating with Museums and Community
Centers to Safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage of Displaced Communities
Tamari Sopromadze, Georgia

Shadows and Walls: Hanenko Museum During War – Ukraine (36:37 min.)
In the documentary short film, an empty museum is documented, where
tours, concerts, exhibitions, and performances used to take place.
Museum staff share how the museum continues to operate during the
war and describe the initial days/months of the full-scale invasion.
Production: MIR&CO PRODUCTION. This film was created with the
support of the Ukrainian Cultural Fund.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQmGF9OvI8o&t=757s

Documentation and Data Transparency as Safety Policy
Dariia Sukhostavets, Ukraine

15:30-16:00 Coffee Break

16:00-17:30 Session Three – Fostering Purpose

Moderator: Natia Khuluzauri, Georgia; Board Member, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

Strategies and Practices to Overcome the Obstacles that Museum and
Science Centres Face in Advancing Sustainable and Regenerative Development
Divyeshkumar Gameti, India

From Soviet Memory to Banksy, Contemporary Street Art Icon
Nino Akhvlediani and Marika Babunashvili, Georgia

On the Construction of the 'Universal' Audience in Artistic Communication
Timothy deVries, Canada

Effectiveness of the Exhibition's Communication Technologies:
Vera Pagava Exhibition
Anna Verulashvili, Georgia

Museum Branding with Purpose – Stand Out for What You Stand For
Cecilia Martin Abad, Spain/UK

17:30-18:00 Everything in a Museum Communicates – Workshop Takeaways
ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR) Board Members Natia Khuluzauri,
Georgia, and Luis Marcelo Mendes, Brazil

Instructions for the Second Day
Lana Karaia, Chair ICOM Georgia

Friday, 6 December

9:00-10:00 Welcome Coffee

10:00-10:15 Welcome and Opening Remarks
Host: Lana Karaia, Georgia, Chair ICOM Georgia
Remarks: Deborah Ziska, United States, Chair COMMS (then ICOM MPR)

10:15-11:30 Keynote Session
How Far Does Your Tolerance Go?
Maria Vlachou, Executive Director, Acesso Cultura/Access Culture, Portugal

Moderator: Luis Marcelo Mendes, Brazil; Board Member, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

11:30-13:00 Presentations and Debate – Communicating Social Justice in the Culture Wars

Communicating Social Justice in the Culture Wars
Anna Cornelius, United Kingdom

Guardians of Democracy: How Tbilisi Museums Union Inspires
Responsible Action and Fosters Democratic Values
Nini Sanadiradze, Georgia

Addressing the Rise in Right-wing Extremism in Museum Education
Michaela Smidová and Eliška Pekárková, Czech Republic

13:00-14:00 Lunch at Museum

Video:
Intangible Heritage of Occupied Didi Valley – Georgia (18:00)

14:00-15:30   Session Four – Building Community Resilience

Moderator: Anna Dentoni, Italy, Board Member, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

The KBR Museum's Journey Toward Accessibility in a
Heritage-Listed Building
Carolien Mertens, Belgium

Museums as A Mechanism for Community Integration
Emma Loosley Leeming, UK, Mikheil Tsereteli and
Darejan Dzotsenidze, Georgia

Empowering Crisis-Affected Communities through Museum-Based
Initiative in Iran
Mohammad Hekmat, Iran

Connecting Past and Present: The Iran Dolls Museum's Engagement with
Women's Rights and Community Dialogue
Niloofar Yazdkhasti, Iran

Empowering Communities through Sustainable Museum Practices: A
Response to Global Challenges
Md. Arafat Ali, Bangladesh

15:30-16:00   Coffee Break

16:00-17:30   Session Five – Safe Spaces in Museums

Moderator: Carolien Mertens, Belgium; Board Member ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

Affective Strategies to Achieve Safe Spaces in Museums: Citizen Labs in Mexico
Jessica Ramírez Rivera, Mexico

Embracing a Mixed Pricing Strategy to Overcome Financial Barriers for
Museum Visitors Amid Inflation
Lingjun Li, United Kingdom

Cháke Bicho, MuCi's Exhibition that Promotes Environmental
Education to its Community
María Amalia Brítez Rodríguez, Paraguay

Huella M: Model Framework for Sustainable Museum Management
Julio González Liendo, Colombia

People Make Museums: Artequin Museum
Roberto Torres, Chile

17:30-18.30   Conference Takeaways
With travel grantees Dariia Sukhostavets, Ukraine; Vladyslava
Dermanska, Ukraine; Maryna Kutsenko, Ukraine; Mohammad Hekmat,
Iran; Niloofar Yazdkhasti, Iran; Maria Amalia Britez Rodriguez,
Paraguay and Jessica Ramirez Rivera, Mexico

Moderator: Deborah Ziska, United States; Chair, ICOM COMMS
(then ICOM MPR)

Closing Remarks
Lana Karaia, Chair ICOM
Deborah Ziska, Chair, ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR)

Saturday and Sunday, 7-8 December
Excursion around Wes Georgia: Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archeological
Museum, City of Kutaisi and Bagrati Cathedral

KEYNOTES

Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia successor of the first museum in Caucasus opened in 1852

BIOGRAPHY

Prof. Dr. David Lordkipanidze is General Director of Georgian National Museum and Academic Director of Academia Europaea Tbilisi Regional Hub.

His scientific interests are related to the issues of human evolution and natural environment history. He is the author of more than 280 scientific publications, including dozens of articles in journals such as Nature, Science Magazine, and PNAS.

Prof. Lordkipanidze led the discovery of the earliest known human remains outside of Africa in Dmanisi, Georgia. He also directed the multidisciplinary research program confirming the oldest wine traces on the ceramic vessels found on the Neolithic settlements of Gadachrili Gora, Georgia, dating back around 6000 BC.

He has over 30 years of experience in interdisciplinary research and management of cultural heritage projects in Georgia, Germany, France, Uzbekistan, and Kuwait.

Under his leadership seven museums of the Georgian National Museum were renovated and three of them were nominated for The European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) by the European Museums Forum (EMF) under the auspices of the Council of Europe. In 2023, Vani Archeological Museum received the Silletto Prize for Community Participation and Engagement.

Exhibitions of the Georgian National Museum were presented in Europe and USA.

From 2007, he has been a foreign member of the National Academy of Sciences (USA), corresponding member of German Archaeological Institute (2008), member of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences (2009), member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts (2010), member of the Academy of Europe ((Academia Europaea), 2011), Humboldt Prize (the Humboldt Research Award) by Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (2014), and founding member of the International Academy of Prehistory and Protohistory (2022).

AT THE NEXUS OF CULTURE, SCIENCE, AND EXPLORATION - BUILDING BRANDS ON OUR BIOCULTURAL HERITAGE

Prof. David Lordkipanidze,
General Director of Georgian National Museum and Academic Director of Academia Europaea Tbilisi Regional Hub

We argue that modern-day Georgia offers a unique opportunity to transform research and knowledge about natural and human heritage into a driver of national competitiveness. Georgia is an ideal place to study the strategic connections between heritage, transdisciplinary scientific research on natural and cultural development, technological advancement, innovation, and society's efforts to achieve sustainable improvements in human well-being.

We discuss the challenges and opportunities of transforming bicultural heritage into a source of competitiveness for Georgia, using the Georgian National Museum as an example—an institution at the nexus of culture, science, and exploration. The Museum has undergone massive renovation and faced many challenges since its establishment in 2004.

Introduction

Georgia has a remarkable ability to rise above challenges, emerging stronger after every crisis. This is more than a saying – our history and experience prove it. The story of the Georgian National Museum mirrors that of our country: we have achieved much, but not without mistakes and obstacles. Recent years have been especially difficult, yet these challenges have strengthened us. Rather than complain, we focus on finding solutions, building a strong team, and developing a recognizable brand rooted in innovation, resilience, and scientific credibility.

We set out to create more than a traditional museum. After the collapse of the Soviet system, most changes occurred in the economy, politics, or military affairs – rarely in cultural institutions. Yet we saw the need for change and began building a more efficient, modern institution. As an evolutionary biologist, I have always seen the network model – so fundamental in nature, where even the simplest cells form interconnected systems – as the best way to ensure institutional adaptability and resilience. We united under the Georgian

The Biodiversity Exhibition at the S. Janashia Museum of Georgia pays tribute to the Museum of the Caucasus, referencing its original scenography and featuring showcases from the 19th-century nature exhibition.

National Museum to build a network, believing this model is far more effective than outdated vertical management – especially for a country like ours.

We began by asking fundamental questions: Why do we need museums, and what stories should they tell? Rather than focusing solely on technicalities like logos or the minutiae of museum operations, we considered how to approach challenges, find solutions, and build partnerships. These are the questions that have guided our journey, and throughout this paper, I will share examples of how our networked, science-driven philosophy has shaped the museum's development and impact.

Institutional Vision

The history of the Georgian National Museum began in 1852, alongside the founding of Georgia's first museum, library, and opera theatre. One of our current buildings – the National Gallery – was originally the Museum of Military Glory. Our collections, rooted in the historic "Museum of the Caucasus," span different periods and regions, attracting scholars from across the Caucasus for research. We have preserved this legacy, from ethnographic and zoological collections to original display cases.

During the Soviet era, Georgia had hundreds of museums and about 300 research institutes, though many lacked clear goals or performance measures. In 2003–2004, we unified museums and research centers under one institution – the Georgian National Museum. Inspired by models like the Smithsonian, Berlin's Museum Island, and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, our goal was to position Georgia on the global

cultural map, bringing overdue transformation to the cultural sector. With ambitious goals, we developed the "Museum Street" project with German colleagues, inspired by Berlin's Museum Island. While not all ideas could be realized immediately, we remain committed to our vision, knowing that perseverance brings long-term results.

The transformation of the Georgian National Museum since 2004 has gone beyond simply preserving collections. Our aim is to create an institution with many functions – like a nexus or a "smartphone" for culture – where tradition and innovation coexist. Our encyclopedic collections, spanning from prehistory to modern times, are central to this vision.

We see museums not as static repositories of objects, but as living organisms that thrive through networks – networks of people, disciplines, and ideas. Breaking down organizational barriers, we foster collaboration within our institution and with partners in academia, government, creative industries, and the public. The unification process required building trust, establishing shared goals, and developing new systems for communication and decision-making. We worked to ensure that every member of our network, from renowned scientists to regional curators, could contribute meaningfully to the museum's mission.

A core component of our vision has been the centrality of science. From the outset, we made it clear that rigorous, peer-reviewed research should underpin every story we tell, every exhibition we mount, and every partnership we form. Whether the subject is Georgia's 8,000-year-old wine culture, the legend of Medea and the

Argonauts, or the discoveries at Dmanisi, our commitment to scientific credibility is unwavering. This focus on science allows the museum to serve as a trusted source of knowledge, a catalyst for innovation, and a bridge between Georgia and the wider world.

This transformation also meant adopting new management philosophies. We encouraged experimentation, welcomed diverse perspectives, and prioritized adaptability over rigid tradition. Sometimes this meant accepting risk and learning from failure, but it has also allowed the museum to respond nimbly to new opportunities – whether technological advances, public interest, or unexpected global events.

Ultimately, our vision is to make the Georgian National Museum a nexus – a place where science, culture, education, and innovation converge; where the past is preserved, but also continually reinterpreted and made relevant for the present and future.

Georgia's Natural and Cultural Uniqueness

Georgia's distinctiveness begins with its geography. While our location – at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, bordered by the Black and Caspian Seas, and framed by the Caucasus Mountains – may seem complicated, it has fostered extraordinary biodiversity and cultural legacy. To understand Georgia's present and future, we must connect our past with modernity. Our geography is a remarkable asset. Georgia sits at an intersection that has existed since ancient times, enriching both our nature and culture.
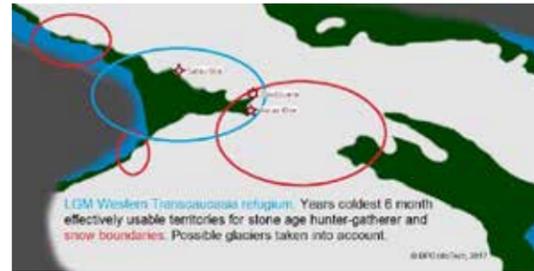
Of the 35 recognized hotspots worldwide, the Caucasus is unique, with the Western Transcaucasia refugium. Here, scientists can study the start of evolution from ten million years ago to the present.

Scientists call this region a "biodiversity hotspot." In just a few hours, one can travel from high mountains to the Black Sea or to arid landscapes. Our compact area contains a world's variety – an extraordinary richness of life shaped by geography and history. Of the 35 recognized hotspots worldwide, the Caucasus is unique. Here, scientists can study the start of evolution, examining animal groups and human ancestors from ten million years ago to the present. These features make Georgia a living laboratory for understanding the processes that have shaped the planet over millions of years and allow us to contribute valuable insights and shape our own narrative within the global story.

Equally important is Georgia's uninterrupted cultural story. Our small territory encompasses every archaeological period, allowing us to trace human development without interruption. From Paleolithic cave dwellers to advanced Bronze Age cultures and flourishing medieval cities, every major archaeological period is represented here.

This rare continuum allows scientists to trace the evolution of technology, language, art, and belief systems, providing a foundation for both national identity and scientific inquiry. The synergy of natural and cultural continuity forms the foundation of our museum's narrative – explaining our importance to the world and helping us build our nation's identity at home. In this context, museums must communicate values through real, science-based narratives. Our goal is to translate research into public understanding, supporting Georgia's journey toward Europe.

Scientific Foundations

At the heart of the Georgian National Museum's mission is the belief that science must underpin every narrative we share. Nowhere is this commitment clearer than in our work at Dmanisi, a site that has transformed the global understanding of human origins and migration.

Dmanisi, located in southeastern Georgia, is one of the world's most significant paleoanthropological sites. Since systematic excavations began in the 1980s, Dmanisi has yielded an unprecedented collection of hominin fossils, stone tools, and animal remains dating back 1.8 million years. These discoveries have rewritten the story of the first humans to leave Africa, proving that early Homo species migrated much earlier – and adapted to a wider range of environments – than previously thought.

Dmanisi archeological site is a model for open science and public engagement.

What makes the Dmanisi finds so remarkable is not only their age and completeness, but what they reveal about the social lives of our ancestors. One individual, for example, lived for years without teeth, relying on the care and support of others – evidence of empathy and social bonds at the dawn of humanity. This story, highlighted in scientific journals and major international exhibitions, stands as a signature example of how the museum turns research into a universal human narrative.

Dmanisi's research is profoundly interdisciplinary, involving paleoanthropologists, geologists, geneticists, and climate scientists from Georgia and around the world. Advanced techniques – CT scanning, 3D modeling, isotopic and dental analysis – allow us to reconstruct not only anatomy, but also diet, behavior, and environment. As a result of a recent breakthrough, we were able to determine the exact age of one of the individuals at the moment of death – she was 11 years old. For the first time in the history of science, we identified the biological age of a human who lived 1.8 million years ago. This is an extraordinary new story: the same bone that once gave one kind of information now reveals another. This is the beauty of science – constantly opening new opportunities to create narratives for the public, grounded in ever-evolving research.

Accordingly, Dmanisi is also a model for open science and public engagement. Each summer, the site becomes a training ground for students and young researchers from Georgia and abroad, who participate in excavations, workshops, and seminars. Museum exhibitions and public programs present the latest findings in accessible, interactive ways – making cutting-edge research available to schoolchildren, families, and visitors.

The impact of this work extends beyond anthropology. By integrating archaeology,

The "Georgia – Cradle of Wine" exhibition, created with the Cité du Vin in Bordeaux representing the wine jar dated back to 8000 years.

paleontology, genetics, and earth sciences, the GNM demonstrates the power of transdisciplinary research – a key to innovation and competitiveness in the modern world. This scientific foundation is what sets our institution apart and supports every story we tell, from wine to metallurgy to mythology.

Georgia: Cradle of Wine

Wine is central to Georgian identity, and our claim as the "cradle of wine" is not just tradition – it is substantiated by science. Decades of archaeological excavations at sites like Gadachrili Gora and Shulaveris Gora, combined with palaeobotanical analysis and chemical residue testing, have revealed the world's oldest evidence

for winemaking, dating back more than 8,000 years. Ancient pottery jars containing grape pollen, seeds, and tartaric acid residues provided irrefutable proof that winemaking began in Georgia during the Neolithic era.

These discoveries, published in leading scientific journals and recognized globally, fundamentally changed the narrative about wine's origins and boosted Georgia's brand and exports. The "Georgia – Cradle of Wine" exhibition, created with the Cité du Vin in Bordeaux and later displayed in Tbilisi, presented a continuous, science-grounded narrative from prehistory through to today. This initiative inspired pride, innovation, and a new generation of winemakers and researchers.

Land of Colchis and Iberians

Georgia's approach to the legend of Medea and the Argonauts exemplifies how myth and science can reinforce each other. The ancient Greek story of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece in Colchis (western Georgia) is rooted in real archaeological evidence. Studies of ancient gold mining in the Rioni River basin revealed the use of sheepskin in gold panning, providing a factual basis for the myth.

Building on this foundation, we developed a comprehensive strategy that extended far beyond the scientific community. We curated traveling exhibitions such as "The Gold of Colchis," "The Treasures of Vani," "Medea's Gold," and "Colchis, Land of the Golden Fleece," showcasing our treasures in leading museums across Germany, France, Spain, the UK, the USA, and more.

These exhibitions, which combined artifacts, historical analysis, and creative

The Vani Archaeological Museum, dedicated to the ancient Colchian civilization received Silletto Prize by EMYA in 2023. Last image: The Auditorium of the GNM hosted an innovative project: archaeology with opera, staging Handel's "Radamisto," set in ancient Iberia.

Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography located in high mountains of Western Georgia is a "refugium" of cultural heritage, in 2016 Svaneti Museum was nominated for the "European Museum of the Year 2016".

storytelling, brought the legends vividly to life. Medea, associated with wisdom and healing, is also being reinterpreted through archaeological and historical research, further highlighting Georgia's ancient ties to the wider Mediterranean world.

When it comes to the question of how Georgia fits into the period of the Roman world and the Greek world of Alexander the Great, our science-based storytelling also covers the ancient kingdom of Iberia. Many are unaware that "Iberia" refers not only to Spain but also to a historic kingdom in the Caucasus. The museum works to clarify this connection, with sites like Dzalisa illustrating Georgia's place in the ancient world.

In one innovative project, we combined archaeology with opera, staging Handel's "Radamisto," set in Iberia, to communicate our findings through art. This fusion of music, performance, and archaeology brought new attention to our heritage and showed how different disciplines can reinforce one another and enrich cultural understanding.

Regional Museums and Community

The Georgian National Museum's vision extends beyond the capital, reaching every region and reflecting Georgia's rich tapestry of local cultures, histories, and environments. Our regional museums are not mere satellite branches: they are vibrant centers of community engagement, research, and cultural preservation.

Up: One of the exhibition halls of the Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography. Down: Bolnisi Museum showcasing region's bio-cultural heritage was nominated for the European Museum of the Year 2022.

The Vani Archaeological Museum in western Georgia exemplifies our approach. Dedicated to the ancient Colchian civilization – the land of the Golden Fleece and Medea – it has become a model for integrating scientific research, creative storytelling, and grassroots participation. Its exhibitions link archaeological evidence with legendary narratives, attracting both tourists and international scholars. In 2023, Vani was awarded the Silletto Prize for Community Participation and Engagement at the European Museum Awards, recognizing its achievements in involving local citizens in heritage preservation and interpretation.

Regional initiatives ensure that the museum's impact is felt throughout the country. Traveling exhibitions and mobile labs bring scientific discovery and cultural treasures to remote villages. Lectures, festivals, and collaborative projects encourage dialogue between urban and rural communities, and between Georgia and neighboring countries. These initiatives foster belonging, pride, and a sense of shared ownership of Georgia's story.

Regional museums are more than custodians of collections – they are platforms for social innovation, resilience, and sus-

By collaborating with leading institutions, scholars, and organizations around the world, the museum has positioned Georgia as an active contributor to the global exchange of knowledge and innovation.
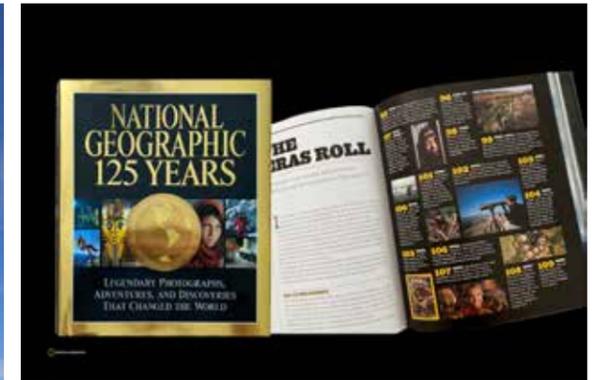
Georgian National Museum is not as a static space for viewing objects, but a dynamic center where science, history, and culture come alive.

tainable development. By empowering local communities and connecting them to global scientific and cultural networks, the Georgian National Museum demonstrates how heritage can drive vitality and progress nationwide.

Education, Public Engagement, and Branding

Education and public engagement are at the very heart of the Georgian National Museum's mission. We see the museum not as a static space for viewing objects, but as a dynamic center where science, history, and culture come alive for people of all ages and backgrounds. Through innovative educational programs, media partnerships, and outreach, we aim to foster curiosity, critical thinking, and a deeper connection to Georgia's past, present, and future.

A central aim is to translate scientific research into experiences that resonate with the public. The project "100 Objects Telling the History of Georgia," inspired by the BBC's "A History of the World in 100 Objects" and developed with the National

Geographic Magazine – Georgia and then extended with the Georgian Public Broadcaster, brings artifacts to life for a wide audience and strengthens the national brand. By selecting significant artifacts and explaining their historical and scientific importance through engaging media, the museum has reached the entire country, strengthening national identity and public appreciation for evidence-based history.

Discoveries like those at Dmanisi are brought to life not just in scholarly publications, but through documentaries, interactive exhibitions, and workshops for schools and families. Visitors can explore reconstructions of early humans, participate in simulated archaeological digs, and attend lectures by leading scientists. This hands-on, multimedia approach transforms abstract concepts into vivid, memorable experiences.

Beyond education, the museum is a key agent of national branding. By grounding our narratives in scientific discovery and presenting them in compelling, contemporary formats, we strengthen Georgia's reputation as a land of authenticity, innovation, and deep-rooted culture. International exhibitions – like "Georgia – Cradle of Wine" – and features in outlets such as National Geographic and the BBC have amplified Georgia's image, supporting tourism, creative industries, and economic growth.

International Collaboration and Economic Impact

From its earliest days, the Georgian National Museum has recognized that meaningful progress in science, culture, and heritage depends on strong international partnerships. By collaborating with leading institutions,

scholars, and organizations around the world, the museum has positioned Georgia as an active contributor to the global exchange of knowledge and innovation.

Much of our most groundbreaking research – especially at sites like Dmanisi – has been built on longstanding collaboration with renowned partners such as the Max Planck Institute, the University of Zurich, and the Smithsonian. These alliances have brought advanced technologies like 3D digital analysis, ancient DNA sequencing, and isotope geochemistry into Georgia's research ecosystem. Joint projects have resulted in publications in the world's top scientific journals and placed Georgia at the center of debates on human evolution, climate adaptation, and the origins of culture.

The museum's international reach extends far beyond science. High-profile exhibitions such as "Georgia – Cradle of Wine" at the Cité du Vin in Bordeaux, tours of the Colchian treasury, and the art of Niko Pirosmani have introduced Georgia's heritage to hundreds of thousands of visitors worldwide. These events are acts of cultural diplomacy, strengthening Georgia's ties abroad and positioning the country as a bridge between East and West.

Such efforts yield real economic and strategic benefits. Museum-led branding has played a key role in boosting wine exports, attracting tourists, and opening new markets for Georgian cultural products. Media partnerships with National Geographic, the BBC, and CNN have amplified Georgia's image as a land of scientific discovery and ancient tradition, fostering trust and curiosity among global audiences.

The museum's collaboration with organizations like UNESCO, ICOM, and various environmental groups has also produced new approaches to heritage conservation, disaster preparedness, and climate change adaptation. Presenting research at global forums, such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the museum demonstrates how scientific and cultural heritage can inform policy and promote societal resilience.

Regional museums, too, play a role in economic development – encouraging local entrepreneurship, boosting hospitality and crafts, and creating jobs. Georgia's success in leveraging its museum network for international collaboration and economic growth is now seen as a model for others, with the GNM sharing expertise in museum reform, community engagement, and science-based storytelling across the region.

Above all, international collaboration is not an end in itself, but a means to expand the museum's mission: fostering innovation, deepening scientific understanding, and ensuring that Georgia's past supports a vibrant, sustainable future.

Challenges, Innovation, and Future Vision

Looking ahead, the Georgian National Museum faces both opportunities and challenges. The world is changing rapidly, and museums must adapt to stay relevant. Digital technology, new methods of communication, and shifting public expectations require us to innovate while remaining true to our scientific and cultural mission.

One of our main challenges is to ensure accessibility and engagement for all au-

The museum is a key agent of national branding. By grounding our narratives in scientific discovery and presenting them in compelling, contemporary formats, we strengthen Georgia's reputation as a land of authenticity, innovation, and deep-rooted culture.

diences. We are investing in digital platforms, virtual exhibitions, and interactive learning to reach people beyond the museum walls. At the same time, we are strengthening partnerships with schools, universities, and communities to make the museum a center for lifelong learning.

Our vision is to further develop the museum as an open, networked institution – one that supports research, inspires creativity, and encourages dialogue across disciplines and cultures. We are committed to transparency, collaboration, and the highest standards of scholarship. By building strong national and international networks, we can share resources, expertise, and stories, making Georgia's heritage accessible to the world.

As we move forward, we also recognize the importance of resilience and adaptability.

The recent global crises have shown that museums must be agile, ready to respond to uncertainty, and proactive in supporting society through knowledge, inspiration, and hope.

Ultimately, the future of the Georgian National Museum depends on our ability to balance tradition with innovation. The GNM's experience shows that, as in nature, diversity and connectivity are keys to survival and growth. As Albert Einstein noted: "In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity." Following this wisdom, every challenge is seen as an opportunity to innovate and lead. By staying true to our values and embracing change, we can always hope for success. Thus, we aim to remain a vital force in shaping Georgia's identity and contributing to global cultural and scientific progress.

Our aim is to create an institution with many functions—like a nexus or a "smartphone" for culture—where tradition and innovation coexist.

Conclusion

The journey of the Georgian National Museum reflects the broader story of Georgia itself: resilient, innovative, and deeply rooted in both tradition and progress. Through strategic transformation, creative storytelling, and a commitment to scientific excellence, we have established the museum as a dynamic institution that bridges past and future, local and global.

By rooting national narratives in science, the GNM transforms cultural heritage into a strategic resource for education, tourism, economic growth, and international reputation. Our exhibitions, media collaborations, and educational programs invite audiences to engage critically and curiously, positioning Georgia as an innovative participant in global conversations and increasing its competitiveness.

Our work is far from finished. As we continue to evolve, we remain guided by our fundamental mission: to preserve, research, and communicate Georgia's rich heritage while fostering dialogue and innovation. By connecting people with their history and with each other, we help shape a more informed, inclusive, and forward-looking society.

The Georgian National Museum stands as a testament to what is possible when vision, perseverance, and collaboration come together. Our key words are: research, science, and literacy. We invite partners and audiences from around the world to join us on this journey, confident that our shared efforts will continue to inspire and transform for generations to come.

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BIOGRAPHY

Maria Vlachou is a founding member and the executive director of Acesso Cultura. Author of the books "What have we got to do with it? The political role of cultural organisations" (2022, in Portuguese) and "Musing on Culture: Management, Communication and our Relationship with People" (2013, in English). Author of the bilingual (pt/en) blog Musing on Culture. She is the manager of the Facebook group Museum texts / Textos em museus and co-manager of the blog Museums and Migration. She is also a member of the Board of the international museum professionals network Solidarity in Action. In the past, she was Communications Director of São Luiz Municipal Theatre and Head of Communication of Pavilion of Knowledge – Ciência Viva (Lisbon). Board member of ICOM Portugal (2005-2014) and editor of its bulletin. She has collaborated with different programmes of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Fellow of ISPA – International Society for the Performing Arts (2018, 2020); Alumna of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the Kennedy Center in Washington (2011-2013); she has a M.A. in Museum Studies (University College London, 1994) and a B.A. in History and Archaeology (University of Ioannina, Greece, 1992).

Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists, by Tiago Rodrigues, a Teatro Nacional D. Maria II production, 2020. (Photo: ©TNDM II. fotografia de Filipe Ferreira | FOT 1017_5782)

HOW FAR DOES YOUR TOLERANCE GO?

Maria Vlachou, Founding member and the executive director of Acesso Cultura

"Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists", by Portuguese playwright and theatre director Tiago Rodrigues, premiered in September 2020 in Guimarães, Portugal, and has since travelled around the world: Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Norway, France, Belgium, Spain, Greece... And also in the US.

This is the story: For over 70 years, one Portuguese family has gathered at their country house for an annual ritual: the execution of a fascist. All the women in this family share the same name – Catarina – and they've passed this tradition down through generations. It is now the turn of the youngest Catarina to kill her first fascist, kidnapped on purpose. It is a day of celebration, beauty and death. However, Catarina is unable to kill and refuses to do so. Family conflict erupts, accompanied by several questions. What is a fascist? Is there a place for violence in the fight for a better world? Can we violate the rules of democracy to better defend it?

Now... spoiler alert: as conflict erupts in the family, its members end up killing each other. The fascist is free and starts a monologue, which can last for as long as the audience is ready to tolerate it. How long is that?

In the play's recent presentation at BAM – Brooklyn Academy of Music, in the US, a technician in the team decided to register how long it took in each performance for the first member of the audience to react and for the rest of the audience to join. The sooner we react, the sooner we can bring that speech to an end.

Many of you may have heard of Austrian–British philosopher Karl Popper. In 1945, in his essay *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* Popper articulated "the paradox of tolerance", a philosophical concept suggesting that if a society extends tolerance to those who are intolerant, it risks enabling the eventual dominance of intolerance, thereby undermining the very principle of tolerance.

In the book *The paradox of democracy and its enemies – Greece, France* (Greek edition, 2024), political scientist Sotiris Vandoros moves further back from 1945, to the 20s and 30s. He refers to Karl Loewenstein, a German lawyer and political scientist, regarded as one of the prominent figures of Constitutional law in the twentieth century, who established the theoretical foundations of militant democracy to battle anti-democratic mass movements. "The mechanism of democracy is the Troyan Horse with which the enemy enters the city", Loewenstein stated. He believes that democracies need to be much less committed to a formalistic conception

of legitimacy, to procedures and abstract democratic and liberal principles. And this is because, in this way, they tend to become dormant until they reach a breaking point, when it may be too late. Instead of this lukewarm attitude, they should become much more proactively combative against the extremist phenomenon.

Before Loewenstein, Hans Kelsen (a jurist, legal and political philosopher, and the principal architect of the 1920 Austrian Constitution – which, with amendments, is still in operation today) defended that democracy, without exception, should grant in full the same rights to the intolerant, to its detractors. If it does not do so, it has destroyed itself before its enemies can inflict it any harm. (By the way, both Loewenstein and Kelsen lived in exile, after the rise of the Nazis)

In his article on the paradox of democracy, Sotiris Vandoros refers to yet one more political scientist, Ami Pedahzur and his concept of "immunised democracy". Although it is not an opposing or incompatible approach to the concept of "militant democracy", Pedahzur distinguishes it in terms of its goals, means, actors and fields of application. Immunised democracy supports the positive defense of democratic values and institutions, it functions as a vaccine against any anti-democratic "virus", it creates immunity, through the broader educational system (beyond the school) and the organised civil society.

In these last years, the world – in different countries, some considered "strong democracies" – has experienced a number of breaking points. A definite turn towards autocratic "protectors", an increasingly

Photo: Maria Vlachou

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intolerant, offensive, at times vicious discourse towards whoever is considered "the other", the one not fitting the "norm", the one not respecting the majority's "traditions". In this context, we also tend to mix up "freedom of speech" and "hate speech", we tend to forget the mechanisms of democracy and tools given to us by the rule of law. We also tend to undervalue the incidents of extremism, hate, moral and physical violence. As long as we don't feel it on our skin, it is not important, it is not something to worry about, we shouldn't be losing our time with it, "we give it visibility and promotion by naming it". And then, one day… it is too late.

Thus, more than expressing shock and consternation on recent electoral results [or attempts, often successful, of political interference in museum work], I am more interested in questioning myself and all of us on where we were, what we did, at the

time all this was in the making. How did we contribute as citizens, as citizens working in museums and as museums to the immunisation of our democracy?

Perhaps this is a good moment to define fascism. In a recent speech at the NEMO conference, I questioned whether we should be talking with fascists. Later that day, at the farewell dinner, a colleague sitting next to me asked me: "How do you define fascism?". Good point. We should never take things for granted. "Fascist" is not just a swear word one may use to attack someone they don't like. It does have a negative connotation for many of us, but do we know what we mean by it?

Fascism is the politics of 'Us' and 'Them'. "Fear and anger" is what drives people to the polls, Steve Bannon (former director of the Trump campaign) had said in an interview in 2018. How is this fear and anger

built in order to cause division in society? The techniques are known and Jason Stanley analyses them thoroughly and clearly in his book *How fascism works: The politics of Us and Them* (2020): the mythic past; propaganda; anti-intellectualism; unreality; hierarchy; victimhood; law and order; sexual anxiety; rural authenticity; destruction of social welfare and unity. This is what I meant when I used the term "fascism" in my speech at the NEMO conference. And these are tactics which should ring a bell that our democracy might be losing its immunity, that our democracy probably needs us to care for it.

Two more book references before I start focusing on culture and museums:

In *Children of the Void: From Individualist Impasse to Citizen Awakening* (French edition, 2018), French journalist Raphaël Glucksmann tells us that, in 2017, a retired worker approached him after a public talk and said to him: "I have got two children, and I don't understand them anymore. They have work, they are married, they have children. Each one has a beautiful car, a home, a mobile phone. They eat and drink as much as they want… They are not rich, but they are richer than I was. Even so, they vote for Le Pen. Even so, they believe that everything today is worse than it was yesterday and will be even worse tomorrow. They are afraid of the world, of the Arabs, of Europe … How can this be explained?" They started talking about this and, approximately half an hour later, that person came to the following conclusion: "We were poor, but we had the Union, the factory, the party. Those who believed, also had the Church. The Union, above all, was a big family."

In her book *How to lose a country: the seven steps from democracy to dictatorship* (new edition, 2024), Turkish author Ece Temelkuran writes that today's world is "an entirely different mass of people, one with a more limited vocabulary, smaller dreams for the world and less faith on the collective survival of humanity." This is a world where we see again and again "the humiliated greet[ing] the perpetrator as their saviour."

If we wish to consider the role of Culture, in general (and museums, in particular), this is where I believe we should turn to and look for a purpose. And by 'purpose', I mean more than mounting exhibitions and organising activities that focus on our personal/professional interests and not on the needs of the society and communities around us. By 'purpose' I mean caring (for life, people, the nature; for solidarity; for knowledge and the capacity to think; for imagination and the capacity to dream).

Focusing on Culture, I will start with books and libraries:

PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide. They champion the freedom to write, recognising the power of the word to transform the world. PEN America has registered this year 10.000 contested books, meaning books that were removed from the shelves of school or public libraries. Usually, these books deal with race, racism, LGBTQI+ issues, slavery, the genocide of indigenous Americans, religion. On too many instances, the citizens asking for a book to be removed haven't even read it, of course. It's the title,

the perceived subject, lists circulating by groups such as Moms for liberty. The toll on librarians has been very heavy; some have resigned from their posts, others are struggling with their mental health.

A recent report regarding the situation in the US, published by the Knight Foundation, showed some very relevant results: that 78% of people trust their public schools to select appropriate materials; it also found that "most Americans feel informed about efforts to ban books in schools, but just 3% of respondents said that they have personally engaged in the issue – with 2% getting involved on the side of maintaining access to books, and 1% seeking to restrict access. Do you know how this looks? Do you think this looks like a healthy democracy?

This is not only happening in the US. I chose pieces of news in English, as it is our common language here, but it's happening elsewhere too. This year I attended a session organised online by librarians in Brazil; also a debate my association, Access Culture, organised in Lisbon, etc. It's all too similar...

When I first heard of an incident involving the launch of a book in Portugal, a book written in inclusive language, I paid attention. It was a bit more than a year ago that an extremist group entered the bookshop and started shouting in order to express its objection with regards to the book. They were not interested in dialogue. They just wished to disrupt the event. I waited and waited to see how serious the Portuguese cultural sector would consider this act of censorship (I refer to the whole cultural sector, not the part related to books).

Silence... The only exception, among the organisations I follow, came from two theatres: one which is in the bookshop's neighbourhood and one dedicated to children and youth. At the time, I wrote on my blog that, although we might think that we are far from the US, we are terribly close. "It is our silence and relativisation", I wrote, "it is the way we normalise certain acts and discourses, that gives space to the enemies of democracy. Our defense of freedom of expression and the non-erasure of History must be informed, permanent, unequivocal."

In the course of a bit more than a year, the attacks on books – namely female authors of children's books – multiplied in Portugal. Still, the wider cultural sector remains largely silent. Last April, I co-organised a debate on the role of cultural organisations in declining democracies. One of our guests was Emily Drabinski, then president of the American Library Association. I asked whether we would be exaggerating if we wished to address the slightest attempt of intolerance, of hate speech, of harassment. Her answer was: "We're in this situation because we´ve been giving up inches for decades. Each of these moments has to be brought to light. We can't concede an inch. Each event needs to be paid a lot of attention, everybody must know about it." When Emily was appointed President of ALA in July 2023, she said that "We need to make trouble – good trouble, the kind of trouble that matters, the kind of trouble I became a librarian to get into – and we need to make it together", building "the collective power necessary to preserve and expand the public good".

Allow me to go back to Portugal, for a second, where the wider cultural sector (including museums) did not feel that far-right populist attacks on children's book authors had something to do with them, that it demanded action on behalf of all of us. Far-right organised groups came knocking (to put it politely) on a museum's door – as expected.

In October, the National Museum of Natural History and Science organised a debate entitled "Around the world in 80 catastrophes". They aimed at discussing collective memory and public space and to question: What symbolic, historical, social and political importance do statues, monuments, memorials and toponymy present in public space have? Who should decide what will be remembered and how it will be remembered? How do changes in social values influence our relationship with the past? This didn't please the far-right, though, who considered that the country's mythic past was being undermined. They showed up at the event, which eventually had to take place behind closed doors and limited to livestreaming. They declared victory on their social media for cancelling the event. They didn't exactly cancel it, it took place online, but wasn't this an attack to the museum's, guests' and other participants' freedom? Very few people know about this incident, it didn't make news. Even if you do a search today, there will be nothing. I find this worrying.

It's not an isolated incident, as you can imagine. Early in October, I attended the final conference of the project CHAPTER – Challenging Populist Truth-Making in Europe: the role of museums in a digital post-truth European society. Julia Les-

er, one of the researchers, briefly shared some findings with us. Right in the beginning, Julia explained that populist agency lies not only with populist governments, but also with organised protest groups, which diffuse manifestations of "the people". These manifestations may include the complicity and implication of museums and museum staff.

In more concrete terms, this research gathered evidence on the following:

Spotlight I:
Quiet transformations & (self-) censorship

Secretly, quietly, museums and museum staff remove references that might "provoke" populist politicians and organised groups; there is concern about losing funding or one's job; there's not an open discussion on certain topics among the staff; risk is avoided; our own freedom and that of others is conditioned.

Spotlight II:
Political violence & exhaustion

Anonymous threats, phone calls, sms, a constant pressure to break people's spirit and mental health. Incidents that museum workers describe as intimidating, exhausting. The aim is to disrupt museum activities when they promote issues populists are not fond of (equality, diversity and social pluralism) and pressure to promote a narrative that speaks of a great country and a great past. Practices of disruption include budget cuts, replacement and direct appointment of museum management, dismissal of museum directors, forms of harassment, political violence.

Spotlight III: Populist traps

As a museum director being interviewed by Julia Leser said, populism creates a situation where there's no objectivity anymore and no one can judge what's actually a fact.

If we go back to how fascism works, I believe we shall be able to see the signs, the connection. And it is necessary to act on those signs (apart from being able to identify them as soon as possible), so that we don't reach a breaking point, so that it is not too late.

Just last month, little after the annual conference in Sibiu, NEMO executive board issued a statement entitled "Museums under pressure". The statement is informed by discussions from the conference "Can we talk? Museums facing polarisation" and findings from an August 2024 survey, conducted by NEMO. They underscore that political pressure, both direct and indirect, can lead museums to self-censor their programming and communication, particularly on sensitive topics. The Board stated that "As a network representing over 30,000 museums, NEMO will continue to serve as a reference point for museums navigating challenging circumstances by providing the space for exchange and support in defence of the values and principles that make museums society's trusted institutions."

Going back to Karl Loewenstein, the theorist of militant democracy, he views fascism as a technique for seizing power, by instrumentally appropriating democratic processes and exploiting to its advantage the opportunities provided by parliamentary institutions and the rule of law. At the same time, by acting as a disruptive element, it erodes the effectiveness and prestige of liberal democracy, which it gradually undermines from within.

At the NEMO conference, my position was that we shouldn't be dialoguing with fascists. I felt that this didn't go down well with some people. A colleague, actually, told me that this too was a way of polarising ('us' and 'them'). I felt we might have a rather romanticised idea regarding dialogue and we tend to view ourselves as good samaritans. There are two main reasons why I believe we should not be naïve and try to dialogue with fascists. First of all, because we tend to react to their discourse, their arguments, their lies. We aim at doing it ethically, responsibly, with facts, and, thus, we almost always lose the battle. A second reason we shouldn't be aiming at dialogue is that it is a waste of time. They are not interested in dialogue, they are pretending to be dialoguing. They scream their slogans, share them extensively on social media, they claim victory for disrupting events. When they interrupt a book launch or when they don't allow people to see a play and they physically attack members of the audience (as they recently did in Sofia, Bulgaria, at the premiere of Arms and the Man, a play by George Bernard Shaw, directed by John Malkovich), they are not interested in dialogue.

Another common feature in these incidents is the stance taken by the police. In Portugal, they remove the book author from the stage, for "safety reasons", but not the disruptors from the room. In Sofia, they didn't make sure members of the

Photo: Maria Vlachou

audience could enter the theatre safely, by controlling the attackers. According to Bulgarian director and Oscar-winning artist Theo Ushev, a policeman scolded him for having provoked them.

It looks rather bleak, doesn't it? Is there hope?

"Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away", writes Rebecca Solnit in *Hope in the Dark* (2016). This is a book about activism and social change in the last four-five decades. It is a book that reminds us "how unpredictable change is and how potent popular power can be." Hope is not about closing our eyes to stark realities. It is about facing them, getting inspired by all the marvellous things that have happened in the past (and we should know about them) and acting. "Power", writes Solnit, "comes

from the shadows and the margins, our hope is in the dark around the edges, not in the limelight of centre stage."

I read and re-read these words and remind myself that change does not come from the masses. We might be feeling lonely and powerless, but the truth is that we are not alone, we are not few, and we have power when we come together and create a community for the common good.

So, what is that I am hoping for?

Considering that we already know the tactics, I hope we shall be able to build a strategy; beforehand and not after we see ourselves involved in an overwhelming, violent crisis.

On 25 November, in an online debate organised by Access Culture, Jana Golombek (senior curator at LWL- Zeche Zollern Museum in Dortmund) shared with us the feelings of being attacked by far-right groups regarding the exhibition "This is colonial". She, precisely, told us it was overwhelming, there was a moment one didn't know who to trust anymore. In what she describes as a "shitstorm", the museum started being bombarded on social media and through phone calls; members of AfD were stationed outside the museum and they only didn't come in because they would have to pay a ticket to do so. What are her learnings from this experience?

- Prepare for the crisis beforehand. It is going to hit you;
- Get everybody together to talk about it;
- Know from the beginning who will have your back, who will protect and

support you (and put it in writing, if possible);
- Prepare guidelines and train the staff (including those working in communication or doing guided tours, whose work may be seriously disrupted by those groups);
- Don't keep quiet and to yourself; share this widely, with your networks (create the networks, if they don't exist) and help support (with your experience, guidelines, etc.) also smaller museums and their staff, who might be more vulnerable.

Julia Leser also took part in this debate and told us "Be together!": be informed, know what's going on, get involved, and don't shy away from dealing with issues that will trigger the far-right. We need to build solidarity, among museum professionals and beyond, so that people are not left alone.

Julia is one of the co-founders of the network Halt!Ung, an association that aims to make politically motivated attacks on museums, exhibition halls and cultural workers visible. They document these incidents of political influence, instrumentalisation and appropriation of museum work, but also the targeted attacks on museums and museum employees. They promote collegial exchange and are a contact point for those affected and those seeking advice.

Thus, I hope for a strategy and networks of solidarity, but I also hope that we shall be able to use the tools both immunised democracy and militant democracy place at our disposal. While we work (through our governance models, education services, programming, communication) to

help our societies gain immunity against populism and extremism, we should also be able to draw clear red lines and not continue to extend our tolerance beyond what should be tolerated in a democracy. Most of our countries have strong constitutions (defending the dignity and rights of all citizens and of all taxpayers) and they have laws. We should use them to defend our democracy. We shouldn't continue being naïve and tolerate the intolerants, who use its mechanisms in order to subvert it.

Finally, I hope we shall be able to do all this on our own terms, our own narrative. Instead of trying to react to absurd, unfounded arguments, conspiracy theories, alternative facts (you name it...), we should build our own vision of a just future – not one of anger, fear and neglect, but one of dignity, possibility, solidarity and... hope. I am sure some of you remember the film "No", regarding the 1988 Chilean

referendum on whether dictator Augusto Pinochet should become president for eight years under resumed civilian rule. The "No" side won with 56%. And if you remember the intense discussion among the members of the "No" campaign team, they didn't win because they tried to unveil and remind people of the crimes they truly suffered under the dictatorship, but because they told people "Chile, la alegría ya viene" (Chile, joy is coming, joy is on its way).

I recently read Ramin Jahanbegloo's book Nonviolence (2023). It quotes Václav Havel saying that "I am convinced that we will never build a democratic state based on rule of law if we do not at the same time build a state that is – regardless of how unscientific this may sound to the ears of a political scientist – humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural."

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PAPERS

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM PRACTICES: A RESPONSE TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Md. Arafat Ali,
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In fact, at times of crisis, museums may offer an important valve that allows for the release and transformation essential to community resilience. This talk focuses on how museums in practice may apply sustainable development on a global scale and see other dilemmas such as social justice and climate change. Drawing on the case of the National Museum of Science and Technology (NMST) in Bangladesh, we will explore how inclusive communication strategies together with energy-efficient digital platforms work to engage wider demographics. Because it utilizes multilingual content and versatile technology, NMST makes sure that everyone is free to access the materials. Interest groups are urged to do something about important concerns that the museum has to do with inclusion and sustainability. As in the case of NMST, museums may ensure that social unity and environmental consciousness are created to be the benchmark

BIOGRAPHY

Md. Arafat Ali is an internationally recognized museum professional dedicated to fostering inclusive, sustainable, and technology-driven innovations in museology. Currently serving as a Gallery Assistant at the National Museum of Science & Technology, Bangladesh, he has played a pivotal role in advancing cultural representation and promoting the role of museums in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ranked 5th among 50 global influencers in the museum sector by Blooloop, Arafat is widely acknowledged for his thought leadership. He is a featured speaker at several prestigious international conferences, including:

- AVICOM-24 _"Integrating Sustainability and Inclusivity into Digital Museum Practices"
- ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR)-24 _"Empowering Communities through Sustainable Museum Practices"
- ICOFOM 2024 –"Future of Museums and Museology Practices in a Changing World"
- ICOM UK 2025 – "Regenerative Museums for Sustainable Futures"

A recipient of the National Integrity Award (2021), Arafat continues to shape global discourse on museums, innovation, and community empowerment. His work bridges academic research and professional collaboration, with a focus on regenerative development, climate action, and inclusive cultural heritage.

Introduction

It is well understood that the museums are important institutions whose primary purpose is to contribute to the preservation of culture as well as education of the masses. But, for the museums, the changes that define contemporary global landscape, such as climate change and pandemics, social unrest, among others, present complex challenges with which the museums cannot deal while sticking to the conventional roles and responsibilities. This paper explores the impact assessment of sustainable development and sustainable development strategy in museums. The paper is developed based on the NMST in Bangladesh, especially its measures to promote energy- efficient digital technologies, multilingual information products and services, and community programs.

Modern Museum Challenges

The NMST of Bangladesh is aiming at creating community resilience over social and environmental issues prevails in the development process of the country through im-

plementing several contemporary practices. Sustainability based activities may include panels or displays for the use of renewable energy sources such as wind, water and sun, recycling stations or demonstrating technologies that can be used to transform waste or reduce its negative impact on the environment. NMST also organizes workshops that involve the students in matters to do with the environment both at the national and international level. Besides, it actively takes an involvement in discussing how local communities can face that problem to protect themselves and their households from a potential catastrophe. Thus, using NMST, people and communities have to take the designation of their participation for the purpose of sustainability so that resilience efforts encourage the consciousness of responsibility.

NMST's Digital and Sustainable Initiatives

Among all those museums, the National Museum of Science and Technology (NMST) Bangladesh is considered as a sustainable museum model. It has installed two open-source applications which has helped in decreasing the use of physical resources and energy. Through offering the services through the online platform, NMST reduces on the need for the travel, which leads to emissions reduction, and the institutions attracts 20% more visitors online than physically. Such initiatives are related to accessibility, environmentalism, and showing that museums are innovating to become sustainable members of society.

Digital Transformation Strategies

Through the years, The National Museum of Science and Technology or NMST has incorporated a digital face-lift so as to cope up with the various changes and hurdles at present and in the future. Some elements that were developed are the ability to move virtually some of the exhibitions to the online platform to continue working even in the case of interruptions. It cut down on the consumption of energy by servers besides the management of data so as to minimize its impact on the environment. NMST also established applications that enabled viewers to have the feeling of being taken for a physically round virtually from anywhere in the world.

Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusivity

Accessibility of the NMST is not an afterthought here but it is paramount due to several considerations that are in place. It has the provision of multilingual information technology options like Bangla and English language to make communication easier for all. To ensure that all users including the disabled have access to the resources that the put up, it has features like screen reader, magnification and voice recognition. NMST has also provided visits and activities made for any disabled guests, and for individuals who may feel uncomfortable about social situations. Moreover, there are partnerships with local community organizations that would donate appropriate technology and in-

formation so that the intended programs in the museum would not be a barrier to the disabled as well as people of particular ethnicity and the like.

Educational Impact and Awareness

The features that I have discussed about NMST have made it an important institution that educates a large number of people every year through its initiatives. Its digital platforms help them to reach out to over Seventy Thousand students every year so as to offer science and technology education despite the geographical barriers. NMST also work with other schools to provide good environmental education programs so that young generations will be aware and ready to act. The museum also focuses on temporary exhibitions that are social issues such as on topics to do with

climate change, energy, and sustainability, and makes lev use of the both the touch and feel methods. Moreover, NMST holds virtual workshops within the course of its activities, where local and international participants can attend the workshops as well.

NMST's Role in Community Resilience

The NMST has been working actively on its digitization process to transform it and make it more convenient for people. This paradigm changed to accommodate online display of specific functions to benefit the museums and social cause during shocks. ago, it enhanced utilization of energy in servers and data management in order to yield a more efficient environmental tenure. It also initiated and created Apps to make virtual tours available to people so that they could visit NMST virtually from

anywhere. These initiatives have helped in growing NMST scope and also in making it more sustainable as well as affordable to larger population in the world.

Lessons for Other Museums

The main idea that illuminates the presented experience of the NMST is that it is possible to achieve the goals and objectives of museums through a digital approach while ensuring the institution's sustainability and accessibility. This has policy and organizational priorities which state that the organization serves a wide audience and will provide materials and activities that are easily translated and accessible for the disabled. NMST works with and for people to foster effective social response to numerous current and emerging issues in environment and society. Thus, demonstrating that it is possible to follow the shift of priorities in the contemporary world, which will be useful for like-minded institutions that want to establish and maintain successful, effective, sustainable, and progressive endeavors for the overall good of the society.

Importance of Sustainability and Inclusivity

The NMST has demonstrated responsibility and dedication to moving forward into sustainability and creating a culturally and diversely sensitive atmosphere through its projects. Today many aspects of the museum functions in compliance with environmental standards, including energy-saving lighting and waste minimization. Certainly, its exhibitions are also built around the theme of presenting visibility of peoples of different cultures and originates in science and technical fields.

Conclusion

Museums have a unique opportunity to lead social and environmental transformation. NMST's initiatives highlight how digital transformation, inclusivity, and sustainable practices can empower communities and drive meaningful change. By adopting these strategies, museums worldwide can help shape a more resilient and inclusive future.

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Wellcome Collection on London's Euston Road. Photo: Wellcome Collection

INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR AN INCLUSIVE MUSEUM

Anna Cornelius, Head of Communications & Marketing for Wellcome Collection in London

Photo by Christa Holks

BIOGRAPHY

Anna has held communications roles in museums, galleries, archives, theatres and public art festivals around the UK. As Head of Communications & Marketing for Wellcome Collection, she connects audiences with London's free museum and library dedicated to health and human experience. She's also a trustee for Artsadmin and People's History Museum in the UK. Anna is disabled but can pass as non-disabled. She spends a lot of time thinking about what it really means to make arts and culture accessible for everyone.

This paper expands on ideas I presented in Tbilisi on 6 December 2024 at the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Marketing and Public Relations conference. Back home in London three months later, it feels impossible not to reflect on the seismic political changes that have taken place in Georgia and around the world since then. My presentation seems to come from a different time: when the nightly protests outside Georgia's parliament building were still making international headlines, and before the dizzying start to Trump's second term.

While I'm writing in March 2025, many global institutions – including museums – are making drastic changes to their diversity, equity and inclusion policies. This paper will be out of date almost as soon as I send it to ICOM, but perhaps it can serve as a useful snapshot of where we are (were) at this moment in time.

My original presentation set out how Wellcome Collection's communications and marketing team contribute directly to the museum and library's goal of a

'Refugee Astronaut III' (2019) by Yinka Shonibare and Friendship Bench, part of the Being Human display at Wellcome Collection. Photo: Kathleen Arundell, 2023

'Figure in the bed' (2024), part of Jason and the Adventure of 254, an exhibition by Jason Wilsher-Mills at Wellcome Collection. Photo: Benjamin Gilbert, 2024

healthier and more equitable future. Traditionally in cultural organisations, efforts towards inclusion have been concentrated in teams dedicated to collections, programming or learning; I'm privileged to lead a remarkable group of professionals working hard to achieve the same through communications and marketing. We do this by creating campaigns that support and amplify stories from people who have typically been overlooked in conversations about health, and striving to ensure the broadest range of audiences can access and see themselves in our content. Wellcome Collection (like many in the sector) is still figuring out what best practice looks like, and I'm grateful to the many colleagues and peers who have shared their experience and expertise generously with us so far. I hope this paper can further our collective understanding of how to embed diversity and inclusion in our institutions' communications, in an increasingly complicated political landscape.

September 2024

I submitted my conference proposal to ICOM in an unusually wet September in London. If you visited Wellcome Collection that month, you would have stepped through our grand neoclassical entrance on Euston Road, out of the rain and into our warmly lit atrium. Inside, you'd see our largest exhibition gallery on your left and our café and shop on your right. Upstairs are more gallery spaces, library and Reading Room. You could have visited *Ja-son and the Adventure of 254*, the vibrant, larger-than-life show about artist Jason Wilsher-Mills' experience of becoming disabled as a child. Or *Hard Graft,* an exhibition exploring the impact of physical labour on the body and human health. And not forgetting our *Being Human* display including 'Refugee Astronaut III', a sculpture by Turner Prize-winning artist Yinka Shonibare, a few steps away from a vial of immortal HeLa cells, the first human cell line to survive and grow in a laboratory.

Founded in 2007, Wellcome Collection explores the past, present and future of health. We are part of the charitable foundation Wellcome, and our vision is a world where everyone's experience of health matters. Our collections represent an im-mense breadth of human experience, including historical books and manuscripts, contemporary artworks, institutional records and personal objects. We are committed to making Wellcome Collection open and accessible to everyone, and all our exhibitions and events are free to attend. More than 460,000 people visited the museum and library in 2024.

Through our collections and public programme, we seek to amplify stories that have traditionally been excluded from narratives around health, meaning people with lived experience can see themselves reflected in the museum and visitors can encounter these different perspectives (perhaps for the first time). Wilsher-Mills' 2024 exhibition is just one example of

this approach: the artist created a giant sculpture of himself in a hospital bed to represent how he spent five years paralysed from the neck down after developing an autoimmune condition following a childhood illness. With vibrant colours, warmth and humour, his installation depicted the obstacles the artist has faced as a disabled person, as well as the fierce love of his family and how he was inspired to become an artist. One parent's comment on social media illustrates what an impact the exhibition had on their family: 'My son who is a wheelchair user and had many hospital visits loved it for its recognition not only of disability but also those young people whose lives revolve around hospital appointments.'

Colleagues across Wellcome Collection ensured that the experience of visiting the exhibition was as inclusive as possible, including exhibition content you could touch and interact with, and an accompanying programme of accessible events. The communications and marketing team set themselves the challenge of creating a campaign that was just as inclusive and collaborated with the artist on the campaign's creative direction from the very beginning. Together we created a new YouTube series about the artist's life and practice, including a film introducing the social model of disability (Wellcome Collection, 2024a), and we extended our usual processes to allow more time for filming and signing-off content. Our in-house design team also embedded a bold set of accessibility icons into all marketing materials, proudly promoting our step-free access and British Sign Language, Audio Description and hearing loop facilities.

These tactics were developed in addition to work the team has been doing for a long time, to ensure our communications and marketing activity goes above and beyond industry standards for accessibility and inclusion. For example, the team don't write alt text for images on social media only for blind and partially sighted people using screen readers, but include creative and often playful descriptions in the main body of each post, so this information is available for everyone. Some tactics, like the accessibility icons, were used for the first time to promote Wilsher Mills' exhibition and have now been incorporated into our standard campaign delivery – whether or not the activity is focused on disability. This is part of our iterative and collaborative approach to make our communications and marketing more inclusive: by testing new things and adding to our experience incrementally, working with colleagues, artists and people with lived experience to build our collective knowledge, and making time in team meetings to reflect on what we've learned.

October 2024

For Black History Month (marked in October in the UK), colleagues in the social media team created a short film about the vial of immortal HeLa cells in our *Being Human* display (Wellcome Collection, 2024b). This is just one recent example of how we use Wellcome Collection's communications channels to share stories that represent the breadth of human experience you can find in our collections and exhibitions.

The original HeLa cells were taken from Henrietta Lacks, a 31-year-old African American woman, in 1951 and cultivated without the knowledge of Lacks or her fami-

Posters for Jason and the Adventure of 254, an exhibition by Jason Wilsher-Mills at Wellcome Collection. The yellow icons by the letter 'J' indicate our step-free access and British Sign Language, Audio Description and hearing loop facilities. Photo: Wellcome Collection

ly. Still used extensively for medical research due to a genetic mutation that means they can divide an unlimited number of times, they have saved countless lives. But the story behind them raises important questions about consent, the power imbalance of patient-doctor relationships, and Lacks' experience as an economically disadvantaged Black woman in a medical system under racial segregation. In *Being Human,* the HeLa cells are displayed alongside a black-and-white photo of Lacks herself, dressed in a sharp blazer and looking directly at the camera with a charismatic grin on her face and her hands on her hips. Before the gallery opened, the curators contacted members of Lacks' family about the inclusion of these objects and her story in the display.

To create this film, Wellcome Collection's communications team worked with Visitor Experience and Engagement Facilitator Isabelle Gapomo, who summarised Lacks' remarkable impact on scientific research: 'For the longest time her name was completely forgotten yet her contribution to medical advancement has been quite extraordinary.' Explaining why she wants to remind people of Lacks' story now, she continued, 'Black History Month is also a celebration of all these hidden faces, all these lives, experiences that have been overlooked, and I want to bring them back.' By sharing this content on Wellcome Collection's social media channels, we were able to invite tens of thousands of our followers to discover Lacks' story and the questions

Photograph of Henrietta Lacks and vial of HeLa cells, part of the Being Human display at Wellcome Collection. Photo: Wellcome Collection

'Husbands bringing their ugly wives to a windmill, to be transformed into beautiful ones', a German engraving from around 1650 held at Wellcome Collection and displayed as part of The Cult of Beauty exhibition. Source: Wellcome Collection

it poses today, even if they may never visit the museum in person. Throughout the year, not just during Black History Month, we want to use the power of social media to 'bring back' these hidden lives into view for an infinitely broader audience than we can reach in London. This approach is one way that we can embody Wellcome Collection's vision of a world where everyone's experience of health matters through our communications, by making visible experiences that have received less attention in the past, even if they might be uncomfortable or challenging to contemplate.

November 2024

With a month to go until the conference, the deadline to submit my presentation was fast approaching. Working on the slides was like compiling a 'greatest hits' of some of my favourite projects – including Jason Wilsher-Mills' work and the film about Henrietta Lacks. The last section I added was about *The Cult of Beauty,* one of Wellcome Collection's most popular exhibitions, which ran between 26 October 2023 and 28 April 2024. It explored how changing ideas about gender, sexuality, social status, age, race, disability, cosmetics and the pharmaceutical industry have affected our beliefs about beauty throughout history, and featured objects from four thousand years ago to contemporary artworks and new commissions.

One item on display from our collections was a German engraving titled 'Husbands bringing their ugly wives to a windmill, to be transformed into beautiful women' (ca 1650). The work refers to the legend of a miller who 'grinds [...] old, ugly, scolding and adulterous' wives into younger, more beautiful versions of themselves (Wellcome Collection, 2023). One woman (pre-transformation) is depicted on crutches while another is carried in by her husband, reminding us that age and disability were signs of a woman's ugliness. At the other end of the exhibition, David McAlmont's film 'Permissible Beauty' (2022) explored why some forms of beauty are still more acceptable and highly valued today. It features portraits of six Black Queer Britons reflecting on the 'Windsor Beauties', a collection of portraits from the court of King Charles II. Watching this film felt like I'd put one of those toy kaleidoscopes up to my eye: splitting and complicating and multiplying my sense of what beauty is – and what it could be.

Another area of the exhibition showed some of the ways people have changed their bodies to achieve their beauty ideal, including a display from the Museum of Transology. This case featured a selection of everyday beauty and personal care objects donated by local trans, non-binary and intersex communities. In curator E-J Scott's words, each item – a lipstick, can of Lynx body spray, strapping tape – was chosen to 'shine a light on how these seemingly mundane products carry meaningful memories and reflect the role beauty plays in the path towards self-actualisation' (Wellcome

Collection, 2023). *Like Permissible Beauty,* this display invited visitors to consider representations of beauty that haven't historically been in the spotlight, and question what this might mean for society's ideas about beauty in the future.

In recent years, museums and other cultural organisations that have chosen to feature trans-inclusive stories have faced criticism from some UK media – and even abuse from a small minority, especially online. Before *The Cult of Beauty* opened, my team worked with E-J Scott and the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester to prepare for this potential response. We drew on the legal and ethical advice set out in the RCMG's Trans-Inclusive Culture guidance (Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, 2023) to develop a set of reactive statements in case we did receive criticism about this display, to make it clear that Wellcome Collection wants our trans visitors, partners and employees to feel welcomed in our spaces and reflected in the stories we share. We also agreed when and if we would respond to any criticism, when we would delete abusive comments on social media, and whether the artists and curators involved in the exhibition would like to be notified. I want to be honest about how emotionally difficult this kind of work can be for everyone involved, but especially for any staff and contributors who are trans, non-binary or intersex. As a cisgender woman, I'm still learning how best to navigate these challenges and still making mistakes; I'd like to pause here and say thank you to everyone who has shared their lived experience so generously and helped Wellcome Collection embed our commitments to inclusion more deeply in our work.

The Cult of Beauty received a spread of glowing 5-star reviews and overwhelmingly positive feedback from visitors, with particularly strong praise for the diversity of perspectives represented in the exhibition. One journalist writing for a national newspaper picked out the Museum of Transology and criticised the decision to include chest tissue from gender-affirming top surgery in the display. Receiving negative comments is always uncomfortable – for an organisation but also for the colleagues and collaborators involved. But this reaction wasn't unexpected, and may even be unavoidable or necessary in situations where museums are engaging with ideas and experiences that are high on the popular news agenda. And while the process to get us to that point had been tough, we were ready to respond with our agreed reactive statement. This meant that when we received the journalist's request for comment, the communications team could respond quickly and confidently with the backing of our stakeholders and senior colleagues.

In the print edition of the newspaper, the story ran alongside articles about another museum and a theatre working to address racism and ableism, two other frequent flashpoints in public conversations around identity and inclusion. I don't really like the expression 'Culture Wars' to describe this discourse, as it implies an irreconcilable, binary conflict in which there will ultimately be a winning – and a losing – side (Duffy and Hewlett, 2021). But the phrase is here to stay, and it was on my mind as I was finishing up my ICOM presentation. In November, not long after the election of the Labour party in the UK and with the US election just days away, it seemed like

The Cult of Beauty exhibition at Wellcome Collection. Central statues Equiline Venus and Idolino courtesy of the Museum of Classical Archaeology, Cambridge. Photo: Benjamin Gilbert

we were at a tipping point. A few months earlier, in her first speech as UK Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy had declared 'the era of culture wars is over', which seemed more aspirational than a reflection of reality. As Marie Le Conte commented at the time, 'conflicts rarely end because one side decides they are done' (Le Conte, 2024). When I tried Googling the term in November, the top search results were dominated by articles, blogs and social media posts asking if the Culture Wars were or could ever be over. The sheer number of results and how broadly the phrase was being applied made me feel sure the Culture Wars wouldn't be ending any time soon.

On 28 November, two days before I flew out of London, international media be-

gan covering renewed protests in Tbilisi and other towns and cities against the Georgian Dream government and their announcement to suspend the country's accession to the European Union. BBC News showed police using water cannon and tear gas against protestors, who set off fireworks in return (Rosenberg, 2024).

December 2024

I landed in Tbilisi on 1 December. The following day, the Law on The Protection of Family Values and Minors passed into Georgian law (Legislative Herald of Georgia, 2024). The legislation forbids same-sex marriage, gender-affirming medical care, and any gatherings or sharing of information that aim to 'popularise' sin-

'Permissible Beauty' (2022) by David McAlmont, part of The Cult of Beauty exhibition at Wellcome Collection. Photo: Benjamin Gilbert, courtesy of the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester/ Soup Co.

Display of objects from The Museum of Transology, part of The Cult of Beauty exhibition at Wellcome Collection. Central photograph of E-J Scott by Bharat Sikka. Photo: Benjamin Gilbert

gle-sex relationships or gender diversity. The change prompted deep concern and criticism across Europe, as representing an attack on the human rights of the Georgian people (Equal Rights Coalition, 2024).

The legislation came into effect four days before my presentation, and prompted a very real question about whether it would break the new law. I received some initial legal advice to remove all references to the Museum of Transology from my presentation, for my own safety and that of my hosts living and working in Georgia. On the day, and following more advice from ICOM members, I decided not to remove this section of the presentation. However, I did

add an age rating symbol – like you'd see on a film – to indicate it wasn't intended for under-18s, and made it clear this work happened in the UK. Far from home in Tbilisi, I was struck by how rare this is in the UK, to be working in a museum and be faced with the prospect of breaking the law, or risking the personal safety of yourself and others. At the same time, I couldn't see how I could remove this part of the presentation while talking about the importance of amplifying the stories of those who have experienced discrimination, and in a city whose people were taking to the streets to call for political change.

That night, I heard fireworks going off at Georgia's national parliament build-

ing on Rustaveli Avenue half a kilometre away from my hotel, while watching the demonstrations on the TV in my room. Each morning came more news of protestors and journalists being arrested.

March 2025

Trump's inauguration in January and his unravelling of diversity, equity and inclusion policies has had a swift and dramatic impact on cultural organisations in the US. The Smithsonian Institution and National Gallery of Art have closed their diversity offices (Goukassian, 2025); the Art Museum of the Americas cancelled an exhibition of works by Afro-Latino, Caribbean and African American artists after government funding was withdrawn (Far-

fan, 2025); and Trump appointed himself Chair of the Kennedy Center (Smith, 2025), declaring his intention to make the previously bipartisan performing arts venue 'GREAT AGAIN' (Trump, 2025).

The international implications of these changes aren't yet clear. In the UK, Lisa Nandy continued to stress the value of representation in the arts in her Jennie Lee lecture in February, emphasising the government's commitment to forging a nation that is 'not just comfortable in our diversity but [..] knows it is enriched by it, where everybody's contribution is seen and valued and every single person can see themselves reflected in our national story' (Nandy, 2025). I see this as a sign of confidence in one of the UK cultural

sector's greatest strengths: our ambition and ability to celebrate people from every part of the country, from every kind of background and lived experience. But this commitment is a fragile and precious thing, vulnerable to changeable political wills and social attitudes. Cultural business strategist Amanda Parker has cautioned that 'what happens in the US also emboldens further disengagement and disinvestment [in diversity, equity and inclusion] here in the UK' (Parker, 2025). Looking outside the cultural sector, this week the Bank of England dropped its diversity and inclusion requirements for financial firms, apparently without any direct government intervention (Joanna Partridge, 2025).

Here at Wellcome Collection, we've recently undertaken a significant project that will reimagine how we build relationships with our audiences over the next decade. We want to explore health and human experience in ways that are affirming for those whose experiences have often been overlooked and that are enriching for all. This commitment will underpin every part of the museum and library's work, including our ambition for our communications and marketing to be as inclusive as the offer we promote. There is an inevitable gap between the vast range of perspectives represented in our collections and the experience of our communications and marketing team; this means we need to collaborate with artists, partners and people with lived experience to create content that meaningfully represents their stories and resonates with our audiences.

One risk that comes with this approach is that these relationships might uninten-tionally become extractive due to the imbalance of power, and Wellcome Collection might cause harm to the individuals we're working with. Likewise in writing this, I am telling stories that aren't mine and may be very personal and painful. I'm grateful to the many contributors who have shared their lived experiences with me and my team, and to those who have read and corrected drafts of this paper. It is only through your courage and candour that Wellcome Collection can tell richer and more complete narratives about human health. Sharing diverse perspectives in this way can also bring to light conflicting views, even within a single exhibition or institution. When this happens, Wellcome Collection's objective isn't to find consensus or compromise, but to draw out the infinite scope of what it means to be human and how we experience health.

I want to end by reflecting on current events in Georgia. Protestors are still taking to the streets, although the demonstrations are only occasionally covered by UK news broadcasters now. Amnesty International has reported that, as of 13 December 2024, more than 300 out of 460 detainees had been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment by special police forces (Amnesty International, 2024). And a number of detained protestors including journalist Mzia Amaglobeli are on hunger strike (PEN International, 2025). The warm welcome I received in Tbilisi last year and the people I met there remain very present in my thoughts. They have not only shaped this paper, but influenced how I think about my work and what it truly means to hold on tight to your values.

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Acknowledgements

ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'UNIVERSAL' AUDIENCE IN ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION

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Established in 1914, the Art Gallery of Hamilton (AGH) is one of Canada's oldest public galleries, and the region's largest. This essay examines two landmark exhibitions at the AGH, the 2011 exhibition The Messenger, *focused on the work of William Kurelek (b. 1927, d. 1977), and the 2022/23 exhibition* Gatherings, *focused on the work of father-son duo Roger Ferreira (b. 1961) and Kareem-Anthony Ferreira (b. 1989). Through an analysis of curatorial texts, press coverage, and the works of these celebrated artists, the essay shows how these exhibitions were broadly conceived for a 'universal' audience, including a diverse and broad range of specific audience segments. The essay also demonstrates that the concept of a universal audience can be strategically employed to unfold the personal specificity of an artist's vision to those who may not immediately identify with, or relate to, the work in question.*

BIOGRAPHY

Timothy deVries is involved in the foundations program at Cardus, a non-partisan think tank, and is in the second year of his coursework toward a Ph.D. in philosophical aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies. As adjunct faculty at Redeemer University, Timothy is teaching the arts to science and business students in the core program beginning January 2025. His research and professional interests are focused on education and strategy in modern and contemporary arts practices.

Introduction

Universality has been a subject of interest to thinkers from at least the medieval period, when philosophers like Avicenna and Abelard defined the universal as a concept to explain what linked members of a class together. Over time, concepts of the universal earned critical attention on account of their tendency to lead into metaphysical realism. In the 21st century, as a philosophical concept, universalism has fallen on hard times (Marenbon, 2016). Practically speaking, however, it is ubiquitous, appearing in architecture and planning as 'universal design' and in religious or spiritual contexts as a non-exclusive form of salvation.

This essay advances a concept of what I call the 'universal' audience to evaluate contemporary curatorial practices for specific exhibitions. I understand the 'universal' audience to be necessarily inclusive without being specific about the segments of the audience which need special consideration to be included. In other words, the universal aspect of the universal audience is implied in much the same way that architects take universal design requirements into account when designing a bathroom. A universal bathroom necessarily includes accommodations which make it usable not only by the broadest class of potential users (i.e. able-bodied members of society), but by those without such accommoda-

tions would be unable to use the bathroom with any degree of dignity or comfort. Such accommodations in no way lessen the utility of the bathroom for the broadest class of users, but extend the bathroom's usefulness as far as possible, thereby making the bathroom, from the perspective of utility, fully inclusive.

The concept of a universal audience functions similarly, with some important caveats. The function of recognition in art is to establish the case for a so-called universal audience, which implies that the art is, or ought to be, accessible to as wide of an audience as possible. As we will we see, the concept of a universal audience is premised on the idea that a particular exhibition communicates widely understood ideas. Implicit in this criterion is the assumption that no particular audience segment is or would be excluded by means of offense to any elements of the exhibition, and thereby excluded from a universal audience broadly construed. Indeed, the function and purpose of the exhibition curator is to describe and demonstrate how a particular exhibition is to be understood as one that is, or ought to be, of universal interest to humankind.

The curatorial attention that is paid to an exhibition's audience ought to also be understood, in part, as an effort to justify why an art institution has chosen to exhibit a particular collection of works, in distinction to any other artists or works they could have possibly chosen. Appealing to a universal audience can show that galleries are serious about ensuring that everyone can enjoy, benefit, and learn from a particular exhibition.

This is an important consideration particularly in cases where galleries receive public funding, which necessarily invites questions about the nature of the 'public' that particular galleries appeal to.

In the remainder of this essay, I intend to show how the Art Gallery of Hamilton has implicitly adopted the concept of a universal audience in two landmark exhibitions, the 2011 exhibition *The Messenger*, focused on the work of William Kurelek (b. 1927, d. 1977), and the 2022/23 exhibition *Gatherings*, focused on the work of father-son duo Roger Ferreira (b. 1961) and Kareem-Anthony Ferreira (b. 1989). Through an analysis of curatorial texts, press coverage, and the works of these celebrated artists, the essay intends to show how these exhibitions were broadly conceived for a universal audience. To develop this concept, I expect to discern whether universality ought to be understood as the way that curators target a diverse or broad range of specific audience segments, or as a strategy for unfolding the personal specificity of an artist's vision to those who may not immediately identify with the work. Though a universal audience is meant to be inclusive, and to provide points of entry into an artist's work, the essay will also consider whether universality may also be employed by curators to aim at one particular audience segment, functionally serving in turn to reach a broader range of people.

The Messenger

William Kurelek was a Canadian artist living between 1927 and 1977, and achieved widespread recognition in his

Figure 1: Installation view of William Kurelek, The Messenger at Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2012. Photo: Robert McNair. "Critic Robert Enright wrote in the Globe and Mail that William Kurelek 'seems like a Prairie Hieronymus Bosch, his naivete replaced by a single-minded apocalyptic vision' (2011). Zeroing in on the cityscape of Hamilton, This is the Nemesis depicted my hometown in the midst of nuclear annihilation. Having read Kurelek's 'A Prairie-boy's Winter' as a child, new details about his religious convictions and mental illness were a revelation to me."

lifetime. According to Wikipedia, "His work was influenced by his childhood on the prairies, his Ukrainian-Canadian roots, his struggles with mental illness, and his conversion to Roman Catholicism" (Unattributed, 2025). In the early 1950's, William Kurelek moved to England, where he was hospitalized in 1952 and treated for schizophrenia. There, he met Jean Andrews, the woman who was to become his wife, and, moving back to Canada, had his first exhibition at Isaacs Gallery in 1960.

The posthumous *Messenger* exhibition was the largest art exhibition ever held of Kurelek's work, making stops in three

Canadian cities: Victoria, BC, Winnipeg, MB, and Hamilton, ON. I attended the exhibition in Hamilton and it was an impressive display of virtuosic art with deep and poignant meanings. Of particular interest was a Hieronymus Bosch-like cityscape of Hamilton in the midst of nuclear annihilation. Having read his 'A Prairie-boy's Winter' book as a child, new details about his religious convictions and mental illness were a revelation to me.

The Hamilton exhibition received financial support from all three levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal) and was reviewed by one of Canada's

largest national daily newspapers, the Globe and Mail. Critic Robert Enright (2011) endorsed the show, noting that "the open-ended plurality of current art making, and a postmodern tolerance for aesthetic and personal eccentricity make Kurelek more contemporary now than when he was alive. In 2011, he seems like a Prairie Hieronymus Bosch, his naivete replaced by a single-minded apocalyptic vision."

The McMaster Museum of Art, a university gallery located in Hamilton, also endorsed the exhibition (Unattributed, 2012), noting they were "very excited about the opening" and "proud" that a painting from their collection was included in the show. A 250-page catalogue, including the contributions of William Kurelek's gallerist Avrom Isaacs and the Curator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Tobi Bruce, was published to accompany the show. Describing the artist as "readily accessible, compellingly complex, and worthy of critical appraisal," the essays chart what could be construed as a universal artistic journey from "isolation, through religion, to a place of hope and acceptance" (Bruce, 2011).

In my reading, broad-based support from governments, media and institutions of art in Canada position *The Messenger* exhibition as one that is universally relevant to museum audiences. William Kurelek's deeply religious and sometimes-sermonizing paintings, which in some cases were received with ambivalence early in his career, were now positioned as truly authentic works that could be widely affirmed in a 'post-modern' and 'contemporary'

art-making environment. In April 2012, a 550-word article appeared in the local paper, the Hamilton Spectator, about William Kurelek's Passion of Christ series, several paintings of which were included in the show. Written by arts columnist Regina Haggo (2012), this article served to make the connection between *The Messenger* exhibition, themes of Christ's passion, and the contemporaneous Easter season, effectively legitimizing *The Messenger* exhibition to a local audience and underscoring its temporal and topical relevance.

Further connections to the universal nature of *The Messenger* exhibition extended beyond William Kurelek's religious convictions into his struggles with mental illness, about which the artist himself and the exhibition was entirely transparent, and the artist's widespread adoption of different Canadian ethnic and religious identities as subjects in his work. The exhibition highlighted these works in a 'Belonging' gallery, with paintings depicting pioneer life amongst Ukrainian immigrants, as well as Jewish, Irish, Polish, Inuit and French-Canadian family and community life. William Kurelek's experiences with mental illness and the ensuing treatments are described as a 'search for [his] identity as an artist and as a human being,' underscoring the humanity of some of his darkly imagined paintings and framing them with reference to universal human themes (Unattributed, 2011). In their description of the exhibition, the Art Gallery of Hamilton summarizes William Kurelek's diverse, universal, and popular appeal by stating that the artist and his art "have meant many different

things to many people" (Unattributed, 2012).

In summary, the communications associated with *The Messenger* exhibition provide a broad justification for William Kurelek's work, and underscore his continued relevance to contemporary and postmodern art audiences by framing the artist's life and art with universal themes of love, redemption, and identity. The popularity which William Kurelek achieved within his lifetime, much of which was associated with his commercial success, is simultaneously affirmed and deepened by including reference to complex details about his religious convictions, experience with mental illness, and personal eccentricities. In other words, *The Messenger* exhibition succeeds in posthumously presenting William Kurelek as an artist that is worthy of critical acceptance and universal approval by art audiences.

Gatherings

Roger Ferreira (born 1961) and Kareem-Anthony Ferreira (born 1989) are a father-son duo with separate but complementary arts practices based in Hamilton, where the Art Gallery of Hamilton is located. *Gatherings* was a major collaboration between these artists with an exhibition that profiled Roger's 35-year career as an artist and arts teacher in Hamilton, and Kareem-Anthony's emerging practice as a painter of large-scale works in oil.

As noted in the exhibition text developed by the Art Gallery of Hamilton (Unattributed, 2022), the *Gatherings*

exhibition served "as a retrospective [for Roger Ferreira] – spanning the major developments and themes in his approach to painting over the years, including his focus on family and Black culture, the landscapes of Canada and Trinidad, activism and spirituality." An article in the Hamilton City Magazine described the exhibition as both a 'homecoming' and a 'family affair' that reflected Roger's fatherly love for his children (Vegh, 2022). In an interview with The Spectator, Hamilton's daily newspaper, Roger expressed that he is "amazingly proud of his son," Kareem-Anthony, for what he has accomplished as an artist (Baleeiro, 2022).

The universal theme of family love, and the relationship between Roger and Kareem-Anthony as a father and a son, are highlighted in the press coverage as a subtext for the themes of the show. By highlighting the apparent themes within the context of a familial relationship, their universality is normatively affirmed. Indeed, Kareem-Anthony's work can be seen as a reflection on his father's work, and vice versa. This is especially relevant given that "family and Black culture" are related not only as subject matter in the work, but as the context for their relationship and life. The article in Hamilton City Magazine develops this further by exploring generational themes between father and son and the history of their collaboration amongst the artist community and with arts institutions in Hamilton (Vegh, 2022). This confers an unusual degree of authenticity to their art, which further underscores its universality.

Figure 2: Installation view of Gatherings: Roger Ferreira (b. 1961) and Kareem-Anthony Ferreira (b. 1989), at Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2022. Photo: Lisa Narduzzi. "Kareem-Anthony develops the universal experience of family life through the exploration of historical family photos associated with his childhood as part of the Caribbean diaspora. Taking as their source material photos of Kareem-Anthony's immediate and extended family, the paintings are renderings of intimate, typically private moments made public in monumentally sized words of art. Breaking down barriers, hospitality focused on shared time over food and conversation is an equalizer that makes 'family and Black culture' universally accessible, understandable and appealing to audiences."

The universal experience of family life is further developed through the exploration of historical family photos associated with Kareem-Anthony's childhood as part of the Caribbean diaspora. This is particularly evident in a show held around the time of *Gatherings* at Hamilton Artists Inc., a charitable, not-for-profit artist-run centre in Hamilton. Entitled *Table, Manors*, the paintings in this exhibition took as their source material photos of Kareem-Anthony's immediate and extended family, and their table culture. The paintings are renderings of intimate, typically private moments made public in monumentally sized works of art. Moreover, the se-lection of personal and familiar subject matter centred on spontaneous, candid source material effectively extends hospitality to anyone who is viewing the works of art. By participating in these meal-times, celebrations and family outings, Kareem-Anthony and Roger's audience are invited into their family as guests. Breaking down barriers, hospitality focused on shared time over food and conversation is an equalizer that makes "family and Black culture" universally accessible, understandable and appealing to audiences.

Given the title of the adjacent exhibition, however, Kareem-Anthony provides a gloss on the larger *Gatherings* show. Indeed, *Table, Manors* refers in part to the experience of participating in and even possibly desiring elements of colonial table culture. By relating the personal experience of family life to colonial man-ners and ways of being, Kareem-Anthony effectively shows how even the unscript-ed moments of family life are influenced by the social and political cultures sur-rounding it. Roger Ferreira refers to this in his interview with the Hamilton Spectator, which highlights his testimo-ny as a black man experiencing racism in Canada (Baleeiro, 2022). By relating the *Gatherings* show to themes of overcom-ing prejudice and adversity, Roger em-phasizes the universal nature of his art as a 'homecoming' (Vegh, 2022). Hamil-ton City Magazine further explains how the gallery was crowded with well-wish-ers on opening night, representing a 'cir-cle of love' that included grandchildren and friends, and portraying their suc-cess as a triumph following years of hard work and modest recognition (Vegh, 2022). Themes of success are cemented in a story carried in the Hamilton Spec-tator about how Lebron James, a very well-known American basketball star, had come to purchase a painting by Ka-reem-Anthony and to hang it in his din-ing room (Baleeiro, 2022). Featuring a photo of Mr. James with his family and the painting in the background, the arti-cle underscores the universal nature of Kareem-Anthony's art through celebrity recognition.

In summary, the art of the father-son duo Roger Ferreira and Kareem-An-thony Ferreira is appealing to universal audiences through relatable themes of family life, shared experiences of din-ing together, and the experience of local community. Drawing legitimacy from well-earned recognition, the art of these celebrated artists is further highlight-ed as the culmination of a long period of diligent work, which emphasizes the triumphant nature of their success. The recognition that Roger and Kareem-An-thony have received further validates the universal nature of their art to a local au-dience, reinforcing the personal support which they have received from family and friends. Through themes of hospi-tality, Roger and his son Kareem-Antho-ny invite all viewers to participate in private, personal moments of their fam-ily life, thereby cementing the universal connection which audiences have to the subjects of their art work.

Conclusion

In the contemporary art world, galleries, the press and networks both formal and informal contribute to the establishment and development of artistic audiences. It is in the interest of artists to earn the recognition of an audience, not only for the sake of their reputation and follow-ing, but for creating and developing a market for their work. As was evident in the foregoing examples, audiences can be constructed by relating elements of an artist's life and work. By presenting artists as individuals that are worthy of an audience's interest and admiration, audience members are invited to find meaningful connections between their own life and the art itself.

By affirming the artist's life and work in its particularity, galleries, the press and

art world networks establish the conditions for audiences to recognize the artist in his or her humanity. This a key criterion for universality in art, especially since the humanity of the artist's vision is not a given for all people in all times and places. Artists in their individuality are not capable of constructing a universal audience; it depends, instead, on the recognition and effort of others who find in the humanity of an artist's vision something that they and others can relate to. By affirming such artists, galleries, the press and art world networks are affirming that there is something in the particularly of an artist's life and work that is of universal interest. It seems possible, then, given the examples in this paper, that universality is a criterion of audience recognition in art.

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STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES IN ADVANCING SUSTAINABLE AND REGENERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Divyeshkumar Gameti, Curator (Science), Science Centre Surat, India

This paper mainly focuses on the strategies and practices to help museums and Science Centres to overcome obstacles in advancing sustainable and regenerative development. The major obstacles are limited funding, community engagement and outdated operational practices. To address these issues, museums and science centres can develop innovative funding streams through grants and partnerships, foster a culture of sustainability via staff training, Community-centric engagement through participatory programs can enhance collaboration and local involvement. Education and training initiatives for staff and youth promote environmental literacy and stewardship, hands on workshop can enhance awareness and participation. In addition to it adaptive exhibit design and use of technology such as VR/AR or mixed reality can enhance sustainability efforts. Public awareness campaigns can inspire community involvement. By implementing these strategies, museums and science centres can transform obstacles into opportunities, positioning themselves as leaders in environmental advocacy and education ultimately fostering a more sustainable future.

BIOGRAPHY

Divyeshkumar Sureshchandra Gameti is a Curator at Science Centre Surat, India, where he has curatorial responsibility of Science Galleries such as Astronomy Gallery, Space Gallery, Diamond Gallery, Fun Science Gallery, Power of Play Gallery, Digital Planetarium and 3D Theatre. Apart from curatorial responsibility, he is a Public Information Officer of Science Centre Surat since 2012. He is also looking after the administrative work of the Science Centre Surat and organizing Workshops, Seminars etc in collaboration with Schools, Colleges, Institutions and NGOs.

With a Master of Science in Physics, a Master of Education in Guidance and Counselling, and a Diploma in Information System Management, Mr. Gameti embodies the perfect synergy of knowledge and pedagogy. Boasting over 13 years as a Curator and a distinguished career in academia, he masterfully weaves scientific expertise with the art of education, making learning an immersive and enlightening experience.

During his 20 years of Career, Mr. Gameti has attended and presented papers in many International & National Conferences, Workshops, training programmes and Seminars across the globe.

A passionate advocate for curiosity, he strives to dissolve the barriers between scientific theory and lived reality, inspiring generations to question, explore, and embrace the boundless beauty of the universe.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015) encourages individual and organizations to embrace change towards a more diverse, equal and environmentally sustainable planet. Based on the UN strategy, organizations like museum and science centres needs regenerative development to improve & enhance their impact on society. "Regenerative Development" in the context of museums refers to a holistic approach to design, construct and manage museum spaces and operations in a ways that it actively restore and enhance the surrounding environment, culture, and community, rather than merely sustaining them. The author discusses "Regenerative Development" in terms of continuous development of museum or Science Centres in its environment, architecture, culture, community engagement and finance. Appropriate planning and emphasizing on positive impact will result in long-term sustainability.

The author emphasis following aspects of regenerative development that is applicable to museums and Science Centres:

1. Environmental Regeneration of museum which includes Sustainable Architecture, Restorative Landscape and Carbon-Negative Operations.

2. Cultural Regeneration of museum that focuses on active collaboration with indigenous and local communities to preserve and promote their cultural heritage, ensuring their practices and stories are represented authentically.

3. Social and Economic Regeneration of museum emphasis on becoming Community Hub to serve as a space for education, community building, collaboration with local artisans, skill development for local population.

The obstacles

Regenerative development should have Long-Term Vision that includes adaptability and Long-term stewardship to foster symbiotic relationship between the institution and its surroundings. Museum and Science Centre plays a pivotal role in advancing sustainable and regenerative development, yet they often encounter significant obstacles like institutional resistance, lack of funding, less community involvement, exhibit designing, staff training and so on.

The implimentation of strategies and practices

To effectively address above challenges, the author suggests some strategies and practices with examples that are being used by well known museums and science centres and can be effectively implemented in other museums & science centres who wants to achieve sustainable and regenerative development.

1. Establishing Comprehensive Sustainability Framework

Museum can create a dedicated sustainability task force composed of staff from various departments of the museum. This focused team can develop a long-term sustainability strategy that aligns with the museum's mission and values.

California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, USA has a Sustainability team focused on sustainability that applies eco-friendly practices to its operations, exhibits, and educational programs. Such initiatives can bring change in the society and it is a wonderful step towards sustainability. It is an example of a green museum that uses sustainable building practices and exhibits to educate public about climate change and prevention of our ecosystem. The museum demonstrates green building practices to achieve environmental regeneration through:

- Installation of "Green roof" by using native plants to reduce heating and cooling.
- Activities and programs that includes many features to save energy and water.
- Developing Sustainable exhibits using raw materials collected from the ecosystem and organizing events, awareness camps and classes to teach public about saving out natural environment

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada has also "Green Team" made up of staff from different areas. They are focused on saving energy, encouraging eco-friendly habits, and involving the public in sustainability efforts through organizing activities.

Fig.1   Green Building @ California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, USA

Fig.2   Green Team's eco-friendly activity involving public in sustainability efforts @ Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

2. Searching for Innovative Funding and Resource Mobilization

To overcome financial constraints, museums can diversify their funding sources. This includes exploring social enterprise models that generate revenue while promoting sustainability, such as eco-friendly merchandise or workshops. Additionally, actively pursuing grants from governmental and non-governmental organizations focused on envi-

Fig.3   Beach Naturalist Outreach Program for community involvement

ronmental issues can provide crucial financial support.

The Exploratorium, San Francisco, USA has developed special membership program apart from regular Day time membership which is called "After Dark" membership for adult visitors. They give special offers to the members and organize special events with discounted rates in museum shop. Such innovative practice can increase annual footfall of museum to achieve economic sustainable regeneration.

Natural History Museum, London, UK also runs a program called "Help us safe-

guard nature's future", encouraging donors to support sustainability and nature conservation. In this unique program, donors can contribute to projects focused on nature and biodiversity, like "Make your mark in the Museum's gardens". Thus museum can achieve social as well as economic sustainable regeneration.

3. Community – Centric Engagement in the Museum

Engaging communities is vital for successful sustainability initiatives. Museums can implement participatory programs that involve local residents in co-creating exhibits and educational content that reflect local

environmental challenges and solutions. Forming partnerships with local NGOs, Schools and businesses fosters collective action and strengthens community ties.

The Field Museum Chicago, USA aims to "connect people to nature and human history." It organizes community programs like workshops, cultural events, and school partnerships to spark interest in science and history. Environmental education programs like "The Mighty Acorns" for the Kids from grades 3 – 5 can connect with their local ecosystems, "Chicago Green Ambassadors" program for Students from 15 to 19 years and "Fellows United for Environment, Growth, and Opportunity"(FUEGO) underrepresented young adults ages 18 to 24 from Chicago to pursue environmental careers, studies, and other pathway opportunities. In this way museum successfully engages local community.

Seattle Aquarium, Seattle, USA runs various outreach programs like "Beach Naturalist Outreach Program", "Cedar River Salmon Journey Outreach program" to provide opportunities to experience the Aquarium to those from the local community who might otherwise experience barriers to participate in such activities. Seattle aquarium also engages the community with volunteer programs, citizen science initiatives, and educational outreach in schools, promoting marine conservation and awareness in local communities.

4. Education and Training Initiatives for staff

Regular workshops can equip staff with the knowledge needed to implement sustainable practices in their daily operations.

Furthermore, developing educational programs for youth and schools can promote environmental literacy and inspire the next generation of stewards.

There are many museums that offer regular training for its staff through workshops, seminars, and professional development programs, focusing on museum practices, technology, and visitor services like Smithsonian Institution, USA, British Museum, UK, Louvre Museum, France, Science Museum Group, UK, National Museum of Australia, National Palace Museum, Taiwan, The Field Museum, USA. These museums emphasize training to ensure their staffs remains knowledgeable and adaptable to evolving museum practices.

5. Utilizing New Technologies in the Museum

Digital Platforms for virtual exhibitions and online educational resources and use of VR/AR or mixed reality for designing exhibits can give immersive experience to visitors with minimizing environmental impact.

The Exploratorium, San Francisco, USA is known for its hands-on exhibits that often utilize cutting-edge technology, including interactive digital displays and augmented reality experiences to engage visitors in science.

National Palace Museum, Taiwan also use virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to   enhance the museum experience. Other technologies that other museums use are Digital kiosks, Mobile apps, 3D printing, Drones, 3D scanning,

Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Online collections.

6. Public Awareness and Advocacy

Launching public awareness campaigns can educate visitors about sustainability issues and the museum's role in addressing them. Storytelling initiatives that highlight success stories and community involvement can inspire action and deepen connections.

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada hosts community events, lectures, and exhibitions that promote public awareness of cultural heritage, environmental issues, and the importance of conservation.

Seattle Aquarium, Seattle, USA offers public programs and campaigns aimed at marine conservation, engaging visitors in discussions about ocean health and the importance of biodiversity.

7. Establishing mechanism for Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Mechanisms for community feedback allow museums to understand perceptions of their sustainability efforts. Regular assessments and transparent reporting on sustainability and drive can lead to ongoing improvements.

National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia have implemented a visitor experience program that gathers feedback through various channels, using insights to continually refine their exhibits and enhance visitor engagement.

Groningen Museum, Netherlands uses visitor input to assess the effectiveness of their exhibitions and programs, allowing them to make data-driven decisions for future developments and improvements.

Conclusion

Advancing Sustainable and Regenerative Development in the field of Museum and Science Centres is the need of the hour but there are many obstacles that hinder success. The author has discussed few strategies and practices with examples to achieve this goal. They can be very effective if they are used by museums and science centres considering local needs of the community and can effectively overcome obstacles and lead the way in promoting sustainable and regenerative development, ultimately fostering a culture of environmental stewardship within their communities.

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MUSEUM SUSTAINABILITY MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING: AN APPROACH FROM THE HUELLA M MODEL

Julio González-Liendo, UNIE Universidad, Spain

In the current context, museums face the unavoidable need to adapt to a sustainable management model aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the renewed concept of museums proposed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). These institutions must preserve and disseminate heritage and respond to the growing demands of their audiences, who demand a real commitment to environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Huella M emerges as a methodology specifically designed to provide museums with tools for diagnosing, monitoring and reporting their performance in terms of sustainability. Through a system of qualitative and quantitative indicators, this methodology allows the current situation of each institution to be evaluated and concrete strategies to be established for its continuous improvement.

Based on five fundamental dimensions – environmental, communicational, cultural, economic and social – Huella M provides a comprehensive approach that facilitates informed decision-making and the effective communication of progress in sustainability. Its application allows museums to measure their impact and make it transparent to their communities and key stakeholders, consolidating themselves as responsible and transformative spaces. Huella M is an evaluation tool and a path towards building resilient, inclusive museums committed to the planet's future and society.

BIOGRAPHY

Julio González Liendo is a Venezuelan academic, researcher, and consultant with over 25 years of experience in strategic communication across Latin America. He specializes in sustainability and communication within the cultural and creative industries, with a focus on museums, fashion, and digital transformation. His work aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda, promoting innovative, inclusive, and socially committed cultural practices.

He holds a Ph.D in Communication and Cultural Industries from the Universitat Politècnica de València, a Master's in Media Business Management from the Universitat de Barcelona, and a Master's in Corporate Communication and Identity from the International University of La Rioja (UNIR). He is currently pursuing a Master's in Educational Gamification at UNIR. Additionally, he holds a degree in Social Communication from the Central University of Venezuela and a specialization in Business Administration from José María Vargas University.

Julio is the creator of Huella M, the first methodology for managing and reporting sustainability in museums. He has actively contributed to the development of tools that integrate sustainability into communication strategies and cultural management processes.

He currently teaches at UNIR, UNIE University, the University of Design, Innovation and Technology (UDIT), Francisco de Vitoria University, and Anáhuac University (Mexico), delivering courses related to heritage marketing, sustainability, institutional communication, and corporate social responsibility.

He also coordinates and participates in European research projects funded by Erasmus+, focused on sustainability, museum communication, and digital transformation. His academic and professional work aims to bridge knowledge, culture, and social responsibility, contributing to the role of cultural institutions as active agents of change.

Introduction

Sustainability in the museum field has emerged as a key concept in the current context, in which cultural institutions must respond to global challenges that transcend the mere conservation of heritage. From a theoretical perspective, sustainability is conceived as a paradigm shift that involves the efficient use of natural resources and the incorporation of social, cultural and ethical values in institutional management.

The concept of sustainability, initially defined in the Brundtland Report as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future gener-

ations to meet their own needs", has been expanded to encompass dimensions that include social responsibility and the comprehensive management of environmental and cultural impact. In this sense, museums – entities responsible for preserving and disseminating cultural heritage – are strategically positioned to assume a transformative role in society. Specialised literature highlights that sustainability must be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process in which environmental management is integrated with social, economic and cultural aspects to impact the community positively.

One of the fundamental theoretical aspects is the paradigm shift that sustainability demands. Contemporary authors have shown that the traditional vision, focused solely on energy efficiency and waste reduction, is insufficient to address the complexity of current challenges. In the case of museums, this limited perspective is not adequate since these institutions must respond to multiple expectations: conserving and communicating collective memory, educating diverse audiences and contributing to social and cultural dialogue. The transformation of these spaces implies a profound review of their practices, which must integrate environmental, social and cultural management strategies in a transversal way.

Leadership emerges as a central axis in this paradigm shift. The transformational leadership theory highlights the need for museum managers to adopt a broad and proactive vision, which is not limited to operational administration. Still, it inspires their teams and the community to participate actively in change processes.

In this sense, leaders must promote an organizational culture oriented towards sustainability, in which each decision and action is articulated with the commitment to transform the social and cultural environment in which the museum is inserted. The literature emphasizes that effective leadership is essential to drive innovation and adaptation processes, which is necessary for museums to become benchmarks for sustainable action.

Various theoretical models have been developed to measure and manage sustainability in organizations. Approaches such as ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance), the Triple Bottom Line and the Balanced Scorecard have been widely applied in business; however, these traditional models have limitations when transferred to the museum sector. The particularity of museums lies in their dual function: on the one hand, they are spaces for the conservation and exhibition of heritage; on the other, they act as educational and social transformation agents. This duality requires the incorporation of indicators that go beyond the merely quantitative and consider dimensions such as culture and communication, which are essential aspects to support the relevance and impact of museums in society.

In the theoretical framework, the importance of integrating the cultural dimension in sustainability processes has been highlighted. Culture is not limited to the preservation of historical objects or documents. Still, it is expressed in the capacity of museums to generate narratives that connect with communities, foster collective identity and promote the diversity of artistic expressions. From this perspec-

tive, cultural sustainability implies ensuring that traditions, local expressions and intangible heritage are integrated into the museum offering, promoting dialogue between the past and the present and strengthening the social fabric.

Likewise, the communication dimension is consolidated as another essential theoretical pillar. Communication understood not only as a process of disseminating information but also as a strategic tool to generate transparency and participation, is vital for the success of sustainability initiatives. Today, the capacity of a museum to communicate its sustainable actions directly influences public perception and the construction of an image of ethical and responsible commitment. Communication theorists have pointed out that integrating digital strategies, preparing sustainability reports, and interacting with diverse audiences contribute to the success of sustainable actions.

Methodology

The methodology followed for creating Huella M is based on a mixed design, which integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand the phenomenon of sustainability in art museums comprehensively. First, a systematic review of the literature was carried out. This phase consisted of searching for information in international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science using descriptors related to "museums", "sustainability", "SDG", "Agenda 2030", and other related terms. Since scientific production on museum sustainability was limited, this review was complemented with grey literature obtained through Google searches and

direct consultations with experts and actors in the sector. This first sweep allowed us to identify the scarcity of studies that comprehensively address museums' cultural, social, economic and environmental impact, evidencing the need to develop a specific model.

In parallel, the Delphi Method was used to extract knowledge from international and national sustainability and museum management experts. This process was carried out in two rounds: the first consisted of a structured questionnaire with closed questions that allowed for the collection of initial opinions from experts such as Christopher Garthe, Sarah Sutton, Jamie Larkin, Martín Müller, Julie Grieshaber, Mara Cerquetti, among others. In the second round, open questions were formulated that delved deeper into the perspectives and challenges identified in the first phase, allowing for an exchange of opinions and generating a consensus on the priority areas of intervention in museums. This technique was essential to validate the relevance of incorporating specific dimensions – particularly communicational and cultural – that are not included in traditional sustainability models.

Data collection was carried out through various techniques. In-depth interviews were applied, both structured and semi-structured, which were carried out virtually (for example, through Zoom or Teams) and by email, which allowed for obtaining detailed and contextualized information on the experiences and needs of the actors in the sector. In addition, surveys were designed for museum communication professionals and administered electronically (e.g. Google Forms or Mic-

rosoft Forms). This diversity of techniques made it possible to capture both the subjective dimension – experts' perception of sustainability and current challenges – and the objective measurement of specific indicators.

An essential part of the methodological process was applying the M Footprint model in three Spanish art museums, selected because they represented different administrative scales (national, regional and local). This case study allowed us to verify the viability and impact of the proposed indicators in different operational contexts. The choice of these institutions was based on criteria such as visitor influx, relevance in tourist attraction and the level of implementation of existing sustainability initiatives. Field application allowed us to fine-tune and adjust the indicators, ensuring that the model responded to the operational reality of the museums and facilitated comparison between institutions.

The data was integrated –both from the bibliographic review and from the Delphi processes, interviews, and surveys–by triangulation of information. This approach allowed for comparing different types of data to generate robust and consistent conclusions about the dimensions evaluated. A system of indicators was established, in which elements of international frameworks such as the GRI standards were adapted and complemented, adjusting them to the particularities of the museum sector. Thus, five evaluative dimensions were defined: environmental, communicational, cultural, economic and social, with the communicational dimension being an innovative contribution that allows the transparency and communica-

tive commitment of the institutions to be made visible.

In summary, the methodology for creating Huella M is characterized by its comprehensive, participatory and adaptable approach. It starts with an exhaustive review of the literature and consultation with experts to identify the limitations of existing models, diverse data collection methods are applied, and the model is validated in real case studies. All of this is aimed at building a diagnostic tool that measures the impact of sustainability initiatives in museums and serves as a basis for drawing up strategic plans and continuous improvement goals in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the new definition of museum promoted internationally.

Huella m: the model

The model is structured around five interrelated dimensions, each with specific indicators, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of a museum's sustainable performance.

a) Environmental Dimension

The environmental dimension is perhaps the most traditional within the sustainability models; however, Huella M gives a broader perspective that goes beyond the simple control of energy consumption or waste management. It focuses on:

- Material resources
- Energy
- Water
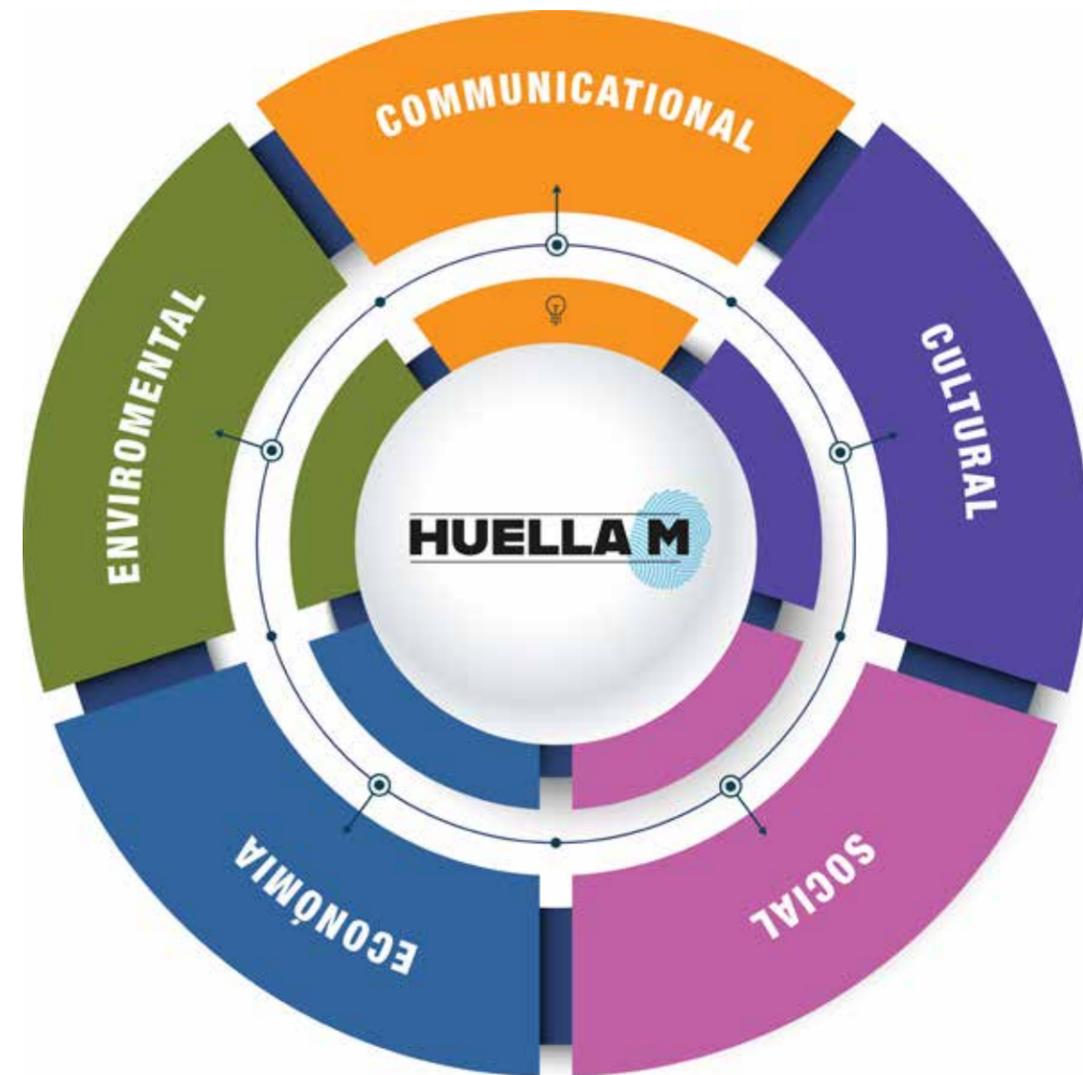- Emissions and Carbon Footprint
- Waste and Supplier Control

Figure 1. *Dimension of Museum Sustainable*
Source: by the author

b) Communications Dimension

Recognizing that sustainability is not achieved without adequate dissemination and transparency, Huella M incorporates the communications dimension as a central element for institutional transformation. This dimension focuses on:

- Corporate communication and transparency
- Digital communication
- Internal communication
- External communication and marketing

The communications dimension is innovative in Huella M since it highlights the importance of sustainable management accompanied by an effective communication strategy capable of generating trust, commitment, and active participation in the community.

c) Cultural Dimension

In museums, the cultural dimension is inherent to their mission, and Huella M incorporates it to evaluate how institutions promote and preserve cultural diversity and heritage. Aspects such as:

- Promotion of art and culture
- Rescue and preservation of traditions
- Inclusion of cultural diversity
- Spaces for cultural encounters and dialogue

The cultural dimension recognizes that the value of a museum does not reside only in the preservation of objects but in the ability to generate experiences and narratives that connect with people's identity and history, promoting social transformation.

d) Economic Dimension

Economic sustainability is a crucial challenge for most museum institutions, which rely heavily on public budgets and ticket sales. Huella M proposes to evaluate:

- Income and expenses
- Generation of direct and indirect economic value
- Transparency in financial management
- Income diversification strategies: This dimension is essential to ensure the long-term viability of museum institutions, allowing museums to become resilient organizations that can sustain their cultural and sustainable initiatives, even in economic crisis scenarios.

e) Social Dimension

Finally, the social dimension evaluates museums' impact on society and their capacity to promote inclusion, equity and community well-being. Among the aspects measured are:

- Citizen participation
- Inclusion and diversity
- Educational and transformative impact
- Social responsibility and community commitment

This dimension underlines that the museum's role in society is much more than that of an exhibition space; it is an agent of change that can significantly contribute to social transformation and the construction of more inclusive and participatory communities.

Integration and Application of the Model

One of the strengths of the M Footprint model lies in its ability to integrate the five dimensions into a system of indicators that allows the current state of museum sustainability to be diagnosed. The M Footprint methodology is based on the triangulation of information obtained through bibliographical review, interviews, surveys and case studies, guaranteeing that the data is robust and representative.

The use of international standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is complemented by specific indicators adapted to the reality of museums. In this way, the model evaluates environmental or financial performance and measures the effectiveness of communication strategies and the museum's capacity to generate cultural and social impact. This approach allows museum managers to establish clear and realistic goals and design action plans that facilitate the monitoring and periodic evaluation of progress.

The practical application of the model in museums of different scales demonstrated that, although the same general indicators can be used, each institution must adapt the parameters to its particular characteristics. For example, a local museum may have a different operational structure and social impact than a national museum, meaning indicators must be adjusted to reflect its specific realities and challenges accurately.

Contributions and Future Perspectives

The M Footprint model represents a significant advance in sustainability management in the museum sector. Its main contributions include:

- Holistic vision: By integrating the environmental, communication, cultural, economic and social dimensions, the model allows for a comprehensive assessment of the sustainable performance of museums, overcoming the limitations of fragmented approaches.
- Innovation in the communication dimension: Incorporating this dimension recognizes the importance of the museum.

Conclusions

Throughout this research, the urgent need for a specific model to diagnose and manage sustainability in the museum field has been made evident, overcoming the limitations of traditional models that do not comprehensively address these institutions' cultural and communicational dimensions. The conclusions drawn from the development of the Huella M model highlight several key aspects.

Firstly, it is noted that sustainability in museums cannot be reduced solely to improvements in energy consumption or waste management; it must be understood as a holistic process that also encompasses social, cultural, economic and, in an innovative way, communicational dimensions. As guardians of heritage and actors with a strong social and educational impact, museums must articulate strategies that in-

tegrate these five dimensions to achieve a fundamental transformation in their practices. Incorporating the communicational dimension – proposed in a pioneering way in Huella M – responds to the need to guarantee transparency and constant interaction between the institution and its various audiences, a fundamental element to strengthen trust and promote active participation.

The practical application of the model in three Spanish museums – selected because they represent different administrative levels (national, regional and local) – has allowed us to validate the viability of Huella M and fine-tune its indicators. This implementation showed that, although all museums can be evaluated under the same system of indicators, operational and contextual particularities require fine-tuning each parameter. In this sense, field experience has shown that the model can identify areas of opportunity and critical points that, once diagnosed, can guide the formulation of personalized strategic plans for each institution.

Another relevant finding is that developing Huella M has been based on integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, allowing us to capture the perception of experts and actors in the sector and objective data on museum operations. The Delphi Method, in two rounds of consultations with international and national experts in sustainability and museum management, was decisive in generating a consensus on the existing challenges and the priority areas to address. This participatory approach enriched the model by incorporating diverse perspectives and ensured

that the proposed solutions respond to real needs shared by the sector.

The systematic literature review revealed the scarcity of studies comprehensively analysing museum sustainability. This academic gap justified the urgency of developing a management framework adapted to the specific characteristics of cultural institutions, in which their contributions to education and cultural promotion are recognised and valued. Thus, Huella M is a pioneering diagnostic tool capable of measuring the impact of sustainability initiatives through indicators that combine international standards – such as the GRI – with elements specific to the sector, enabling the comparison and replicability of good practices.

Likewise, the implementation of Huella M has highlighted the importance of transparency and accountability in the museum field. The measurement of indicators in each dimension allows for identifying the current state of sustainability and establishing short-, medium-- and long-term goals. This translates into the possibility of developing action plans that facilitate the monitoring and periodic evaluation of progress, helping museums become resilient and adaptable organizations in the face of contemporary challenges, such as climate change, economic crises and social transformations.

Another fundamental aspect that emerged from the research is the need to break with the traditional paradigm that limits museums to being simple recipients of sustainability policies. The results show that these institutions can potentially lead to societal changes, acting as catalysts for

new behaviours and models of responsible consumption. To do so, museums must take ownership of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, integrating them transversally in all their operational areas and effectively communicating the results obtained.

The conclusions of this doctoral thesis also point to the importance of having a robust initial diagnosis, which serves as a basis for formulating strategies and implementing specific indicators. In this sense, Huella M offers a proposal.

EMPOWERING CRISIS-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES
THROUGH MUSEUM-BASED INITIATIVES IN IRAN

Mohammad Hekmat, *Art University of Isfahan, Iran*

This paper outlines a cultural campaign organized based on museum principles to respond to the flood crisis in Iran. The devastating floods that struck 20 provinces in Iran from mid-March to April 2019 caused widespread destruction, resulting in loss of life and damage to historical and archaeological sites. In response, a cultural campaign was organized to support flood-affected source communities through museums of Iran. The initiative sought to promote awareness of heritage environments impacted by the disaster, demonstrate the communities' integral role in understanding and preserving their heritage. The first part of the paper defines heritage as a multifaceted concept encompassing various aspects including tangible and intangible, the environment, and human connections. The second part explores the implementation of educational programs designed to address the interconnections between heritage and flood-affected communities through innovative activities that engaged visitors and supported the affected communities. The article concludes by highlighting the potential of museum practices to empower crisis-affected communities, foster pride and sense of belonging, amplify the community voices, promote cultural preservation, and sustainable development.

BIOGRAPHY

Mohammad Hekmat is a seasoned museologist with expertise in museum management and community engagement. He has led initiatives such as the "Cultural Campaign of Museums' Aid to Flood-Affected People and Heritage" and an international training course on museum education. His previous roles include Director of the Iranian Museum of Graphic Design and the House of Tehran. He is also a professional photographer specializing in heritage documentation.

Introduction

The article explores the role of museums in responding to crises, focusing on the 2019 floods in Iran. Traditionally viewed as repositories of artifacts, museums have increasingly evolved into active social institutions embedded in their communities (Sandell, 2003; Crooke, 2007). This transformation is particularly relevant during crises, when museums can serve as platforms for resilience, social solidarity, and empowerment (ICOM, 2017).

Over the past two decades, scholarship on museums in crisis contexts has expanded, highlighting their social, cultural, and ethical responsibilities. Two interrelated themes dominate this discourse: museums as agents of social inclusion and the role of museum in post-crisis reconstruction. Museums, by amplifying marginalized voices and providing cultural capital, can challenge social hierarchies and foster civic engagement (Sandell, 2003; Crooke, 2007). Museums, meanwhile, serves not

only as a repository of cultural memory but also as a tool for reconciliation and social cohesion (Silverman, 2011; Dean, 2013). Social museology emphasizes that heritage is a living, evolving process inseparable from the communities that sustain it (Kreps, 2003).

International frameworks, including UNESCO's 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the ICOM Code of Ethics (2017), advocate for a holistic understanding of heritage. Museums are thus ethically obliged to safeguard collections, collaborate with communities, and engage in socially responsible interventions. Iranian museums' responses to the 2019 floods exemplify this integration of theory and practice, demonstrating the capacity of museums to preserve heritage while empowering communities.

The 2019 flood in iran

Between March and April 2019, Iran experienced severe flooding across 20 provinces due to intense rainfall, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental mismanagement. Over ten million people were affected, with at least 78 deaths, 1,000 injuries, and approximately 365,000 people displaced (United Nations in Iran, 2019). Cultural heritage suffered extensive damage, particularly in Lorestan, Khuzestan, and Golestan, where ancient bridges, archaeological sites, mosques, and museums were severely impacted. The disruption of festivals and oral traditions highlighted the intricate link between environmental stability and the continuity of cultural heritage. According to ICHHTO, over 700 heritage sites sustained damage, particularly in rural areas lacking protective infrastructure.

Theoretical framework

A holistic understanding of heritage moves beyond the traditional object-centered paradigm of museology, which has long privileged monuments, artifacts, and collections as the primary bearers of cultural value. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that heritage is a living process encompassing social relationships, rituals, oral traditions, and collective memory (Kreps, 2003; Smith, 2006). A critical implication of this holistic view is that museums must approach communities not as passive beneficiaries but as partners. Participatory museum approach emphasizes shared authority: exhibitions and programs should be co-curated with communities, ensuring that their perspectives shape interpretation. This approach challenges hierarchical relationships between museums and the communities promoting instead collaborative knowledge production (Waterton & Smith, 2010). Within this framework, museums are not merely custodians of objects but facilitators of dialogue and collaboration, tasked with empowering communities to sustain and reinterpret their cultural expressions, particularly in times of crisis.

The cultural campaign

In response to the 2019 floods, the author proposed a campaign titled "Museums Supporting Flood-Affected Communities and Heritage in Iran" to the museum community across the country. The program aimed to mobilize museums as agents of social support and cultural preservation. By leveraging their cultural authority and symbolic power, museums collectively fostered solidarity, resilience, and civic engagement.

The initiative pursued two main objectives: first, to raise public awareness of heritage environments affected by the disaster; and second, to emphasize the essential role of source communities in understanding and preserving their heritage. Participating institutions included the National Museum of Iran, the Malek National Museum and Library, the Niavaran Palace Museum, the Golestan Palace Museum, the Iranian National Museum of Medical Sciences History, the Glassware and Ceramic Museum of Iran, the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and the Holy Defense in Tehran, and the Isfahan Museum of Contemporary Art, among others. Figure 1 shows one of the posters from the campaign, which was designed by the National Museum of Iran. The campaign was coordinated through informal networks of museum curators, educators, and cultural activists, and it conveyed three main messages: "Flood-Affected Communities Are Protectors of Heritage," "Museums Stand in Solidarity with Flood-Affected Communities," and "We Have Always Been Together Throughout History."

The museums' actions

The campaign adopted a multifaceted approach, positioning museums as active agents of solidarity and cultural mediation in response to the 2019 floods. Temporary exhibitions formed a central component of this strategy, serving not merely as artistic displays but as deliberate acts of connection between displaced communities and their heritage. At the National Museum of Iran, curators organized guided tours highlighting collections from regions severely affected by the floods as illustrated
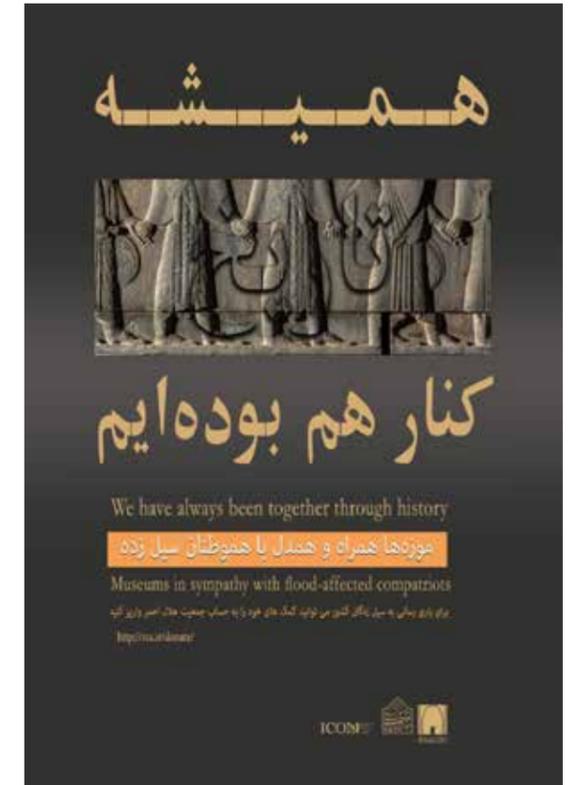

Figure 1 The National Museum of Iran designed a poster to participate in the campaign "Museums Supporting Flood-Affected Communities and Heritage in Iran" and shared it on its social media pages. © National Museum of Iran.

in Figure 2. Registration fees from participants were directed toward flood relief efforts, transforming museum visits into acts of both solidarity and cultural engagement. Through these initiatives, museum objects were re-contextualized within contemporary crises, inviting visitors to reflect on the fragility of heritage and the resilience of communities.

Other institutions, such as the Niavaran Palace Museum and the Glassware and Ceramic Museum of Iran, curated small-

Figure 2 The National Museum of Iran, as a pioneering and leading museum in this cultural campaign, organized several curatorial walks on the theme of water and civilization, as well as dedicated special tours and lectures on the heritage of flood-affected communities. © National Museum of Iran.

Figure 3 The Isfahan Museum of Contemporary Art invited one of Isfahan's artists to stage a performance entitled Memories on Water in commemoration of the flood's victims. © Mohammad Reza Sharif, IMNA.

scale exhibitions featuring objects from flood-affected regions. These initiatives expressed solidarity with impacted communities while highlighting shared cultural heritage at risk. Notably, the Memories on Water project at the Isfahan Museum of Contemporary Art created an interactive space in which audiences engaged in reflective dialogues on loss and resilience (Figure 3). In line with performance theory, such interventions functioned simultaneously as acts of commemoration and as vehicles for transformation, acknowledging trauma while fostering pathways toward healing (Schechner, 2006).

Educational workshops and storytelling formed another key dimension of the campaign. At the Malek National Museum and Library, educators and artists organized storytelling events featuring narratives

from Golestan, Lorestan, and Khuzestan provinces. Three illustrations inspired by these stories were later sold to raise funds for flood relief efforts (Figure 4). This initiative demonstrated how artistic expression and community participation could serve both cultural and humanitarian purposes, bridging creative practice with social responsibility. By employing participatory pedagogies, museums facilitated dialogue rather than passive instruction, enabling affected communities to voice their experiences and reinforce cultural continuity (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Media and digital engagement further extended the campaign's impact, as museums circulated solidarity messages, images, and narratives across social media platforms. This strategy not only humanized the disaster but also mobilized solidarity both nationally and within Iranian

Figure 4 The Malek National Library and Museum organized a storytelling event featuring tales from Golestan, Lorestan, and Khuzestan, accompanied by three paintings inspired by these stories, which were sold to support flood relief efforts. © The Malek National Library and Museum.

diaspora communities, illustrating the sector's capacity to adapt to contemporary communication channels despite historically limited digital engagement.

Collectively, these strategies demonstrate how Iranian museums leveraged exhibitions, performances, education, fundraising, and media engagement to integrate cultural preservation with social support, positioning heritage as both a resource for resilience and a medium for fostering collective solidarity in the aftermath of disaster.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of Iran's 2019 flood response highlights that museums served both symbolic and practical roles. Symbolically, they were redefined as civic actors, extending their public function beyond mere preservation of objects. Practically, they provided platforms for storytelling, empathy, and social recovery, fostering collaboration among cultural institutions and creating a model for joint initiatives.

The campaign also revealed structural limitations: resource shortages, political oversight, and the lack of long-term disaster preparedness restricted the scope of museum interventions. Nevertheless, Iranian museum professionals demonstrated creativity and commitment, showing that museums can act as agents of social solidarity even under constraints. The floods were not only a human tragedy but also a cultural and political crisis, threatening heritage sites and communal memory. Museums responded through exhibitions, performances, educational programs, fundraising, and media campaigns, mo-

bilizing cultural authority to support both communities and heritage.

Persistent challenges remain, including limited sustainability, inclusivity, and digital infrastructure. While museums cannot replace systemic reforms, they can play complementary and catalytic roles in resilience-building. The case underscores the significance of cultural resilience, social capital, and the ethics of care, with tangible and intangible heritage acting as tools for remembrance, healing, and reconstruction. Policy recommendations include institutionalizing disaster preparedness, strengthening community partnerships, diversifying funding, investing in digital infrastructure, integrating museums into national disaster frameworks, and enhancing international solidarity. Ultimately, the campaign exemplifies the evolving identity of museums as active civic actors embedded in networks of solidarity, preserving both heritage and human experience. This dual mission – protecting heritage and nurturing human solidarity – is captured in the ethos of the Iranian poet, Saadi Shirazi:

"Human beings are members of a whole / In creation of one essence and soul If one member is inflicted with pain / Other members uneasy will remain If you have no sympathy for human pain / The name of human you can not pertain."

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BIOGRAPHY

Christiana Kazakou is a transdisciplinary researcher, curator, producer. At the nexus of art, science, and technology, her curatorial practice fosters dialogue between disciplines, cultures, creative research methodologies and emerging technologies. She is committed to exploring how contemporary artistic practices engage with scientific inquiry, digital culture, and social change. Through transdisciplinary collaborations, immersive experiences, and speculative narratives, she curates spaces and synthesise theory with practice that challenge perceptions, provoke critical thinking, and inspire new ways of engaging with the world. Her approach is deeply rooted in fostering innovative ecosystems where artists, researchers, scientists and audiences co-create knowledge, pushing the boundaries of artistic research and technological innovation.

Her Ph.D research explored curatorial models and the role of space in art-science-technology collaborations, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK. Following her MA Art & Science (Central Saint Martins, London), she has worked for diverse organisations and groups whose work spans the spectrum of the arts, sciences, technology and society. She is also the Program Engagement Specialist for Leonardo/ISAST, the International Society for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology, and LASER Talks, a program of international gatherings that encourage contributions to the cultural environment of a region by fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and opportunities for community building in over 50 cities across five continents worldwide.

TRANSFORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES: THE ROLE OF CURATORS AS SYSTEM DESIGNERS IN THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Christiana Kazakou, Transdisciplinary researcher, curator, producer | Ph.D Digital Art & Technology, Plymouth University, UK

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) marks a pivotal era defined by the fusion of physical, digital, and biological technologies – from AI and robotics to XR, blockchain. In this shifting landscape, curators are stepping into expanded roles: not only as cultural intermediaries, but also as systems designers shaping sustainable and inclusive futures in collaboration with museums, cultural organisations and external stakeholders.

AUGE NEXT: A European Experiment in Co-Creation

Co-funded by the EU's Creative Europe and Citizens programmes

AUGE NEXT: Augmented Europe – Next Challenges, is a collaborative platform that mobilises youth and creatives to engage with Europe's most pressing transitions – climate, digital, socio-economic, and geopolitical. Rooted in Latvia, Germany, Italy, and Greece, and extending across Europe, AUGE NEXT fosters hybrid communities that work across borders, disciplines, and generations.

Augmented Europe began during the COVID-19 pandemic as a direct response to the ongoing global crisis, shaped by challenges affecting four European cities: Milan, Riga, Athens, and Berlin. The project is a collaborative initiative by four organisations – RIXC, ADAF, MEET, and Public Art Lab – to address these challenges through youth-driven creative engagement, involving activists, young citizens, and digital artists.

The challenges defined by the four partners reflect Europe's broader future concerns, including the pandemic, climate change, digital transitions, and war. The project aims to explore contemporary modes of living, learning, and working from a transnational perspective. AUGE NEXT seeks to build communities and foster creative collaboration, enhance digital literacy, and develop innovative artistic languages using emerging technologies. It raises awareness of urgent societal issues and strives to shape an interconnected future through digital artworks.

Figure 32: AUGENEXT Programme Model (2022). Illustration by AUGENEXT.

The initiative includes a fellowship programme, artathons, exhibitions, and a creative manifesto co-authored by more than 700 participants aged 15–29. Youths, artists, researchers, and policymakers came together in ideathons focused on social inclusion, climate change, the future of work, and urban connectivity. Through digital literacy, training in emerging technologies, and creative prototyping, AUGE NEXT empowered participants to co-create visions and tools for a more resilient Europe.

Project: Living and Other Afflictions

As part of the AUGE NEXT Fellowship, hosted by ADAF (Athens Digital Arts Festival) under the challenge theme Metaverse and Future Scenarios, a research prototype titled "Living and Other Afflictions" was developed. This experimental immersive work combines virtual reality, binaural audio, and sensory theatre to explore the intersection of identity, perception, and reality. The prototype was exhibited at MEET | Digital Culture Center in Milan.

Led by filmmaker and visual artist Conan McIvor and Dr. Michael J. Daly, a cardiologist and writer, the project was shaped during a creative residency at Theagenio Hospital in Thessaloniki, Greece. Entrenched in Daly's personal health journey, the work transforms intimate, often invisible experiences into a shared and tangible encounter.

"Living and Other Afflictions" is designed for a diverse adult audience. It functions not only as an evocative artistic experience but also as a potential educational

tool for medical professionals, cultivating empathy, enhancing understanding of patient perspectives, and inviting reflection on their vulnerability.

This interdisciplinary prototype employs mixed reality (VR/AR), immersive performance, and a hospital bed installation to create a multi-sensory, narrative-driven environment. By blending fact and fiction, the self and the other, the real and the virtual, the project offers participants a profound journey through illness, altered states of consciousness, and the fragile boundaries of the human condition. It exemplifies how immersive technologies can bring complex health and societal narratives to life, building empathy, connection, and critical reflection in the process.

Project: Circular Futures

Our world's challenges are increasingly systemic and interconnected. The circu-

lar economy offers a path forward, built on principles of reducing waste, keeping resources in use, and regenerating ecosystems. In this context, curators can act as facilitators of systems thinking – building empathy with communities, connecting disciplines, and fostering co-creation for sustainable change.

The Circular Futures Hackathon was a dynamic "hack-and-think" initiative that sought to unlock open social innovation across the arts and sciences, fostering transdisciplinary collaboration and systems change. Organized by Onassis Stegi in collaboration with MADE Group, and held in the context of the S+T+ARTS Regional Centers initiative Repairing the Present, the event brought together designers, artists, scientists, architects, technologists, policy makers, and entrepreneurs to co-create circular solutions for a more sustainable future.

Closing event of the Circular Futures Hackathon (2022). Photo by Pavlos Fysakis, © Onassis Stegi.

Responding to the increasing fragility and unsustainability of the systems that underpin daily life, the hackathon embraced the principles of the circular economy – designing out waste, keeping materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. As the world entered the Fourth Industrial Revolution, participants explored how emerging technologies such as AI, robotics, and biotechnology could be harnessed to support ecological transition through art and culture.

Far more than a traditional hackathon, Circular Futures served as a platform for co-creation and collective inquiry. It addressed challenges including sustainable urban design, responsible material use, lifelong learning through interdisciplinary education, and the role of digital systems in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The event empowered change-makers from across sectors to experiment, connect, and envision new pathways toward circular and inclusive futures.

Systemic Design as a Curatorial Practice

Adopting a systemic design approach requires curators to move beyond traditional programming toward actively shaping interactions, networks, and impact. Key principles include acknowledging interrelated problems, developing systemic empathy, enabling collaborative creativity, influencing mental models, and designing iteratively for change.

Curating within a challenge-driven context was not initially an area I intended to research; however, the rise of COVID-19,

ongoing geopolitical conflicts, and the emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought these challenges to the forefront in ways that demand new solutions. Working within these contexts offers a valuable opportunity to test transdisciplinary research frameworks and explore the concept of "Mode 2" knowledge production, which emphasizes socially robust and application-driven knowledge creation.

As digitalization accelerates, so does the need to humanize technology and ground innovation in community values. Museums and cultural platforms are not passive spaces – they are catalysts for learning, imagination, and change. By embracing transdisciplinary methods, the role of the curator can evolve into that of a civic designer – bridging sectors, empowering communities, and co-creating sustainable futures.

In today's rapidly evolving world, curators are increasingly called upon to move beyond traditional programming and adopt a systemic design approach – one that actively shapes interactions, networks, and long-term impact. This shift redefines curatorial practice through a set of core principles: recognizing interrelated problems, cultivating systemic empathy, enabling collaborative creativity, influencing mental models, and designing iteratively for adaptive change.

The urgency of this transformation is underscored by global developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing geopolitical conflicts, and the global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These complex challenges de-

mand innovative, transdisciplinary solutions, and offer fertile ground for testing new research paradigms like "Mode 2" knowledge production – knowledge that is socially robust, context-driven, and applied in real-world settings.

As digitalization accelerates, the need to humanize technology and root innovation in community values becomes critical. Museums and cultural platforms are no longer passive repositories of heritage; they are active spaces for learning, imagination, and civic engagement. Through transdisciplinary methods, the curator's role evolves into that of a civic designer – someone who bridges sectors, empowers communities, and co-creates sustainable futures.

Systemic design provides an integrative framework for addressing complex, interconnected challenges – social, cultural, ecological, or technological – by focusing on relationships within systems rather than isolated components. Applied to curatorial practice, this means moving away

from linear, event-based programming toward more dynamic, participatory, and responsive models of cultural engagement.

In this context, the curator becomes not just a content organizer but a systems thinker and facilitator of change. Instead of producing stand-alone exhibitions or programs, systemic curators design platforms for ongoing dialogue, meaningful exchange, and adaptive response. Drawing on systems thinking tools such as feedback loops, leverage points, and interdependence, this approach deepens engagement and enhances the potential for long-term impact.

By embracing systemic design, curators can help cultural institutions remain relevant, resilient, and transformative in the face of complexity, eventually positioning them as catalysts for societal learning and change.

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Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve

DIDI LIAKHVI MUSEUM-RESERVE AS A SYMBOL OF UNITY FOR DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

Mariam Lomsadze, MA of Cultural and Social Anthropology / Researcher-Interviewer

Salome Kasabishvili, MA of Museology / Researcher-Interviewer

During the Russian-Georgian hostilities in 2008, the Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve found itself in a crisis situation. In addition, the problem of protecting and preserving cultural heritage became critical among the internally displaced population.

The report concerns the refugee Museum, a museum without exhibits, which was located in the village of Kurta in the currently occupied Tskhinvali region before the 2008 Russian-Georgian August war, and today, with its scientific and educational programs, the museum serves as a bridge and a unifying symbol in the lives of internally displaced persons with their villages.

BIOGRAPHY
Mariam's master thesis focuses on an ethnographic study of the village of Disevi, which was occupied as a result of the August 2008 war. Since 2019, she has been the curator of the State Museum-Reserve of the Didi Liakhvi. Since 2022, she has been participating as an interviewer in the project "Protection of Occupied Regions". Her subsequent project is "Protection of Cultural Heritage in the Occupied Regions – Tskhinvali Region".

BIOGRAPHY
Salome was an intern of Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield at Gori Historical-Ethnographical Museum (2020-2022). Her master's thesis is about the situation of regional museums of Shida Kartli during emergency situations. An interviewer and a researcher in projects "Protection of cultural heritage of occupied regions" (2022-2024). A participant in various scientific conferences (2019-2024). She is interested in the protection of museums and cultural heritage during emergency situations.

The Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve was located in the occupied Tskhinvali region, in the village of Kurta, until 2008, and its main activity was the monitoring, passportization and restoration of the local material cultural heritage in the region. During the hostilities, the museum office was completely destroyed, became an IDP museum, and today it continues to function continuously in the Verkhvebi refugee settlement in Gori. In the new reality, under different conditions of existence, the museum has completely changed its activities.

Based on the above circumstances, the current activities of the museum-reserve are mainly related to scientific research activities and conducting educational activities among displaced and non-displaced youth. Research activities include the processing of scientific literature and periodicals of the 19th-20th centuries on the tangible and intangible heritage of the Tskhinvali region, monitoring of Russian and Ossetian media sites in order to determine the state of immovable heritage. Field expeditions to displaced settlements in order to identify and record intangible heritage. The educational direction is based on the aforementioned research activities and, based on this research, guides the creation and implementation of thematic and targeted programs.

Cultural heritage – as a part of identity, as an expression of a person's creative attitude towards the world – is inherent-ly important, however, the problem of its protection and, accordingly, preservation is acute, especially among the displaced population and this applies to all generations. Unfortunately, they are cut off from the living environment, where the heritage was perfected and formed with its many elements.

The museum-reserve is one of the main sources of communication regarding heritage for the displaced population today; given that not only the displaced from one region, but even from one village, are settled and scattered in different regions of Georgia, the various activities implemented by the museum-reserve allow them to continue to protect the heritage and perform various elements under the conditions of occupation today; especially for representatives of the generation that were the creators and performers of this heritage.

The Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve, in cooperation with Georgian partners – the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, the Center for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Heritage, and with the participation and assistance of foreign partners[1], implements projects in the field of research and education.

Field expeditions to IDP settlements, on the one hand, serve to research and record intangible heritage, and on the other hand, they promote the unity and interconnectedness of the IDP population in order to

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1 Historical-Cultural Heritage Protection Center – a local NGO and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Cultural Heritage Center (PennCHC); The US Embassy in Georgia; Cultural Emergency Response Program (CER).

Educational and exhibition Programs in Museum

Focus Group Meeting in Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve

preserve the heritage that expresses their identity.

In this direction, the projects "Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Occupied Regions" and "Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Occupied Regions – Tskhinvali Region" were implemented in 2022-2023. Individual and group meetings were held with the displaced population within the framework of these projects. Field material was obtained using the interview method. Through interviews with them (Gori, Tserovani, Koda, Shaomiani), interesting elements of the intangible cultural heritage of the Didi Liakhvi were identified. Folk holidays, customs, legends, toponyms that have survived until recently in the life of the village of Kekhvi were recorded. Empirical experience about the traditional and important field of fruit growing and gardening. Information about hunting, fishing, various materials related to death, marriage, details of folk medicine, children's games, types of traditional food, etc. It should be noted that the field research revealed the current situation, the daily life of the uprooted and forcibly displaced population, social problems and emotional aspects, the transformation of elements of traditional culture, the painful processes of adaptation to a new place of residence, the problems of preserving and surviving customs and passing on traditions to the next generation.

Each interview process was quite emotional and moving, because remembering the sweetest period of their lives was quite painful for them, which often required a temporary or complete interruption of the interview. No less emotional were the meetings with the focus groups, both in the IDP settlements (Tserovani, Koda, Shaumiani) and in the museum-reserve. Different age groups participated in the meetings, both the older and younger generations, who were born in exile after the war and know information about their own village only through stories and photographs. During these meetings, the role of heritage in the formation of their identity became even more clear. These events contributed to the reunification of the displaced population, increased interest and involvement of young people, and the return of traditional elements to their daily lives, which they no longer practiced after the occupation. This is evidenced by the

Focus Group Meeting in Shaomiani

celebration of the important holidays of Kekhvi, one of the villages of the occupied Tskhinvali region, "Saghvto" and "Angelozoba" 15 years later.

Educational programs combine both theoretical and practical knowledge of various artistic fields. This helps young people to engage in cultural life. The programs concern both understanding the importance of heritage in general and specifically the celebration and significance of traditions and holidays established over centuries in the villages of the Tskhinvali region, their connection with material monuments and places, which bound and united the rural population with their native places.

For 10 years, internally displaced adolescents from the Tskhinvali region have been actively participating in various cultural and educational programs of the museum. Educational programs combine both theoretical and practical knowledge of various artistic fields. They promote the involvement of young people in cultural life. They are given the opportunity to have an active and continuous connection with their native land, to understand the heritage as part of their identity, and therefore, to un-

derstand the importance of its protection and preservation of memory. At the same time, greater awareness of the heritage of Tskhinvali is especially important for displaced adolescents – given today's reality, there is a real danger that the generation that was born and raised in a different environment will no longer even remember their native land and its culture, what they lost and what remained in their native land – in the valleys of the Big and Small Liakhvi, Prone.

The Museum-Reserve, with the help and cooperation of partners, has become a kind of connecting bridge for the displaced population through the implementation of these projects. The Museum-Reserve is the only cultural object for intergenerational connection, which continues to monitor, research and popularize heritage in society. However, in order for this activity not to slow down and continue, it is important to receive more attention, support, human and financial resources from local and international bodies working towards the protection of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve without exhibits, represents the only source of unity and communication restoration of the displaced (and not only) community in order to maintain a sustainable society, a center of informal education for young people in the displaced settlement in terms of deepening knowledge and knowledge of various fields. The museum-reserve, with the availability of more resources, can assume an even broader role in the research, popularization and education of the heritage of the Tskhinvali region.

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BIOGRAPHY

Cecilia Martín is a branding consultant specializing in arts and culture. Based in London, she founded the agency-network Culture Connects (CC), helping museums and cultural organizations push boundaries and forge deeper connections with their audiences through purpose-driven strategies.

She has developed brand strategies for institutions such as Art Fund, the National Museum of World Cultures, LAS Art Foundation, the International Institute of Asian Studies, osloBIENNALEN, Wiener Konzerthaus, Child Helpline International, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Garage Museum of Contemporary Culture, Windermere Jetty, King's College Cultural Institute, Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, Philharmonie Luxembourg, British Council, Creative Economy Programme and Berlin Philharmoniker, among others.

Cecilia also co-founded Lava Lab in Amsterdam, a hub for innovation, strategy, design, and technology. She believes in the power of collaboration to drive groundbreaking ideas. She has served as a Board Member of ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR) for eight years and teaches Arts Branding at the University of Barcelona's Master's of Contemporary Art (IL3) of Contemporary Art program and Audience and Audience Development at the ICOM International Training Centre in China.

A frequent speaker on innovation and workshop facilitator, Cecilia has presented at VLOW!, Transform, Communicating the Arts, and Design Indaba. Her research on audience development includes studies such as *Millennials, the Driving Force of Innovation* and *#Staysocial @Museums.*

STAND OUT FOR WHAT YOU STAND FOR: BRANDING WITH PURPOSE

Cecilia Martin, Branding Consultant for Arts and Culture, Spain

Introduction

Today, branding is essential for museums to drive positive change and create lasting impact. But a museum's brand must go beyond a logo or tagline – it must be rooted in purpose. A strong brand acts as a beacon, clearly communicating an institution's significance. For museums and cultural organizations, purpose-driven branding fosters meaningful connections, shapes audience experiences, and positions them as catalysts for change. This paper explores the role of purposeful branding in the museum sector, its impact on audience engagement, and its potential to bring museums closer to people's lives.

The Power of branding with purpose

Great cultural brands are unforgettable , they create experiences we remember for the rest of our lives. They stay with us because they change how we see the world and how we see ourselves within it. Audiences may forget what they say or do, but they never forget how they make them feel (inspired by Maya Angelou). In a crowded cultural landscape, institutions must stand out not just for what they offer but for what they stand for. Purpose-driven branding helps organizations define their identity and shape their communication, culture, and programming. It ensures that museum brands are fit for the 21st century – people-centered, narrative-driven, and technology-enabled,

fostering deeper interaction. Without this approach, brands risk feeling inauthentic, lacking engagement, and appearing solely focused on corporate messaging rather than fostering genuine connections with their audiences. At its core, purpose-driven branding defines the why that unites museums and their audiences, responding to their emotional and intellectual needs and aspirations, and guiding every touchpoint, experience, and moment of engagement.

A shift in audience expectations

Today's audiences are no longer passive visitors; they are active participants who seek meaning, hope for the plantet, self-expression, and opportunities to contribute. 21st-century audiences seek brands that empower them – they want to collaborate, raise their voices and actively participate.

"Museums need to stop forcing people down a path of engagement they assume people will follow and start responding to what people actually do in their spaces."
– W. Ryan Dodge, Digital Content Manager & Digital Engagement Coordinator

What people do with your brand matters more than what you want them to do.

We are witnessing a shift:

- From passive receivers to active participants

- From enjoying experiences to contributing to change
- From being institutions of knowledge to platforms of advocacy
- From information to conversation

This shift requires institutions to clearly define their purpose and communicate it in a way that resonates with audiences. A strong brand purpose serves as a unifying principle that guides all aspects of an organization – from its visual identity to its visitor experience, and most importantly, its internal culture and the values that shape its direction. It provides clarity, fosters alignment, and ensures that every touchpoint reflects a deeper, purpose-driven vision. As I have previously argued, "there is a need for a paradigm shift: to move from authoritarian cultural institutions to spaces of possibility where opportunities, innovation, and transformative experiences can unfold" (Ramirez-Figueroa et al., 2024).

Art Fund (2024) emphasizes this need in Why Museums Should Use Emotional Branding to Grow Their Support, stating that institutions should "attract support from new audiences by breaking away from museum stereotypes and language…be more than a museum." Furthermore, Art Fund underscores the importance of emotional connections, arguing that "museums must create strong emotional connections – giving people a reason to visit, engage, support, and advocate for their work" (Art Fund, 2024).

Purpose vs. Mission: Understanding the difference

There is often confusion between purpose and mission. While both are essential, they serve different roles:

- Purpose defines why it exists and what emotional and societal impact it seeks to create.
- Mission defines what an organization does and how it operates to fulfill that purpose.

In essence, brand-driven purpose is the soul of the organisation, and the mission is the plan to achieve it.

For example:

- Patagonia's Mission: "To build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis."
- Patagonia's Purpose: "We're in business to save our home planet."

Similarly, the Natural History Museum's purpose is "to challenge how people think about the natural world – past, present, and future." This moves the museum beyond being a catalogue of objects to being a catalyst for change that creates planet advocates.

How purpose shapes brand experience

A clear brand purpose does not stay confined to an organization's mission statement; it must translate into every aspect of the audience experience:

- Personality & Values: Defines the tone and voice of communication.
- Programs & Exhibitions: Align content with the brand's impact goals.
- Culture & Leadership: Ensures internal teams embody the brand's ethos.
- Communication & Spaces: Creates a seamless narrative across touchpoints.

Institutions like Tate exemplify purpose-driven branding. Their mission is "to increase the public's enjoyment and understanding of British, modern, and contemporary art." This mission is reflected in their brand purpose, which goes beyond simply showcasing art – it challenges audiences to engage critically, rethink assumptions, and see the world differently. The brand positioning, encapsulated by the phrase "Look again, think again," embodies this purpose, inviting visitors to shift perceptions and embrace new perspectives. This approach aligns seamlessly with Tate's role as a space for bold, thought-provoking contemporary art experiences.

Brand purpose serves as the foundation for all communication efforts, ensuring clarity, consistency, and alignment with an organization's values. It differentiates the brand, fostering emotional connections and authenticity that resonate with audiences. Purpose-driven messaging enhances credibility, inspires both staff and audiences, and strengthens engagement.

By guiding communication with meaning and relevance, a strong brand purpose helps organizations stand out, build trust, and create lasting impact.

Defining a purpose is a process that recognises that a museum is more than a place, it's a living purpose expressed in many different ways, and one that begins with understanding the difference we make in people's lives.

Case Study: Philharmonie Luxembourg – Branding with purpose

A compelling example of purpose-driven branding is the transformation of Philharmonie Luxembourg. While an architectural landmark known for its striking design and world-class acoustics (see Figure 1)., its brand communication lacked emotional resonance and failed to connect meaningfully with audiences. The challenge was clear: how to reposition the Philharmonie as a modern cultural icon while attracting a new generation of concertgoers.

Figure. 1 – The Philharmonie Luxembourg building was designed by Christian de Portzamparc.

Figure. 2 – NB Studio (2023) Visual identity image.

Figure. 3 – NB Studio (2023) Campaign image.

As explored in my article *Spaces of Possibility: Challenging institutional stereotypes (Ramírez-Figueroa et al., 2024)* as an independent consultant collaborating with NB Studio on this project, I contributed to the brand strategy for the Philharmonie, supporting efforts to transform perceptions and reinforce its relevance. The rebrand focused on a purpose-driven approach that reshaped its identity, messaging, and audience engagement.

Key elements of the rebrand:

Defining a purpose

At the core of the transformation was a clear purpose – "To share musical experiences that open hearts and minds."This purpose guided every aspect of the rebranding strategy, ensuring that the Philharmonie was positioned as more than just a concert venue, but as a catalyst for cultural engagement.

Bringing the Brand to life

The Philharmonie's iconic architecture became a central element of its new identity. NB Studio designed a dynamic pulsating logo, inspired by the venue's distinctive columns, visually representing the rhythm and energy of live music (see Figure 2). To enhance adaptability, creative coder Patrik Hübner developed a generative tool that allowed the logo to dynamically react to sound – ensuring that the brand identity remained fluid, vibrant, and directly connected to music itself. Utilizing JavaScript, WebGL, and Vue.js, this innovative tool generates audio-reactive wave patterns based on sound input, making the logo adaptable to various musical genres, whether electro, opera, jazz, or classical.

Breaking down barriers

A major challenge was addressing the barriers to entry that deterred potential concertgoers, particularly the perception that the Philharmonie was elitist or boring. Research revealed that many associated the venue exclusively with classical music, limiting its appeal. To challenge these perceptions, a bold and disruptive brand awareness campaign was launched.

One of the campaign messages provocatively stated: "Boring is a night on the sofa – shake up your musical calendar!" (Figure 3).

By juxtaposing classical music with relatable, everyday experiences, the campaign disrupted stereotypes and encouraged broader audience engagement. The rebranding also introduced a vibrant and energetic color palette, rejuvenating the perception of classical performances and infusing them with a contemporary feel.

Technology-enabled interaction

The Philharmonie's rebranding also leveraged technology to create deeper audience interactions. The sound-reactive logo not only visualized music but also served as an interactive tool, bridging the gap between audiences and the concert hall. This approach positioned the Philharmonie at the forefront of digital innovation in cultural branding, ensuring that audiences could engage with the brand in a dynamic and participatory way.

Impact and legacy

By aligning visual identity, campaigns, and messaging with its core purpose, the rebrand successfully revitalized the Philharmonie's image. It became more than a concert hall ,

it emerged as a cultural movement rooted in innovation, inclusivity, and the transformative power of live music. This evolution has delivered measurable results, with rising ticket sales and clear signs of growth among younger audiences.

This case exemplifies how branding with purpose can break down barriers, redefine audience perceptions, and create lasting emotional connections – ensuring that cultural institutions remain relevant, engaging, and fit for the 21st century *(Ramírez-Figueroa et al., 2024)*.

The role of purpose in securing museum funding

For museums to thrive in today's cultural landscape, a clear and compelling purpose is not just an asset – it's a necessity. Purpose shapes identity, fosters engagement, and, crucially, strengthens an institution's ability to secure funding. Funders – whether government agencies, private foundations, or individual donors – seek to support organizations that align with their mission and demonstrate meaningful impact. A well-defined purpose enhances credibility, relevance, and long-term sustainability.

A clear and compelling purpose is essential for museums to secure funding and sustain long-term growth. Funders prioritize institutions that align with their mission, demonstrate measurable impact, and actively engage with contemporary societal issues. A strong purpose enhances credibility, builds trust, and ensures strategic vision, making museums more attractive to donors and partners.

More than just financial support, a well-defined purpose creates a sense of belonging

– a unifying principle that connects everybody through shared emotional aspirations. To be effective, our purpose must be authentic and driven by the issues we are passionate about. It should be unique to our institution, and it must express both our motivations and the impact of our collective efforts.

Conclusion: Stand out for what you stand for

Branding with purpose is no longer optional – it's essential. Museums and cultural institutions must define why they matter and embed that purpose into everything they do.

A strong brand purpose:

- Creates emotional connections
- Engages audiences as active participants
- Differentiates institutions by the issues they are passionate about
- Drives advocacy and long-term loyalty
- Builds trust, recognition and meaning

By standing out for what they stand for, cultural institutions can move beyond being places of knowledge to becoming forces for change. As we look to the future, those who embrace purpose-driven branding will not only thrive but will also inspire and lead the next generation of cultural engagement.

Things to remember: Stand up for what matters, lead with purpose, and engage your community of stakeholdes with your values through interactive storytelling and technology-driven experiences. Be more than a cultural venue, become a cultural actor.

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AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE SAFE SPACES IN MUSEUMS: CITIZEN LABS IN MEXICO

Jessica Beatriz Ramírez Rivera, **Design and Special Projects Coordinator at the Antonio Haghenbeck Cultural Foundation and the Design Lead at ICOM Mexico.**

This study explores the role of museums as safe and inclusive spaces by examining participatory methodologies that promote active engagement with diverse communities. Drawing from the framework of social museology and citizen innovation laboratories (CILs), this paper highlights strategies that enhance inclusion and human rights in museum settings. Through case studies in Mexico, it is demonstrated how participatory models address gender discrimination, accessibility barriers, and community engagement to foster a radial system of care in museums.

BIOGRAPHY

Feminist graphic designer with over 15 years of experience in museums and 8 years in feminist organizations. I hold a Ph.D in Arts and Design from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where my doctoral research focused on feminism and inclusion in museographic discourses from a human rights and citizen participation perspective. I am currently the Design and Special Projects Coordinator at the Antonio Haghenbeck Cultural Foundation and the Design Lead at ICOM Mexico. I am involved in various academic and professional spaces related to museums and feminism, such as the Forum for Museum Audience Studies, the Raquel Padilla Ramos Museum Observatory, and the Seminar on the Educational Role of Museums. I am also part of the organizing team for the Network of Museums and Digital Strategies (REMED) and the Permanent Gender Seminar in Art and Design at UNAM.

Introduction

Museums have traditionally been seen as institutions that preserve and exhibit cultural heritage. However, their role in society is evolving as they strive to become inclusive spaces that engage with communities.

This context, together with the COVID-19 pandemic, has been developed from the conceptualization of New Museology to the new museum definition (ICOM, 2022) established by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), which emphasizes participation, inclusion, and diversity.

This paper investigates whether museums can truly serve as safe spaces for all individuals, particularly marginalized groups. It explores how participatory models and co-creation methodologies can redefine the museum experience, fostering accessibility, equity, and inclusivity.

Theoretical framework

The concept of social museology (Navajas, 2020) provides the foundation for this study, emphasizing the idea that museums should serve as platforms for social transformation. By integrating the principles of human rights, cultural democracy, and participatory governance, museums can create environments that reflect the diversity and needs of their communities. Additionally, I analyze the role of intersectionality as a "tool for analysis, advocacy, and policy-making that addresses multiple forms of discrimination and helps us understand how different sets of identities influence access to rights and opportunities."(Association for Women's Rights in

Development, 2004) in museum practices, considering how factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity shape access to cultural institutions.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative approach, incorporating case studies, participatory action research, and literature review. Key methodologies include mapping, provocation, and prototyping as strategies for engaging communities in museum practices. The study also examines Citizen Innovation Laboratories (CILs) as an experimental framework to promote active participation in museum spaces. To further strengthen this analysis, interviews with museum professionals, community leaders, and visitors were conducted, providing first-hand insights into the challenges and successes of participatory initiatives.

Results and discussion

1. Museums as safe spaces: the challenge of accessibility and inclusion

Despite efforts to become inclusive, many museums still face issues of discrimination, economic barriers, and social exclusion. Gender-based discrimination is particularly evident in museum narratives, visitor experiences, and institutional practices. Additionally, financial constraints and logistical difficulties hinder access for many individuals. Museums must therefore implement proactive strategies to eliminate these barriers and ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, can fully participate in cultural life.

2. The role of community participation

Communities play a crucial role in reclaiming museums as inclusive spaces. When given the opportunity, they transform museums into places of belonging and empowerment. Participatory methodologies encourage horizontal dialogue, ensuring that public spaces reflect diverse voices and experiences. Through initiatives such as community advisory boards, collaborative curation, and public forums, museums can become more responsive to the needs and aspirations of their audiences.

3. Participatory models in museum practice

In this analysis, several models were considered as the theoretical basis, including those applied to museums. Three key models illustrate the impact of active participation in museums:

ICOM International Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) "Museums for everyone!" (CECA,2020) : Highlighting how attention to corporeal needs fosters a sense of ownership among museum visitors.

Nina Simon's Participatory Museum Framework: A five-stage model emphasizing engagement between institutions and society (Simon, 2010).

Leticia Pérez Castellanos' Holistic Cultural Participation: Advocating for decision-making power among museum visitors to democratize cultural spaces (Pérez Castellanos, 2022).

These models demonstrate the potential of participatory approaches in fostering more inclusive museum environments. By actively involving communities in decision-making processes, museums can break down traditional hierarchies and promote shared cultural stewardship.

4. Citizen innovation laboratories (cils) in museums

CILs provide an experimental approach to museum participation by integrating four key agents: government institutions, private enterprises, academic institutions, and citizens (Ankil, 2017) . These laboratories function as co-creation spaces where communities collaborate with stakehold-

ers to develop inclusive narratives and participatory exhibitions. The adaptability of CILs allows them to be applied in diverse contexts, from small local museums to large national institutions, fostering innovation and adaptability in cultural programming.

The Four-Helix Model applied to museums (Figure 1) involves Departments, Sponsorships, Collaborations, and Audiences, with the museum acting as a link that fosters mediation and discourse reconciliation.

"This enables direct impact, a safe space for experimentation, equitable knowledge distribution, and participation in citizenship." (Ramírez Rivera, 2024: 235)
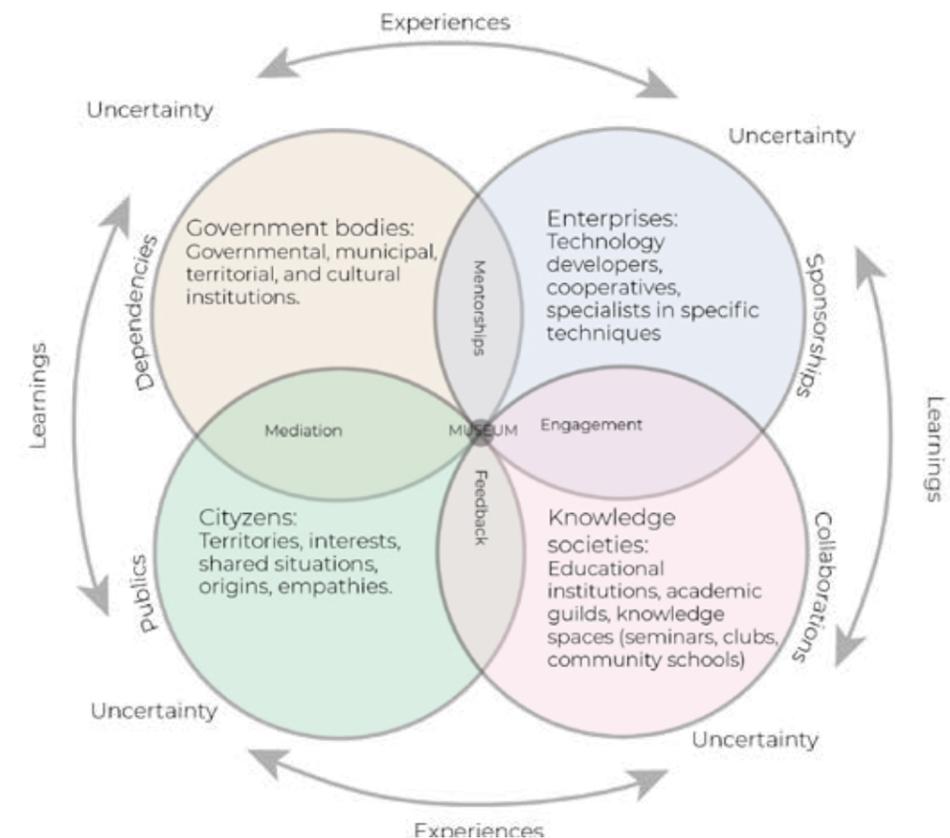

*Fig1. Quadruple Helix Model for Citizen Participation in Museums, (Ramírez Rivera, 2024)*

Case studies: implementing participatory models in latin america

This research presents three case studies demonstrating the practical application of participatory methodologies:

Feminist narratives in museums

The "Laboratorio de Reinvención Participativa en los Museos", that was carried out in 2021, facilitated community-driven feminist narratives, fostering critical discussions on gender representation in museum spaces.

The initiative led to the creation of "Inspectoras de Museos," a digital platform advocating for gender inclusivity in cultural institutions.
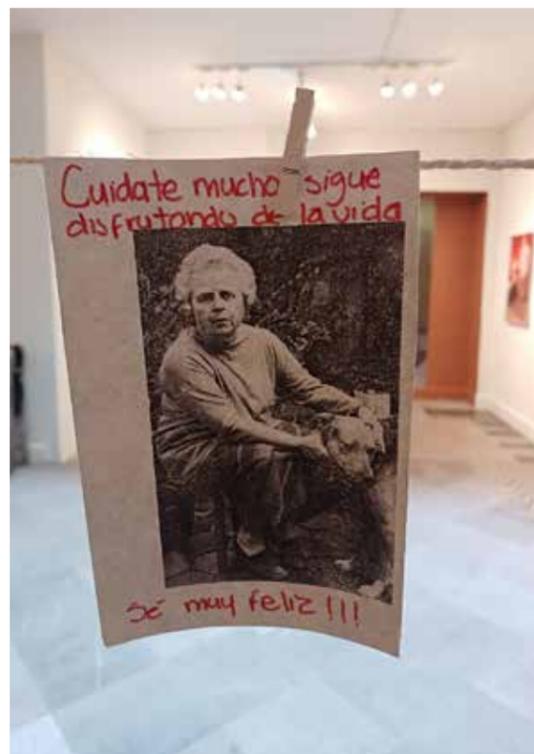
The project also resulted in the development of practical tools, such as the "Violentómetro de Museos," which helps document and analyze gender-based discrimination in museum settings.

Addressing violence and healing through museum exhibitions

Another project was conducted during 2023 and 2024, in which museums served as spaces for visitors to express personal narratives related to gender-based violence, resulting in ephemeral installations that challenged traditional exhibition formats.

The model was implemented in five museums in Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Museo Archivo de la Fotografía, Museo del Telégrafo, and Museo de la Ciudad de México. Participants explored their personal backgrounds and expressed themselves both narratively and museographically.

The interactive nature of these installations fostered collective reflection, encouraging visitors to share their experiences and perspectives in a safe environment.

Cultural rights and art for peace at casa de la bola museum

A collaborative program integrating psychological support, historical narratives, and creative expression to empower women through art and storytelling. The project emphasized the importance of long-term engagement, ensuring that participants remained involved in museum activities beyond the initial workshops.

From February to November, more than 60 women took part in activities focused on self-care, thanatology, childhood, and motherhood. Through these sessions, they engaged in discussions and connected their personal experiences with works of art and hands-on artistic experimentation workshops.

Through this program, we discovered that linking cultural participation with broader human rights issues positions museums as key players in social justice movements.

Conclusion

Museums hold the potential to serve as inclusive and safe spaces, but achieving this goal requires a radical shift toward participatory methodologies. By integrating community voices and fostering co-creation processes, museums can dismantle traditional hierarchies and build environments where diverse identities are acknowledged and valued. The proposed methodological model emphasizes the importance of a radial system of care, ensuring that museums evolve into spaces that truly serve all members of society. Future research should explore how these participatory frameworks can be scaled and adapted to different cultural contexts, further enhancing the role of museums as catalysts for social change.

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CHÁKE BICHO, MUSEO DE CIENCIAS – MUCI'S EXHIBITION THAT PROMOTES ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION TO ITS COMMUNITY

Paola Martínez de Ruidias, Executive Director of MuCi, Paraguay
María Amalia Brítez Rodríguez, PR and manager of School Bookings of MuCi, Paraguay

Chake Bicho, in Paraguayan Guaraní´s native language, is the first owned exhibition of the first interactive science museum in Paraguay. Kickstarted in 2022, MuCi aims to be a place that ignites curiosity with science as an excuse, while fostering playful and enjoyable learning through play and wonder. This exhibition, based on selected insects showcasing part of the native collection at Museo Nacional de Historia Natural del Paraguay with macro photography by artist Henry Maillet, presented an invaluable opportunity to pose a comprehensible social conversation regarding ecosystem preservation in our country, laden with much disinformation regarding the importance that insects hold in the well being and future of our environment.

In this lecture we hope to share the adventure that represented the pursuit of our first ever exhibition, prototype it with our public and to see it take flight with significant success.

BIOGRAPHY

Paola Martínez de Ruidias, Executive Director at MuCi, Paraguay´s first interactive science museum. She holds responsibility for strategic leadership as well as designing and establishing the vision for the museum in this first experimental phase, as well as harnessing the experiences learned through MuCi's prototype spaces towards the final 12.000 sq meter museum soon to begin construction in Asunción's bay. She holds a degree in Science Communications at Universidad Nacional de Asunción and a specialization in Luxury markets and fashion at Universidad Camilo José Cela in Madrid. She is a member of ICOM Paraguay and a speakers coach at Gramo talks.

BIOGRAPHY

María Amalia Brítez Rodríguez is both the Public Relations Lead and manager of school bookings at MuCi (Museo de Ciencias), Paraguay 's first interactive science museum. She is responsible for establishing and strengthening relationships with museums, as well as relevant authorities and maintaining and strengthening the school visit program for public and private schools, visiting public schools that are part of our social program and managing reservation requests from schools to our spaces. She holds a Master Degree in Valorization of Architectural and Environmental Assets by the Istituto Internazionale di Formazione in Reggio Calabria – Italy. Architect by Universidad Nacional de Asunción and Museology diploma by Universidad Autónoma de Asunción. She is also a board member of ICOM Paraguay and ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR) member.

1. Muci – museo de ciencias

MuCi is Paraguay's first interactive science museum. Striving to "spark curiosity with science as an excuse", it is a place to dream, find inspiration, and learn through immersive experiences. Kickstarted in 2022, MuCi currently operates two experimental physical spaces dedicated to exhibit prototyping, visitor engagement and learning. One is called TatakuaLab which is a place where we develop our exhibitions and San Cosmos, a digital planetarium.

These spaces are a revolutionary approach to the museum building, co-creating and learning with visitors prior to the creation of the building itself. Simultaneously, the museum is currently being designed; with construction expected to start in 2025; and doors opening in 2028. MuCi was born from the desire of a group of people who dreamt of opening the first Interactive Science Museum in the country, as a starting point for new opportunities for a better future. Once its doors are opened, MuCi will be one of the best interactive science museums in the region. Committed to establishing a new excellence standard in the

Fig.1 TatakuaLab, un espacio MuCi
(PRessencia comunication agency,2024)

region, MuCi promises a 14.000m2 building and a digital, curved led planetarium for 200 visitors. It will also demonstrate sustainable, locally-developed exhibits that approach science multidisciplinary,

while engaging visitors of all ages. MuCi will be located in Asunción's riverfront, offering world-class architecture, and is already nurturing a close relationship with its neighboring vulnerable communities and city park, based on the notions of social museography.

MuCi aims to be an inclusive and attractive space for a wide variety of visitors. The experiences designed within the museum are intended to cover all ages, from children to adults, providing exhibitions and activities programming for each demographic. MuCi is a place to dream, be inspired and learn with immersive experiences. It is an invitation to awaken curiosity, whose mission is to cultivate curiosity using science as an excuse.

Fig.2 San Cosmos, digital planetarium
(PRessencia comunication agency, 2024)

Fig.3 Cháke Bicho, exhibition (PRessencia comunication agency,2024)

2. Cháke bicho

2.1. Introduction

"Cháke Bicho" exhibition was conceived through a summer prototyping exhibition at TatakuaLab, Fig.3, the project was developed in close collaboration with museum audiences and the local community. Prior to the opening of "Cháke Bicho", the prototyping period was called "*Un Verano en el museo*," where we invited the community to actively participate in the creation process of "Cháke Bicho", without them noticing what they were doing. We presented living collections and received feedback on their experiences, what they would like to see and which interactives were the most appealing, according to different ages.

In "*Un Verano en el museo*" we had interactives, Fig. 4, like finding fake bugs in a

ball pit, little pieces of cardboard where the visitors could write their thoughts regarding insects, magnifying glasses where the visitors could see magnified insects, a place where the visitors can stitch a moth with wool and also seeing living collection, insects. This two-month period of "*Un Verano en el museo*," allowed us to analyze and refine the final exhibit, certifying that "Cháke Bicho" reflected the interests and needs of the public.

Fig.4 Un Verano en el Museo, arts graphic
(MuCi Comunication Department,2024)

2.2. Cháke Bicho Exhibition

"Cháke Bicho", Cháke in Paraguayan Guaraní's native language means take care and *Bicho* means bugs. This exhibition is MuCi's first owned exhibition, based on selected native insects of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural del Paraguay with macro photography by artist Henry Maillet, and it presented an invaluable opportunity to create a social conversation about ecosystems preservation in Paraguay showing the importance that insects hold in the wellbeing and future of our environment.

In Paraguay there is a great diversity of native insects, a hidden treasure of small creatures that inhabit our forests, fields and nature reserves, and even in the urban cities we live in. Without them, ecosystems couldn't work well and human society would have serious difficulties to exist. Challenging the negative prejudices towards insects that were inherited by folklore or popular culture, becomes a powerful mission that is complemented by macro photography technology. These large-scale images not only capture the intrinsic beauty and amazing details of these tiny beings, but also invite us to appreciate their importance from a new perspective, allowing us to look at them more closely. By exposing the audience to these astounding images, we invite them to explore nature with curiosity and wonder, we are building a bridge towards scientific understanding and appreciation. Photography becomes a powerful tool to educate and fascinate, encouraging everyone to look beyond their fears and myths, and discover the vital role that insects play in our ecosystem. In this exhibition, we push science and technology to the limit, revealing the diversity and complexity of these tiny inhabitants of Paraguay`s nature, through insect`s photographs like never seen before in Paraguay. We live surrounded by experiences and stories about insects that often create negative preconceptions about this world. These preconceptions are the things that we want to break and show that these tiny living beings are more important than we think.

In addition, we believe that observing nature motivated by curiosity, wonder, and fascination are the key to doing science in Paraguay. But above all, getting to notice the fragility of the biodiversity of insects, plants, and life in general related to Paraguay in its seven diverse ecoregions.

2.2.1 Objectives

Promote conservation: Highlight the importance of conservation of Paraguay's ecosystems and the preservation of biodiversity, reflecting this importance on insects that are part of the exhibition.

Appropriation and awareness: To provide the audience with an immersive and enriching experience about the world of native insects in Paraguay, so that they can feel a connection and ownership with the ecosystem that surrounds them, and the importance of each living being in the wisdom of nature, in order to generate awareness about its preservation.

Collaboration with allies: Promote cooperation between organizations, scientists and experts in entomology and other related areas to enhance the quality of the exhibition, conservation and local research.

2.2.2 The Exhibition

In **Cháke Bicho** we developed interactive stations where the public participated in a very active way with different stations, such as **Macro photography**, Fig.5: were insects of the *Museo Nacional de Historia Natural* photographed by Henry Maillet with the macro style photography, amplifying each photo in a huge picture. Henry Maillet is a photographer, storyteller and explorer. Henry's mission is to promote collaborative campaigns for the conservation of South America's most valued natural resources. Each of these images is a window into the dichotomy of fragility and strength of life in Paraguay, inviting us to reflect on our responsibility in preserving our ecosystems and natural habitats.

Living Collections, Fig.6: Here you have the chance to see one of the most diverse kingdoms, with more than 400 million years of existence and having survived five mass extinctions, insects are one of the most resilient and adaptable groups on earth, with more than a million species that occupy almost all environments. This diversity and adaptability have allowed them to specialize and develop unique capabilities such as flight. Their life cycles and varied reproductive strategies contribute to their proliferation. Insects have amazing abilities, such as lifting heavy objects and complex communication systems. Their large population plays crucial roles in ecosystems, as pollinators, decomposers, being essential in the food chain and underlining their importance for biodiversity and planetary health.

Fig.5 Macrophotography by Henry Maillet (PRessencia comunicacion agency,2024)

Fig.6 Living Collections
(PRessencia comunication agency,2024)

Fig.7 Insects in equilibrium
(PRessencia comunication agency,2024)

Fig.8 Magnifying glasses table
(PRessencia comunication agency,2024)

Also, we developed others stations such as **Insects in equilibrium**, Fig.7**:** where nature is kept in balance by insects, as they are part of the base of the food chain and play roles such as pollination and biological control up to decomposition and beyond**; Magnifying glasses table,** Fig.8: observing allows us to awaken our curiosity, look more closely at a world that we do not know, observation is one of the main tools used by researchers and scientists to make discoveries**; Insects' searcher**: A game where we use the concept of the ball pit, where kids have to search fake bugs removing their prejudices in a playful way**; Blooms**: John Edmark 's Blooms Art. With this kinetic art we show the pub-

lic what Fibonacci sequence is and **Paraguay Map with ecoregions**: with this map we show that Paraguay has different natural ecoregions, each with its own characteristic vegetation and wildlife, the 7 ecoregions are: *El Pantanal, el Chaco Seco, el Chaco Húmedo, el Bosque Atlántico del Alto Paraná, el Cerrado, los Pastizales Mesopotámicos y el Paraguay Central.*

The exhibition teaches the public in a ludic and interactive way, the importance of insects in the ecosystems The aim of Cháke Bicho is to demonstrate through the exhibition that the diversity of native insects in Paraguay plays a crucial role in our ecosystems, considering that with-

out them terrestrial ecosystems could not work well and human society would have difficulty existing. Through this exhibition, the public is educated by inviting them to explore nature with curiosity, seeking wonder towards understanding scientific value, and encouraging them to take responsible actions for the preservation and respect of the environment. "Cháke Bicho" highlights the crucial role of insects in regulating ecosystems and climate stability. Through educational activities, it shows how insects, as pollinators and decomposers, are essential to mitigating climate change, empowering visitors to take informed action to support environmental sustainability. The "Cháke Bicho" exhibition educates about

the importance of insects in ecosystem health, highlighting the need to conserve Paraguay's native species. It promotes a change in the public's perception, helping to take conservation measures. Cháke Bicho aims to help the public to recognize and learn the value that native insects have for their ecosystem. In this way, it contributes to natural ecosystems following their course for future generations, highlighting their essential role on Earth and discussing the prejudices we have in relation to insects. This exhibition promotes environmental education showing the crucial role that insects play in nature.

2.3. Cháke Bicho: Education in sustainability

Education in sustainability at Chake Bicho was given through what we presented in the museum, through the exhibition and how the elements that compound itself. Helped and encouraged the community for education in the environment, care of it, its ecosystem and taught them scientific value and the role that insects play in ecosystems. The museum depends on the non-verbal language of objects, in this case the photographs that invite us to see in an amplified way every insect`s details, their anatomy, colors, giving it an importance that if we saw them small we would not notice, here the photographic communication invites us to see large images that not only capture the intrinsic beauty and amazing details of these tiny beings, but also invite us to appreciate their importance from a new perspective, allowing us to look at them more closely and reflect on insects and our responsibility in the preservation of ecosystems and natural habitats. In the interactive museum, communication and learning take place in an interactive and playful way, through interactive elements. Interactive actions could be defined as operational or manipulative and observing what happens, a concept proper to an approach of learning, where learning occurs from experience. The museum labels in each sector helps to achieve an understanding what we show in the exhibition, with their designs, colors and texts that invite us to learn more about what we want to communicate, on the subject of the great diversity of native insects that corresponds to a hidden treasure of small creatures that inhabit our forests, fields and natural reserves, and even in

the urban cities that we live in, and without them, ecosystems could not work well and human society would have difficulty in existing. In addition to the value of this exhibition, it educates the public by inviting them to explore nature with curiosity, seeking wonder towards the understanding of scientific value and encouraging responsible actions for the preservation and respect of the environment. Education is also provided through communication with mediators who talk to visitors, formulates questions. Fig.9. Mediators are eloquent, curious people whose objective is to serve the public and accompany them in their approach to science. The role of the mediator in a science interactive museum is to accompany the public with the objective that the public could draw their own conclusions by encouraging them with critical thinking; since we work on social museology, where museology is at the service of society, being participatory, where the public is the protagonist and the museums invites them to generate their critical thinking through dialogue and construction of their own knowledge. We also have audio guides, in Guaraní, our native language, in Spanish and in English, so that language barriers can`t restrict the public from what Cháke Bicho wants to tell them.

At Cháke Bicho we spread environmental education, the value of the importance of insects in their ecosystems through interactive museography, through its photography, through its living collections, through the projection of Paraguayan map with its ecoregions, through the magnifying glass table that invites us to observe, to ask ourselves questions, to stop, to pause and reflect and, sometimes as a reward, to un-

Fig.9 Scholar's visitor in TatakuaLab
(PRessencia comunicacion agency,2024)

derstand how the world around us works, appreciating in a better way its diversity and complexity. In the Cháke Bicho exhibition where everything comes together in an interactive science museum, which is a communication machine and through communication we educate the public on the values of native insects, ecosystem, insect care and sustainability.

3. Results and conclusion

Cháke Bicho was one of the most beloved exhibitions by the Paraguayan audience, till now in the history of MuCi, perhaps because it was an exhibition where we as Paraguayans felt identified and reflected the sense of belonging unconsciously or

maybe because insects awakened curiosity. It is an exhibition that taught us to see insects with different eyes, removing prejudices. The public that visited us acquired knowledge to actively promote sustainable development, through education on the importance of the role of insects in nature, seeing their value in sustainability itself. During the 4 months of opening, it was visited by 13,000 people, a record for MuCi, highlighting the relevance of an interactive science museum in a country where this type of institution did not exist before our arrival. In addition, 3,000 students from primary, secondary and university levels of education, from various places of the country participated in the exhibition. School visits in particular

have a long-term impact, since interested teachers who came with their students and Cháke Bicho offer memorable learning experiences that contribute to national education. Furthermore, one of the tangible achievements was the access to the insect catalog of the National Museum of Natural History of Paraguay to a wider and more diverse public, using non-traditional approaches. This project allowed the collection to be presented in an interactive and educational way, significantly increasing its visibility and appreciation. In "Cháke Bicho," several good practices and guidelines were adopted to ensure its success and sustainability. Guided by sustainability principles, prioritizing biodiversity conservation and environmental education. Implemented participatory museography, involving the public in the prototyping phase to adjust the exhibit according to their needs and expectations. We also followed universal accessibility guidelines, ensuring that the exhibit was inclusive for all visitors. In addition, we used museographic materials that were reused or will be reused in future exhibits, with the objective of reducing our impact on waste generation and promoting more sustainable practices within the museum. How you see it, Cháke Bicho is a great exhibition that promotes sustainability in environmental education

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Fig.10 Conclusion.
(MuCi Comunication Department,2024,2024)

Cháke bicho's credits

An exhibition by MuCi in partnership with the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural del Paraguay (MNHNP), with photographs by Henry Maillet.

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GUARDIANS OF DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF TBILISI MUSEUMS UNION IN FOSTERING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Ph.D Nini Sanadiradze, General Director of Tbilisi Museums Union in 2016-2025

Museums have evolved beyond their traditional role as preservers of artifacts to become dynamic platforms for civic discourse and social transformation. The Tbilisi Museums Union, established in 2016 through the consolidation of nine independent museums, exemplifies this evolution within the Georgian context. Through initiatives such as Thursday Evenings, Museum out of Museum, and penitentiary system collaborations, the Union actively responds to societal needs while fostering democratic participation. Quantitative data reveals significant impact: over 5,800 participants in educational programs in 2022 alone, more than 1,000 individuals from the penitentiary system engaged in resocialization activities, and specialized support for over 500 Ukrainian refugees following Russia's 2022 invasion. This transformation, recognized with a Special Commendation from the European Museum of the Year Award jury in 2023, illustrates how memorial museums can transcend passive commemoration to become active defenders of democratic values.

BIOGRAPHY

Nini Sanadiradze was the General Director of the Tbilisi Museums Union in 2016-2025, an institution that received the EMYA Special Commendation in 2023. She oversees multiple cultural institutions, including the Ilia Chavchavadze Literary Memorial Museum, and has spearheaded numerous programs promoting civic engagement and social justice. Actively involved in academia, Nini teaches museum management and cultural policy at various universities in Georgia. A prolific author of scientific articles and monographs, she has extensive expertise in integrated communications and has collaborated with both local and international cultural organizations. Since 2007, Nini has been engaged with various international programs and ICOM, where she currently serves as Vice Chair of ICOM Georgia.

Introduction

In an increasingly polarized world, cultural institutions face a critical choice: remain passive repositories of historical artifacts or actively engage with contemporary societal challenges. Museums worldwide are reconceptualizing their role, moving beyond collection and preservation toward fostering civic engagement and democratic values (Bennett, 2018; Black, 2021). This evolution is particularly significant in post-Soviet nations like Georgia, where democratic consolidation remains fragile and historical narratives continue to be contested.

The political climate in Georgia today presents substantial challenges to democratic institutions and freedom of expression. Museums bear a heightened responsibility to not only preserve historical

truth but create spaces where democratic discourse can flourish. As Sandell (2012) notes, "Museums are never neutral spaces – they inevitably communicate values, perspectives, and ideologies through what they choose to collect, display, and how they interpret these materials."

This paper examines how the Tbilisi Museums Union has embraced this responsibility, transforming from traditional memorial institutions into dynamic spaces for civic engagement – an achievement recognized through a Special Commendation from the European Museum of the Year Award jury in 2023. Drawing on data collected between 2016-2024, it analyzes how specifically designed programs have enabled the Union to honor its memorial function while addressing contemporary social challenges.

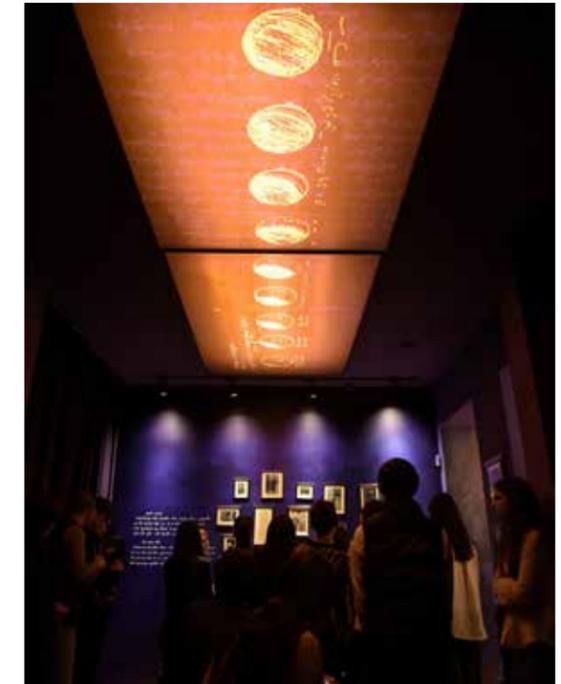## Historical Context: Museums in Post-Soviet Georgia

Under Soviet rule (1921-1991), Georgian museums primarily served propagandistic functions, presenting carefully curated narratives that reinforced Soviet ideology while suppressing national identity (Jones, 2013). Memorial museums dedicated to cultural figures were permitted only insofar as their revolutionary or national-independence aspects could be carefully muted.

Following Georgia's independence in 1991, museums faced crumbling infrastructure, outdated exhibition practices, limited resources, and the complex task of reinterpreting collections to reflect newly accessible historical truths. By the early 2000s, Georgian museums remained largely rooted in Soviet-era exhibition practices – static displays, limited interpretation, and minimal visitor engagement. Memorial museums saw steadily declining audience numbers between 2000-2015, with annual visitors decreasing by approximately 35% (Georgian National Museum, 2016).

This decline reflected a broader disconnection between memorial institutions and contemporary society. As one museum professional noted in 2015, "Our memorial museums were frozen in time, displaying personal artifacts without connecting them to broader historical contexts or contemporary relevance" (Museum Professionals Survey, 2015).

The Union of Tbilisi Municipal Museums: Founding and Mission

The Union of Tbilisi Municipal Museums was established on July 29, 2016, consol-

idating nine independent museums into a single administrative and conceptual entity. The Union comprises eight memorial museums dedicated to prominent individuals who significantly influenced Georgian culture, literature, and national identity from the 19th to the 20th centuries, including the Ilia Chavchavadze Literary Memorial Museum honoring the writer, public figure, and national liberation leader (1837-1907) who advocated for press freedom and human rights.

The Union's mission extends far beyond administrative consolidation. It aims to fundamentally reimagine museums' role in contemporary Georgian society by integrating traditional preservation with dynamic educational initiatives. The Union's primary goal is to transform these museums from static memorial spaces into interactive educational environments where heritage preservation merges with civic dialogue. Core objectives include "contex-

tualizing historical figures within broader historical, political, and social contexts" and "drawing explicit connections between historical struggles for freedom and contemporary democratic challenges."

European Recognition:

The Award-Winning Ilia Chavchavadze Museum

In 2023, the Tbilisi Museums Union achieved international recognition when the Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum received a Special Commendation from the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) jury at the European Museum Academy's annual conference in Timisoara, Romania. The conference theme, "Democracy and Democratization: Urgent Challenges Today," provided a fitting backdrop for recognizing the museum's contributions to democratic discourse.

The jury praised the museum for its homage to Chavchavadze as a distinguished

national figure, its celebration of his legacy of national freedom and progress, and how the museum prompts visitors to contemplate historical struggles while inspiring them to address contemporary social challenges. They specifically commended the Union's creative approach to knowledge generation, interpretation, and social responsibility within the complex geographical and historical context of Tbilisi.

Historically, Chavchavadze's house served as a hub for progressive thinking and pivotal processes in Georgia. The rehabilitated museum honors this tradition by continuing to serve as a space for democratic discourse through programs like Thursday Evenings – creating a powerful connection between past struggles for freedom and present democratic challenges.

Museum Rehabilitation and Development Projects

From 2016 to the present, with financial support from the Tbilisi Municipality, the

Union has carried out extensive rehabilitation across several museums. These renovations were not merely cosmetic but aimed at fundamentally reimagining how these spaces could engage with visitors and serve broader social purposes.

The Ilia Chavchavadze Literary-Memorial Museum underwent four years of large-scale rehabilitation, including structural strengthening, restoration of decorative façade details and authentic interiors, courtyard improvements, engineering upgrades, and creation of modern exhibition spaces alongside restored memorial halls. This careful restoration preserved the museum's 19th-century character while creating spaces for contemporary dialogue – a transformation recognized by the EMYA jury in 2023.

Thursday Evenings: Creating Forums for Democratic Discourse

The "Thursday Evenings" program at the Ilia Chavchavadze Literary Memorial Museum draws direct inspiration from historical practice: in the late 19th century, Chavchavadze regularly hosted Thursday gatherings at his home where intellectuals, artists, and activists discussed literature, politics, and social reform – despite surveillance by imperial Russian police.

Launched in September 2021, this program reimagines this historical practice as a platform for civic discourse on pressing contemporary issues. Between September 2021 and February 2024, the museum hosted over 65 public discussions on topics including human rights, media freedom, social justice, marginalized commu-

nities, historical memory, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation.

These discussions deliberately bring together diverse perspectives, creating rare opportunities for dialogue across political divides in an increasingly polarized society. Attendance data reveals growing community response, with average participation increasing from 24 attendees per event in 2021 to 68 per event by late 2023. Importantly, 42% of participants had never previously visited the museum, suggesting the program's success in attracting new audiences (Thursday Evenings Program Evaluation, 2023).

The program's impact extends beyond attendance numbers. As one regular participant reflected: "In a political environment where opposing viewpoints rarely engage constructively, Thursday Evenings creates a space where I can hear perspectives I disagree with presented respectfully. The historical setting reminds us that these debates about Georgia's future have deep roots in our past struggles for independence and democracy." (Participant Interview, 2023)

Museum staff report that the program has occasionally faced external pressure to avoid controversial topics. However, the Union has maintained its commitment to open discourse, arguing that this approach honors the legacy of figures like Chavchavadze who advocated for freedom of expression despite political risk. This commitment to democratic dialogue was a key factor in the EMYA jury's decision to recognize the museum with a Special Commendation.

Museum out of Museum: Extending Reach Beyond Traditional Boundaries

Recognizing that museum visitation remains constrained by geographical, economic, and social barriers, the Union launched its "Museum out of Museum" initiative in 2018. The initiative's founding principle was that "museums should not merely wait for visitors to come to them, but should go to the people, generate interest, and establish two-way communication."

The initiative encompasses multiple outreach strategies: mobile exhibitions in rural and conflict-affected regions, educational programs in schools and community centers, digital content, targeted programming for internally displaced persons, partnerships with non-traditional venues, and walking tours that extend museum narratives into urban environments.

Between 2018-2023, the initiative implemented over 200 activities reaching more than 3,000 participants across Georgia, with 68% of these activities occurring in regions outside Tbilisi. The program has been particularly impactful in addressing the needs of displaced communities. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Union developed specialized programs for Ukrainian refugees temporarily residing in Georgia, reaching over 500 displaced persons and their family members.

The initiative also features innovative urban engagement through specialized walking tours, including "Golovin... From Opera to Opera" tracing Tbilisi's main avenue and "The Nobelians in Tbilisi" exploring the visits of 35 Nobel Prize laureates to Georgia. These programs create connections between museum collections and the broader urban landscape, effectively turning the city itself into an extension of the museum experience.

Democratic Values in Action: Working with the Penitentiary System

The Union's collaboration with Georgia's penitentiary system demonstrates how museums can extend their educational mission to include society's most marginalized individuals while directly continuing the legacy of historical figures like Ilia Chavchavadze, who actively opposed capital punishment between 1895-1905.

This partnership began in 2021 with a Memorandum of Cooperation with the penitentiary rehabilitation institution of the Ministry of Justice, establishing a framework for resocialization-rehabilitation programs. In October 2022, the partnership expanded through a joint project with the National Agency for Crime Prevention, focused on reintegrating individuals in conflict with the law.

The program has several distinctive features that enhance its effectiveness: multi-stakeholder involvement including social workers and psychologists; family inclusion in museum activities; progressive educational methodology using interactive approaches; and historical context as inspiration for contemporary questions of justice and dignity.

Quantitative data demonstrates substantial reach: over 50 programs implemented within closed penitentiary institutions, more than 1,000 individuals hosted at museums as part of resocialization efforts, 108 distinct educational programs involving 642 participants, and 529 individuals in diversion programs participating in museum visits.

Educational programs cover diverse themes spanning cultural heritage, scientific innovation, and democratic values. Program evaluations indicate positive impacts on participants' well-being, communication skills, and civic knowledge, demonstrating how cultural institutions can contribute meaningfully to social reintegration while honoring the legacy of Georgian historical figures who advocated for human dignity.

Education and Learning Innovation

At the core of the Union's transformation lies a fundamental reimagining of museum education. Rather than treating educational activities as supplementary to collection preservation, the Union has positioned education as central to its mission, developing a comprehensive approach that combines formal and informal learning opportunities.

The Union currently offers 39 distinctive educational programs across its museums, each designed with specific learning objectives aligned with Georgia's national curriculum while extending beyond traditional classroom frameworks. These programs are deliberately structured to develop critical thinking rather than passive knowledge absorption.

The Union also operates a structured 4-month internship program that has trained numerous future museum professionals: 32 interns in 2017 (12 subsequently employed), 22 in 2018 (5 employed), 7 in 2019 (1 employed), 18 in 2020 (2 employed), 2 in 2021, and 18 in 2022 (3 employed).

During COVID-19 restrictions, the Union quickly adapted with virtual learning tours, digital educational resources, online guided experiences, and virtual museum access. This comprehensive educational approach demonstrates how museums can serve as vital educational institutions that complement formal education while offering distinctive learning methodologies.

Collaborative Initiatives

The Union has established formal partnerships with numerous organizations to extend its social impact:

- Mental Health Centre: Joint programming for children with mental health challenges
- Centre for Culture, Education and Sports of the Blind: Adapted workshops for visitors with vision impairments
- National Award for Teachers: Free museum access for all 60 members of the "Tens Club" teacher recognition program
- Various ethnic community organizations and civic initiatives

These partnerships have facilitated knowledge exchange, capacity building, and implementation of innovative methodologies while strengthening the Union's position within Georgia and connecting local heritage to global cultural discourse.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Given the current political situation and ongoing challenges, it is increasingly difficult to develop a concrete strategy for implementing future plans and programs. However, the Tbilisi Museums Union remains committed to its mission and the historical legacy it upholds. Despite uncertainties, the Union will continue to safeguard democratic values, promote civic engagement, and serve as a platform for open dialogue, ensuring that culture remains a space for resilience and resistance.

The Tbilisi Museums Union exemplifies how memorial museums can transcend passive commemoration to become active participants in contemporary civic life – an achievement recognized through the prestigious European Museum of the Year Award Special Commendation in 2023. By deliberately connecting historical struggles for freedom and human rights to current democratic challenges, the Union has transformed its museums from static repositories of memory into dynamic platforms for civic engagement.

As political polarization and democratic backsliding threaten many societies globally, cultural institutions face a critical choice between passive neutrality and active defense of democratic values. The Tbilisi Museums Union demonstrates that even small, resource-constrained institutions can make meaningful contributions to civic life by deliberately reimagining their societal role.

Museums are not merely windows to the past; they can be catalysts for the future. By honoring historical struggles for freedom, democracy, and human rights through active civic engagement rather than passive preservation, memorial museums fulfill their highest purpose – not just remembering history but ensuring its most noble aspirations continue to inspire action in the present.

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HARNESSING DATA TRACKING FOR MUSEUMS: PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND INNOVATIVE COMMUNICATION

Manuel Scortichini, *Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Industrial Design at the University of Camerino, Italy*

In an era of unprecedented change and crisis, museums are at a crossroads in their role as pillars of community resilience and facilitators of public dialogue. This paper investigates how data tracking technologies, traditionally used to analyse visitor experiences, can be repurposed to foster resilience and improve communication strategies within cultural institutions. By redefining data boundaries and visitor involvement, museums can engage underrepresented groups, promote civic participation and citizen science initiatives.

This paper explores how data-driven insights – ranging from visitor flow to engagement levels – can be leveraged to create citizen science programs and customized content that respond to the needs of diverse populations. Furthermore, it examines how innovative communication strategies, enhanced by real-time data tracking, can foster dialogue, collaboration, and collective action, contributing to the creation of a museum digital ecosystem.

Key areas of focus include the curatorial opportunity of using data in community-building efforts and the transformative potential of data technologies to inspire hope and drive positive change. By investigating these intersections, this paper aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on how museums can adapt to contemporary crises while remaining catalysts for community empowerment.

BIOGRAPHY

Manuel Scortichini is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Industrial Design at the University of Camerino. Since 2022, he has been a contract professor in Food Design and has served as a teaching tutor since 2018. Over the years, he has had the opportunity to be involved in the organisation of several exhibitions, conferences, and teaching seminars at the 'Eduardo Vittoria' School of Architecture and Design in Ascoli Piceno. Throughout his academic career, he has participated in numerous training courses and workshops in Italy and abroad, consolidating his knowledge in the fields of industrial design and museum science. Currently, he works as a research fellow and contract lecturer at the University of Camerino.

Introduction

Data plays a crucial role in shaping modern society by driving innovation, enhancing decision-making, and transforming industries. It fuels advancements in technology, supports personalised services, and enables more efficient resource management. In sectors like healthcare, education, and urban planning, data helps optimize operations, improve outcomes, and foster inclusivity. In the contemporary digital economy, it powers algorithms, artificial intelligence, and automation, creating new business models and economic opportunities. The extensive use of data

in products and services prompts significant questions about the opportunities it offers in the design process, such as facilitating co-design among diverse stakeholders. However, it also presents challenges, particularly concerning privacy, ownership, and transparency. This phenomenon as been described as "datafication" of humans, this concept refers to the utilisation of data from people's online activities, app use, embedded sensors in mobile and wearable devices, and physical locations (Lupton, 2021).

While data holds great potential for museums, relatively few institutions are fully utilizing it to its maximum potential. Many museums are still in the early stages of adopting data-driven strategies due to factors like limited resources, technical expertise, or the complexity of integrating new technologies with traditional practices. Smaller museums, in particular, may lack the infrastructure to collect, analyze, and apply data effectively. Currently, many museums primarily use data within their CMS (Content Management Systems) for logistical and administrative tasks, such as cataloging collections, tracking visitor numbers, and optimizing operational efficiency. While this is valuable, there is significant untapped potential for using data in a more curatorial and creative way, going beyond just economic optimization.

The updated guidelines from the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022) urge museums to rethink their role as active contributors within their regions, emphasizing the importance of understanding community needs and fostering practices that eliminate barriers – whether physical, cognitive, or psycho-senso-

ry – to ensure accessibility for all. There is pressure on museums to address social and environmental concerns, such as pandemics and climate change. This study investigates how museums might employ data-tracking technologies to improve community resilience and create creative communication plans that empower a range of audiences. Museums might create specialized programs for underrepresented groups, guaranteeing inclusivity and promoting a sense of belonging, by examining visitor behavior and participation through a data-driven approach.

Tracking and Timing (T&T)

The amount of time spent paying attention is essential for learning, and research has demonstrated a positive correlation between the time visitors spend in an exhibition and their learning outcomes (Borun et al., 1997). Observing visitors discreetly as they navigate an exhibition, interacting with each other and with the exhibit elements, provides valuable insights into what captures their attention. It reveals how much time visitors spend in the exhibition and which parts engage them the most. This analytical approach is structured over time into a true sub-discipline of visitor studies, known as tracking and timing (T&T), the earliest evidence of this approach dates back to the 1930s.

In 1933, Arthur Melton carried out an in-depth study on visitor timing and observation, exploring key concepts like the attraction and holding power of exhibitions. He also noted that most visitors tend to spend only a brief amount of time in galleries or at individual exhibits. During a field study Melton noticed that by varying

the number of paintings exhibited in a gallery, noted that as the number increased, so did the visitors' interest. Melton's research played a crucial role in developing methods for observing and measuring visitor interactions with exhibits, representing one of the earliest instances of systematically applying data to the study of museums. These findings made an important contribution to the understanding of visitor behavioural patterns within museum spaces and are still considered fundamental in this field of research today.

This discipline saw a significant contribution in 1983, E. Veron and M. Levasseur provided a more formalized and scientific approach to understanding visitor engagement. In their seminal study *Ethnographie de l'exposition*, they proposed a framework that classified different types of museum visitors based on their behaviors and movement patterns within exhibition spaces (Ant, Fish, Butterfly and Grasshopper visiting style). The authors argued that exhibitions are not just static displays, but dynamic environments shaped by the actions and interactions of visitors. This typology provided museum professionals and researchers with a structured way to understand the diversity of visitor interactions within the same exhibition space, offering a way to map and analyze how visitors navigate and experience museum content. Another key insight was the recognition that visitors bring their backgrounds, experiences, and interpretations to the museum space. This understanding of the visitor as an active participant rather than a passive observer laid the foundation for what would later be known as "visitor experience" in museum studies.

Building on this foundation, Beverly Serrell's 1997 study *Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions* took a closer look at how long visitors engage with exhibits and where they direct their attention. Serrell's research emphasized the importance of understanding time allocation as a key factor in measuring the effectiveness and appeal of exhibitions, using data to reveal patterns in how visitors interact with different types of content. One of the key contributions was her pioneering use of time as a metric for understanding visitor engagement. Unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on qualitative aspects of the visitor experience, Serrell's study took a quantitative approach, measuring the amount of time visitors spent in specific areas of exhibitions. This research demonstrated a direct correlation between time spent and engagement, establishing time as a critical indicator of a visitor's level of interest and interaction. This work was able to identify patterns of behavior that revealed much about how exhibitions capture and maintain visitor attention.

More recently, a research group from MIT University conducted an advanced study on visitor flows at the Louvre Museum in Paris, using sophisticated tracking technologies to analyze how people move through the museum's vast galleries (Yoshimura et al., 2014). This research provided critical insights into crowd management, spatial design, and visitor engagement, showcasing the potential of data in optimizing both the visitor experience and the operational efficiency of large institutions like the Louvre. The technology involved in detecting visitor flows was Bluetooth tracking systems, an accurate

system for indoor mapping, which can consistently generate relevant datasets, enabling researchers to analyze a large amount of data compared to the empirical data collections made by museum operators in the past. This is particularly useful for museum visitor studies, which have a long tradition of employing interviews, questionnaires, and observations for their research.

In recent years, the field of T&T has evolved with the integration of advanced technologies, enabling museums to gather more precise data about visitor behaviour and to process that data in a more sophisticated way. Among the companies leading this innovation, New Zealand's company Dexibit has become a prominent player in the museum sector by providing advanced solutions that integrate big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning to track, analyse and predict visitor behavior. The Dexibit platform focuses on gathering and interpreting various data points from visitor interactions, including entry statistics, dwell time, movement patterns, and engagement levels with exhibits. By tracking these metrics, museums can gain a comprehensive understanding of how visitors interact with their spaces, allowing them to make informed decisions about exhibition design, visitor flow management, and programming. One of the core features of Dexibit's platform is predictive analytics. The system leverages AI to forecast visitor attendance, helping museums anticipate peak times, manage staff, and optimize resources. These predictions are based on historical data, seasonality, external factors like weather or local events,

and real-time visitor trends, providing museums with a powerful tool to enhance their planning and operational strategies.

Personal data as a curatorial opportunity

The creation of dynamic, context-aware communication strategies that tackle urgent societal challenges can be informed by real-time data. Using interactive exhibits and responsive technologies, museums have the potential to cultivate discourse on civic involvement, establish secure environments for cooperation, and advance mutual understanding across disparate groups. New technologies facilitate scientific research by supporting the collaborative collection of data and dissemination of information in real-time (Mooney, Corcoran & Ciepluch 2013).

In times of disaster like COVID-19, data tracking has shown to help promote community cohesiveness and improve accessibility and safety. In 2020[1], the M9 Museum in Mestre, Venice, implemented an innovative indoor tracking system called *EMMA Tracking* (Electronic Museum Management & Analytics) developed by *RnB4Culture*, to ensure social distancing among visitors. This technology provided real-time monitoring of individual movements within the museum spaces, allowing for the enforcement of physical distancing measures. *EMMA Tracking* operates by collecting anonymized data on visitor locations, enabling the museum to manage crowd density effectively while maintaining a safe distance between visitors. This

EMMA Tracking, M9 Museum, Mestre, Venice

system exemplifies the role of data-driven technologies in enhancing museum operations, particularly in addressing public health challenges, while also raising important considerations regarding visitor privacy and data protection in cultural institutions.

Recall Duncan Cameron's well-known article *The museum, a temple or the forum* where he challenges and questions the identity of science museums. He asks his readers

to consider, specifically, a shift from the traditional role of informal settings as temples of collections – to forums as open places where visitors can actively engage in discussions and debates about issues that matter. He writes, "The forum is where the battles are fought, the temple is where the victors rest. The former is the process, the latter is the product" (Cameron, 1971).

Building on this idea of the museum as a forum, contemporary institutions are

Digital Relational Ecosystem, Maxxi Museum, Rome

The Pen, Cooper Hewitt, NY

increasingly striving to become dynamic spaces where visitors not only observe but actively contribute to the experience. This shift reflects a reimagining of the museum as a civic plaza – a place where diverse voices matter, and where visitors are empowered to express themselves, engage in dialogue, and co-create meaning. By moving beyond the traditional model of passive observation, museums can foster environments where participation is central, encouraging visitors to share their perspectives and interact with both the exhibits and one another. This participatory model transforms the museum into a space of ongoing negotiation and exchange, where meaning is not dictated by curators alone but emerges through the interactions between visitors, collections, and curatorial frameworks.

The exhibition *What a Wonderful World*[2] hosted at the MAXXI museum in Rome from May 2022 to March 2023, aimed to explore the intersections of scientific and technological progress with contemporary social challenges. An innovative aspect of this exhibition is its collaboration with the research centre *HER: She Loves Data*, which has introduced a *Digital Relational Ecosystem*. This ecosystem invites visitors to interact with the artworks, sharing impressions that are mapped and visualized in real time, essentially allowing the audi-

ence to co-author the narrative of the exhibition alongside the museum.

Expanding on this trend, the use of personal data collected during museum visits presents a unique opportunity to extend and personalize the visitor experience even after they leave the physical space. By leveraging data-driven systems, museums can tailor post-visit interactions based on individual interests and preferences captured during the visit, offering customized information, recommendations, or further insights aligned with the visitor's engagement. This approach not only enhances the relevance of the content but also deepens the connection between the visitor and the museum, fostering an ongoing relationship that transcends the traditional boundaries of time and space. Visitors can receive follow-up emails with personalized suggestions for future exhibitions, articles, or multimedia content that align with their preferences, transforming the museum visit into a continuous and evolving learning experience.

An example of this strategy is *The Pen*[3], an innovative project created by the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. Launched in 2015, the Pen was developed in collaboration with *Local Projects* and *Diller Scofidio + Renfro,* as part of the museum's effort to integrate digital tools into the visitor experience. The Pen is a handheld, stylus-like device

2 https://www.maxxi.art/events/what-a-wonderful-world/

3 https://www.cooperhewitt.org/new-experience/designing-pen/

that allows visitors to interact with the museum's exhibitions in a personalized and dynamic way. By using the Pen, visitors can "collect" objects by tapping it on special NFC (Near Field Communication) tags next to the exhibits, effectively creating a digital archive of their visit. This collection of objects can then be accessed online after the visit, allowing users to explore additional content, learn more about the objects, or revisit their favorite pieces.

Conclusion

Museums possess the potential to serve as agents of constructive transformation for society. They can motivate communities to take significant action on important issues like social justice, environmental sustainability, and public health by using data-driven communication tactics. As seen in those examples, museums could use technology to promote community transformation and resilience by showcasing excellent practices of participatory museology. In times of crisis, museums may establish themselves as a reliable institution by addressing ethical issues and fostering transparency, enabling communities to overcome obstacles together.

By integrating data into curatorial practices, museums can design more engaging, personalized experiences for visitors. In a near future, interactive exhibit design could use personal data, related on visitors behaviors and preferences, and shape thematic organization of exhibitions, the selection of artworks, or the development of interactive elements tailored to different audience segments. This approach opens the door to using data as a tool for storytelling and cultural interpretation, enriching the visitor's journey through personalized content, adaptive exhibit pathways, or responsive environments that change based on real-time feedback.

Data tracking technologies, such as mobile apps, digital kiosks, and sensors, could allow museums to monitor visitor flow and dwell times, helping optimize exhibit layouts, manage crowds, and ensure smoother operations. Museums could use data to measure the success of exhibitions and educational programs by analyzing attendance, visitor feedback, and social media engagement, which informs future strategies. Furthermore, data plays a critical role in digital initiatives, such as virtual exhibitions and online collections, by helping institutions understand how audiences interact with their digital content. To expand their reach, making cultural resources more accessible to global audiences. By harnessing the power of data, museums are not only improving their internal processes but also transforming the way they engage and educate the public, fostering a more dynamic and inclusive cultural environment.

However, as larger and more technologically advanced museums increasingly leverage data to enhance visitor experiences and optimize operations, it becomes essential to recognize that the success of these innovations relies heavily on trust. For most institutions, the challenge remains in transitioning from conventional methods to more sophisticated data usage, but the trend is growing as awareness of the benefits and accessible tools for data collection and analysis emerge. While data holds significant potential to drive innovation in curatorial practices and visitor engagement, its use also rais-

es critical ethical considerations. Museums must navigate issues of privacy, consent, and data security with great care. To maintain their role as trusted cultural institutions, museums must implement robust ethical frameworks that prioritize transparency, protect visitor autonomy, and ensure fair use of personal data. Trust is the most valuable asset for a cultural institution, and by committing to responsible data practices, museums can foster deeper connections with their audiences, ensuring that their engagement is not only innovative but also respectful and secure.

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BUILDING BRIDGES: COALITION BUILDING AND PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFEGUARDING THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

Tamar Sopromadze, Chairperson of the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield

This paper examines the collaborative efforts by the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield with local museums, non-governmental organizations, and community centers to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of individuals displaced from the Didi Liakhvi Valley, located in the Tskhinvali region of Georgia, due to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Focusing on its main goal – safeguarding cultural heritage in times of crisis, the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield has built vital partnerships with organizations along the occupation line and in internally displaced person settlements. We analyze methodologies employed since 2022, addressing successes and challenges in cultural preservation following the conflict. Ultimately, this presentation emphasizes the significance of collaboration in protecting the unique identities and traditions of displaced communities.

BIOGRAPHY

Tamar Sopromadze, a native of Kutaisi, Georgia, holds a bachelor's degree in Art History from Tbilisi State University and a master's degree in Arts and Culture from Leiden University. In 2020, she joined the Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, dedicated to safeguarding cultural heritage during crises. By 2022, she coordinated projects supporting communities displaced by the 2008 war with Russia. In 2023, she was elected chair of the board. Tamar's work with Blue Shield has enriched her understanding of local and global cultural heritage, enabling her to contribute meaningfully to preserving Georgia's cultural legacy.

Introduction

The armed conflict in the Tskhinvali Region of Georgia in August 2008 led to the widespread displacement of the ethnic Georgian population and the destruction of entire villages, including cultural sites and museums. Between 2008 and 2015, at least 12 historical villages of the Didi Liakhvi, Patara Liakhvi, and Prone River Valleys, home to around 35,000 ethnic Georgians, were demolished to prevent the population from returning. Today, the internally displaced people (IDPs) from the region are dispersed in the settlements across Georgia.

The Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield (GNCBS) is a non-governmental organization, which, similar to its umbrella organization – Blue Shield International aims to protect the cultural heritage from the threats of armed conflict and natural disasters and promote and facilitate the state implementation the Hague Convention, which touches on protection of the cultural heritage in the occupied territories. Through this framework, GNCBS has been working towards

Figure 1, by Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, focus group meeting in the Koda IDP settlement, in the Koda Community Education Center

protecting the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Tskhinvali region, which was occupied during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

The intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses the traditional elements of the culture that are immaterial, such as knowledge, customs, practices, and oral histories. ICH is carried by the community and safeguarded by the transfer of knowledge between the generations. ICH is often tied to tangible heritage sites.

In times of crisis, and especially in displacement, safeguarding intangible heritage becomes exceedingly significant and challenging as it is interconnected with communities' everyday lives, which almost always are changed by the crisis. In Georgia, the IDPs living in different settlements have little interaction with each other, and the practice of local traditions and knowledge is limited, depriving the newer generation of opportunities to enhance their understanding of local identity and culture.

Therefore, the role of local museums, and community centers in ICH preservation is significant as they work closely with the carriers of the heritage. The GNCBS's collaboration with local organizations shows how cooperation is vital for carrying out heritage preservation efforts during times of crisis.

Since 2022, the GNCBS has developed various methodologies all aimed at protecting the IHC in displacement. This paper will seek to critically explore the employed strategies while placing a keen focus on partnerships with local museums, NGOs, and community centers while analyzing the successes and challenges, with emphasis on how such collective cooperations help reinforce the resilience of the displaced communities.

Methodology

Building Partnerships for Cultural Preservation – First Steps

In view of the mass displacement due to the armed conflict in the Tskhinvali region

of Georgia, GNCBS found it important to seek out collaborative relationships with numerous local organizations, including museums, community centers, and NGOs.

GNCBS's greatest partner is the Didi Liakhvi Museum-Reserve (DLVMR), which was located in the occupied Tskhinvali region before the war. The museum's office was destroyed during the war and has since been resettled in the Verkhvebi IDP settlement in Gori, where it functions as both a research and a community center for IDP children and adults. The museum is doing continuous documentation work on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, serving as a focal point for the protection and preservation of cultural identity in times of displacement.

One of the earlier collaborative endeavors between GNCBS and DLVMR involved a joint project to assess the condition of immovable heritage in the Tskhinvali region, which resulted in publishing the report and an updated map of occupied heritage sites. Inspired by this mutual success, both organizations have taken on the mission of protecting the intangible heritage of displaced communities. The DLVMR, through its continuous work, has gained the trust of the local IDP community, which was a big help when conducting the planned activities.

Focus Groups and Safe Spaces – New Partnerships

GNCBS, along with partners, DLVMR and the Center for the Protection of Historic and Cultural Heritage, adopted the method of conducting the focus group meetings for ICH research. Focus groups gathered around ten to fifteen IDPs and led the mod-

erated conversation about their knowledge, memories, traditions in their villages, and how they have been affected by the displacement. These meetings needed to create safe spaces where IDPs could share experiences and recollections, participants would need an easy atmosphere of trust-building, which was all the more relevant due to the trauma those displaced were exposed to. Therefore, conducting them in an environment that was known to and comfortable for the participants was essential.

The first of such meetings was held at the DLVMR, where the local IDPs from the settlement where the museum is located had been invited. Finding a proper venue for the rest of the meetings was quite a challenge, as IDP settlements are scattered across Georgia, with variable conditions and resources. Very few had established community centers, which were a prerequisite for conducting focus group sessions.

Through our research, the project team sought out several community centers – which included the Community Education Centers in Koda and Shaumiani IDP settlements, located in the Kvemo Kartli region, quite separated from the rest of the settlements. These organizations turned out to be a key place for GNCBS to interact with IDPs from the Tskhinvali region and to carry out focus group meetings. Another successful collaboration occurred in the Tserovani IDP settlement – with the Youth House of the settlement. The community centers assisted the project team with inviting potential attendees but more importantly, provided well-known and trusted spaces for the meetings. This familiarity was important, as it reduced any uncertainty or discomfort for the IDPs,

Figure 2, by Georgian National Committee of the Blue Shield, the meeting "IDP Organizations and Coalition Building"

who were attending such meetings for the first time. Following the meetings, a large number of the participants expressed their happiness with discussing the topics related to their traditions and lives before the war, which, no doubt, was facilitated by the supportive environment.

Apart from the focus group meetings, GNCBS and DLVMR worked together to build an educational program for the DLVMR that would facilitate the transfer of knowledge about the occupied heritage. A relationship with community centers that was established through the focus group meetings provided an opportunity for the project group to present educational programs outside of the DLVMR walls, for the IDP children involved with the community centers mentioned above.

Another key initiative by the project team was the creation of a traveling exhibition showcasing the intangible heritage of one of the occupied villages. From the outset, the exhibition was designed to be mobile, leveraging the partnerships mentioned earlier to allow it to be displayed at vari-

ous community centers, thereby reaching a wider audience. So far, it has been exhibited in the Shaumiani Community Education Center and additional exhibition openings in other settlements are planned.

The focus groups and educational program led to the idea of establishing a broader network of IDP-centered community organizations throughout Georgia. These included several rounds of meetings held under the auspices of the GNCBS with the theme "IDP Organizations and Coalition Building," aimed at forging closer ties among these organizations and fostering more joint efforts. The goal was to empower these groups to work together on joint activities that would support cultural preservation for IDP communities. These meetings served to underline the important role of partnerships in protecting heritage in times of crisis. They also offered an opportunity for exchange and spawning future collaborative endeavors. The conversations resulted in drafting several ideas for future collaborations between the attendees.

Results

Although the GNCBS's work with local museums and community centers is geared towards preserving the intangible heritage of displaced populations, it should not go unmentioned that an established partnership itself can be considered an accomplishment. A network of community centers allows greater outreach to displaced populations, promoting collective identity and resilience.

Together with DLVMR and community centers, this collaboration allows for planning for the multi-layered strategy of preserving cultural heritage. The creation of a safe space for dialogue and sharing has enabled the project team to galvanize useful information and insights from community members and ensured that their voices become central to the process of cultural preservation.

However, challenges persist. Both GNCBS and DLVMR face limited resources, and ongoing support from external partners – such as international NGOs and government agencies – is essential. Additionally, the dispersed nature of IDP communities, coupled with varying levels of resources, makes it challenging to effectively reach and engage all communities in efforts to preserve their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The importance of coalition-building and partnerships in protecting the intangible cultural heritage of displaced communities has been one of the central issues of this paper. Collaborations with local museums, community centers, and NGOs have been essential in creating safe spaces for IDPs from the Didi Liakhvi Valley to share their memories

and traditions. The GNCBS has successfully built a community-based and sustainable framework for cultural preservation through focus groups, educational programs, and the creation of a network of stakeholders. This initiative highlights the importance of collaboration during times of crisis and provides valuable insights into the continued need for partnership and support in protecting the heritage of displaced populations.

Acknowledgements

PEOPLE MAKE MUSEUMS

Roberto Alexis Torres Mandiola, **Head of Communications at Museo Artequin, Chile**

Technology has transformed how museums engage with audiences, enabling new ways to connect through digital platforms. However, many institutions still center their communication on exhibitions, activities, and the historical value of their collections rather than fostering deeper audience participation.

To move beyond traditional approaches, museums must shift from a hegemonic model to a more open and collaborative creation process. By involving communities as active participants, museums can encourage audiences to generate content in their own voices, making cultural narratives more inclusive and dynamic.

The Museum of Memory and Human Rights of Chile has embraced this challenge by prioritizing narrative and emotional engagement in its digital initiatives. A key example is The Memory Dial, an online audio gallery that recreated the events of the 1973 coup d'état minute by minute. Broadcast via open radio on its 45th anniversary, this project reached over 4 million listeners, demonstrating the power of participatory and immersive storytelling.

Keywords: Digital narratives, storytelling, archive activation, audio collections, digital strategy, streaming, online platforms.

BIOGRAPHY

Professional with more than 10 years of experience in communication for artistic, cultural, and heritage projects. Bachelor in Advertising Communication (Universidad de Santiago), Master in Strategic Communication (UDP), and Diploma in Education and Human Rights (Universidad de Chile). I have specialized in communication and digital platforms, branding, audience development, and innovation in the creative industry. My contribution from the spaces where I have worked focuses on connecting people and organizations through participatory strategies and meaningful experiences that promote access to culture as a citizen's right.

Introduction

Museums play a crucial role in society, having evolved from custodians of historical artifacts into dynamic spaces for collective meaning-making. This transformation has been driven by technological advancements and the rise of digital narratives and transmedia storytelling, concepts introduced by Henry Jenkins in 2003. Digital storytelling connects past, present, and future, making museum collections more accessible and emotionally engaging.

While some museums still rely on traditional Web 1.0 structures, newer digital narratives foster audience interaction and participation. Storytelling in digital spaces strengthens museum identities through collective contributions and emotional connections.

An example of this is Sintoniza con la Memoria, a digital initiative by the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos that recreated the events of Chile's 1973 coup using archival radio broadcasts. Reaching nearly 4 million listeners worldwide, this project demonstrated the power of digital storytelling in engaging audiences and preserving historical memory.

Fig. 1 Image excerpt from speech by Mauricio Rojas, former Minister of Culture of Chile.
Source: Capture of video from the Tune in to Memory project.

Fig. 2 Some of the discourses expressed in social media
Source: Capture of video from the Tune in to Memory project.

Objectives

Even though the events that took place during the Chilean civil-military dictatorship are globally criticized, in Chile, there are still denialist discourses and public figures who justify the military regime and its actions. In addition to relativizing human rights violations, this group also tries to instill the idea that these are events of the past and that it is necessary to move on and forget what happened.

Against this backdrop, one of the main objectives of the initiative was to generate an experience of memory that would help new generations in particular to understand how 11 September 1973 was experienced, and thus open up a space for national reflection on the importance of respect for human rights and democratic values in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

On the other hand, this activation also sought to enhance the value of the Muse-um's audio archive collections, through a platform that would allow all these records to be linked as part of an auditory experience that would account for the events that took place during the 1973 coup d'état.

Developing the initiative

As part of the commemoration of the 45th anniversary of the coup d'état in Chile, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights launched the digital experience Sintoniza con la Memoria, a real-time audio gallery that reconstructed all the events of 11 September 1973, through audios recovered from the time that belong to the Radio Archive kept by the Museum.

The Archive is a platform that brings together the Museum's collection of radio recordings, which include to journalistic dispatches, news items, segments, an-
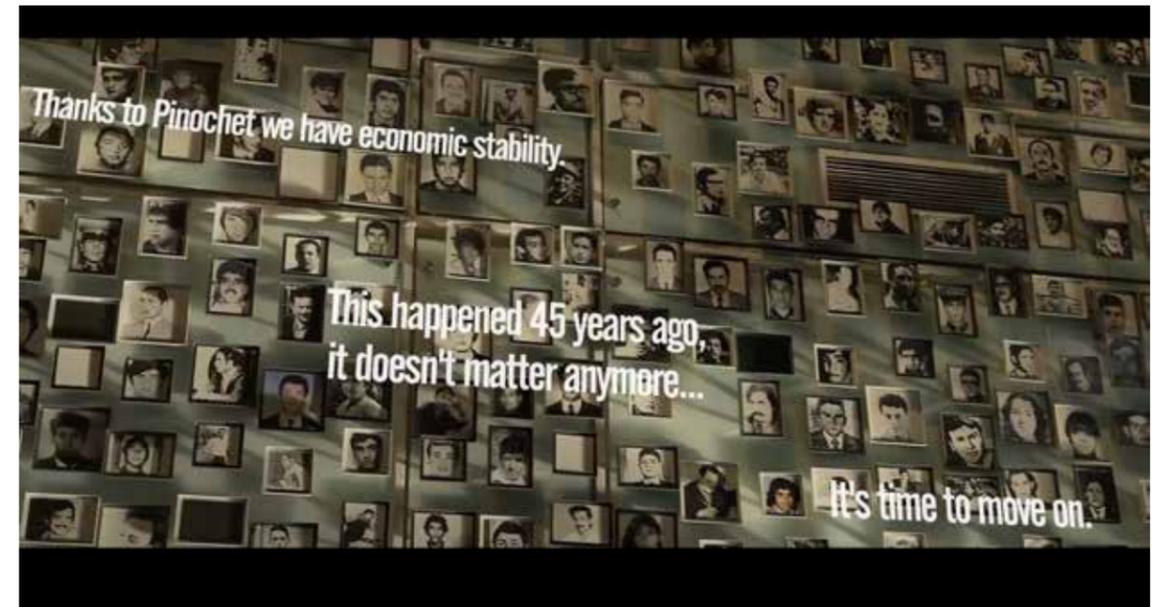

Fig. 3 Campaign graphic of digital action
Source: Museum of Memory and Human Rights

nouncements, and complete programs broadcast by national and international radio stations during the Chilean civil-military dictatorship. It is a platform dedicated mainly to research, which presents its content in database format.

This classified and categorized repository was used to build an online platform that, through a transmedia narrative strategy, managed to articulate all these archives into a unified and experiential narrative, allowing the events to be reconstructed in

Fig. 4 Sound file editing work. Audio chronology.
Source: Capture of video from the Tune in to Memory project.

Fig. 5 Project video graphic. .
Source: Capture of video from the Tune in to Memory project.

such a way that they were synchronized chronologically and listened to at the same time as they occurred in the past. In total, more than 100 sound files were used during the 10 hours that the broadcast was on air.

The minute-by-minute transmission of the coup d'état was broadcast on Radio Santiago's 690 AM frequency and via streaming on the project's official website and the Museum's social networks.

The broadcast began at 8:00 a.m. with historical audio that chronologically narrated the events that took place on that day which marked the lives of thousands of Chilean men and women. Military bands, secret communications, Allende's last speech, and live coverage of the bombing of La Moneda Palace were part of this radio timeline, which, without interruptions, accompanied the listeners until 6:00 p.m., concluding with the speech of the mem-

bers of the military junta that marked the beginning of the 17 years of the military regime.

Such was the impact of the initiative that the broadcast was listened to and widely commented on across social networks by close to 4 million people in 75 countries, becoming a trending topic of the day. In addition, it was shared during the programmatic and news coverage of important national media, valuing the exciting and innovative nature of the experience.

This sound-based journey into the past was made possible through extensive research and curatorial work, transforming the Museum's heritage into a unique and meaningful experience. Although the archives were already publicly accessible, this new narrative approach gave them renewed relevance, — a model that could be replicated with other documentary collections.
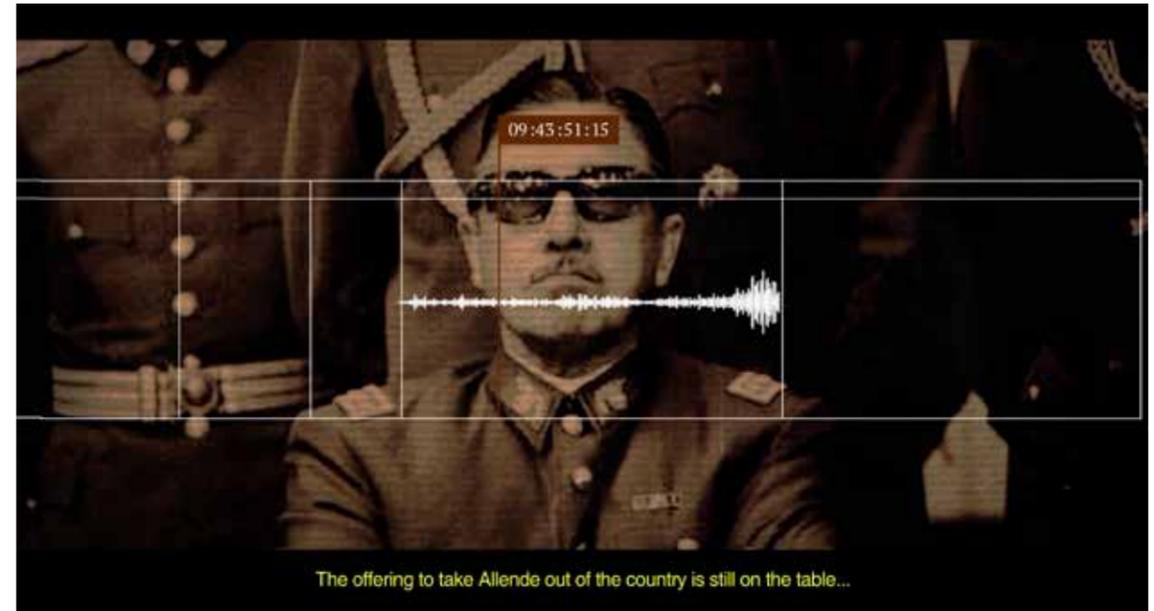

Fig. 6 Summary of media coverage of the transmission.
Source: Capture of video from the Tune in to Memory project.

Developed in collaboration with the Wolf BCPP advertising agency, the project received major awards, including a Bronze Lion at Cannes Lions 2019, a Chile Diseño 2019 award, and the Grand

Prix and Gold at the Achap Advertising Festival 2018.

Due to its impact and innovative use of auditory heritage, the initiative was reim-

plemented in 2019 and ultimately became a permanent part of the Museum's annual September 11th commemoration. The full project archive is available at www.sintonizaconlamemoria.cl.

Results and conclusions

Sintoniza con la Memoria reached nearly 4 million listeners in 75 countries – 21 times the museum's annual visits. The hashtag #A45AñosdelGolpe became a trending topic in Chile, amplifying the Museum's commemorative program across national and international media. The initiative also attracted 20,000 new social media followers and generated media visibility valued at over 100 million Chilean pesos in advertising.

This initiative demonstrated the power of digital storytelling in museums, fostering engagement and reflection on historical events. By leveraging existing heritage, digital narratives can deepen audience connection and offer new dimensions for archiving and cataloging, integrating multimedia and transmedia approaches.

However, this shift also raises challenges, such as balancing institutional authority with public participation, navigating tensions between expert and popular knowledge, and managing global-local perspectives. Museums must embrace these transformations holistically – conceptually, methodologically, and ideologically.

Sintoniza con la Memoria exemplifies how digital storytelling can enhance museum experiences, turning collections into dynamic, emotional journeys where each visitor defines their own path of discovery and meaning.

Fig. 7 Cloud of terms most used on 11 September 2018
Source: Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos Report

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EXPANDING THE STAGE: PERFORMATIVITY, INCLUSION, ACCESSIBILITY AND DIALOGUE IN DIGITAL MUSEUM THEATRE

Foteini Venieri, **Co-chair of** *Heterotopia*

This paper critically examines how digital technologies are reshaping museum theatre, emphasizing their potential to promote dialogic encounters, enhance inclusivity, audience engagement, and narrative complexity. By exploring innovations such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), memorial avatars, and AI-driven narratives, the research highlights both the opportunities and ethical dilemmas these tools introduce. While digital transformation democratizes heritage interpretation, it also necessitates careful consideration of representational ethics and interdisciplinary methodologies to balance technological advancements with the core principles of live, embodied storytelling in the context of heritage interpretation.

BIOGRAPHY

Foteini Venieri is a researcher and practitioner in museum learning, digital storytelling, and cultural heritage. She holds a Ph.D in Museum Theatre from the University of Thessaly, a Master's in Cultural Management from Panteion University, and a degree in Theatre Studies from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She has conducted postdoctoral research at Panteion University on dialogic practices in museums. She is an adjunct lecturer at the Hellenic Open University and the University of Peloponnese and serves as co-chair of Heterotopia, a non-profit promoting the role of theatre in museums and heritage sites. In 2023, she was awarded the HISTOLAB fellowship – a joint initiative by the Council of Europe and the EU – to research the digital transition of museum theatre. She has collaborated with museums, archives, and municipalities to develop museum theatre programs, including an award-winning online live program for Roma students, which received the 2024 ICOM CECA Best Practice Award. Her work focuses on public engagement, innovative educational methodologies, and the integration of digital tools in heritage communication. She has published extensively, and her book on museum theatre was released in Greek in 2024 by Disigma Publications.

Introduction

The contemporary museum landscape is undergoing a radical metamorphosis, challenging traditional paradigms of cultural preservation and knowledge transmission. Museums are evolving from static repositories of artifacts to dynamic, dialogical platforms of cultural exchange, redefining the relationship between institutions, audiences, and historical narratives (Bennett, 2013; Witcomb, 2015, Kamariotou et al, 2021, UNESCO, 2024).

This transformation is driven by technological advancements, changing audience expectations, and an increasing emphasis on inclusive, participatory approaches to cultural interpretation (Bertnard et al, 2021). Digital storytelling emerges as a crucial element, offering innovative methods for engaging diverse audiences through immersive, interactive experiences (Drotner & Schrøder, 2013, Bonacini, 2022).

Museum theatre – with first-person interpretation being one of its most established forms – represents a distinctive performative approach to heritage interpretation, characterized by its emphasis on live, embodied storytelling that transforms museum spaces into vibrant platforms of cultural dialogue (Hughes, 1998). Actors take on the role of historic characters or contemporary withnesses and invite audiences into direct conversations, in a specific historical context. Digital technologies both challenge and expand this practice, serving as transformative agents that fundamentally reimagine the performative potential of heritage interpretation, extending beyond technological implementation, challenging core conceptual frameworks, like authenticity, liveness, and audience agency.

Participatory Histories: Digital Museum Theatre as Dialogical and Inclusive Performance

In contemporary museum theatre, history is no longer presented as a fixed, monolithic past but as a lived and evolving dialogue shaped by multiple perspectives. At the same time, performance functions as a liminal space – a threshold where history is enacted, contested, and negotiated in real time (Schechner, 2002; Turner, 1982). This liminality fosters a participatory and inclusive approach to historical interpretation, where visitors actively engage in meaning-making.

This shift toward participatory and interactive storytelling fundamentally reconfigures narrative authority within museum theatre. As audiences engage with Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven narratives, historical interpretation becomes a dynamic, co-constructed process. These technologies foster a polyphonic space where multiple perspectives intersect, allowing users to navigate and negotiate historical meaning in real time. Within this context, the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, already used in museum theatre in physical spaces (Venieri, 2024b), become particularly relevant, as they highlight how museum theatre, through digital mediation, transforms from a monological recounting of history into a relational, multi-voiced discourse shaped by audience participation.

Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Participation, and the Transformation of Narrative Authority

Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia provide a critical lens for understanding museum theatre as an inherently interactive and multi-voiced practice. Unlike static, monological interpretations of history, dialogism emphasizes relational meaning-making, where narratives emerge through exchange rather than authoritative imposition. Heteroglossia is a notion referring to the coexistence of multiple voices and perspectives, without hierarchy, within a single discourse, making it particularly relevant to museum theatre as it encourages a plurality of viewpoints – historical, contemporary, institutional, and visitor-generated – within the same space, even if they are completely opposite. This multiplicity fosters critical dialogue, disrupts dominant narratives, and repositions the museum as a site of negotiation.

Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture builds upon Bakhtin's framework by demonstrating how digital technologies dismantle traditional knowledge hierarchies, transforming audiences into co-authors of historical narratives rather than passive consumers. When museum theatre integrates digital technologies, participation is extended even further. AI-driven storytelling, VR, and AR restructure the narrative process itself by embedding visitors within historical narratives, enabling them to actively shape the unfolding story through their choices and interpretations. This shift redistributes narrative authority, rendering it fluid and dialogical.

Inclusion, Narrative Identity, and the Ethics of Digital Representation

The transformation of narrative authority in museum theatre aligns with broader shifts in heritage interpretation toward inclusivity and democratization. Ricoeur's (1991) theory of narrative identity underscores that both personal and collective identities are continuously shaped through storytelling. Digital mediation enhances this process, offering new avenues for historically marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives (Costa et al., 2024). AI-driven memorial avatars, for instance, preserve the voices of historical figures or recently deceased individuals in interactive formats, fostering ongoing dialogue between past and present.

However, as Auslander (2022) warns, the shift toward digital mediation raises critical ethical concerns regarding authenticity, representation, and the risk of reinforcing biases – concerns echoed by Jackson and Kidd (2008), who recognize museum theatre's power to humanize history but caution that without careful framing, it may inadvertently oversimplify narratives or reinforce selective representation. To mitigate these risks, they advocate incorporating debriefing components to contextualize sensitive issues, fostering critical engagement and addressing gaps in representation. Examples of debriefing components in digital storytelling include interactive discussions following a performance, where audiences can reflect on the narrative's themes (Giannachi, 2016); multimedia exhibits that provide additional historical context and scrollytelling techniques that allow viewers to explore layered narratives at their own pace through animations, videos, and audio clips (Drucker, 2020).

Digital Mediation and Performative Strategies

As performances unfold across virtual, augmented, and interactive platforms, they not only deepen immersion but also redefine the epistemological and ontological frameworks of museum theatre (Venieri, 2025; Auslander, 2022). These emerging approaches preserve the core principles of live interpretation while expanding performative possibilities and reimagining how historical narratives are experienced, embodied, and co-created (Tilden, 1957; Venieri, 2024a, 2025). This transformation aligns with the concept of the "experience economy," where transformative encounters are prioritized as audiences actively engage in meaning-making (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Building on the theoretical foundations of digital performativity, which sees digital media as a generative performative force (Auslander, 2022), the following sections provide some concrete examples of how Virtual and Augmented Reality, AI-driven narratives, and interactive digital platforms enable more dynamic, responsive, and participatory engagement with cultural heritage.

Virtual and Augmented Reality: Reconfiguring Immersive Historical Narratives

Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR) extend the performative aspects of museum theatre, facilitating an embodied form of spectatorship, where audiences step into reconstructed historical moments guided by AI-driven, pre-recorded or live-narrated storytelling mechanisms.
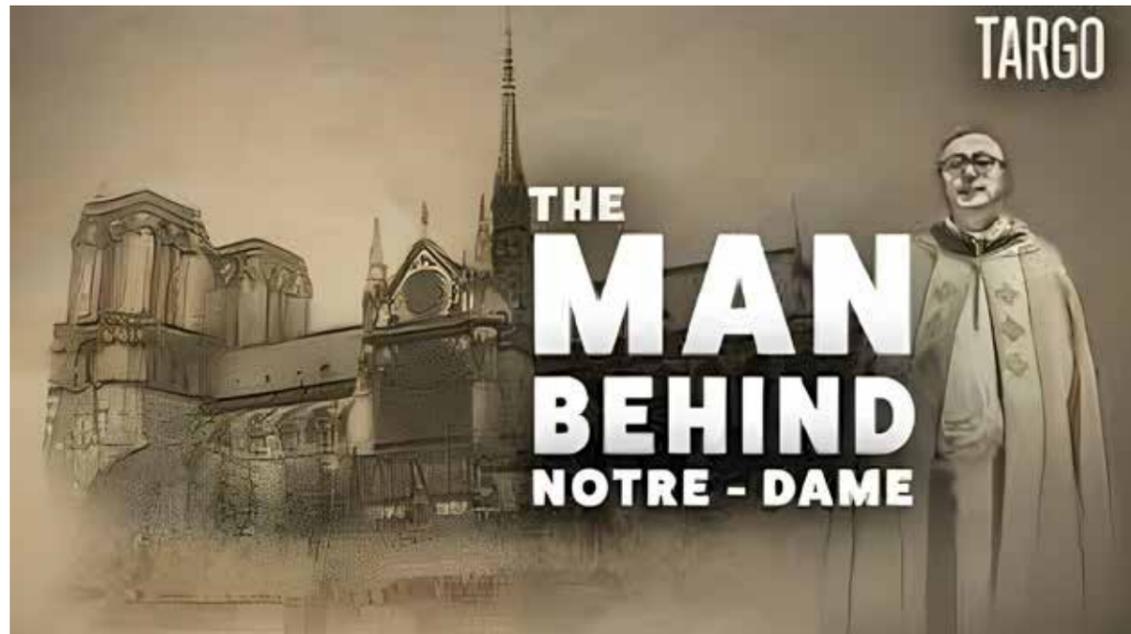
Figure 1. Screenshot from the VR documentary The Man Behind Notre-Dame

The Man Behind Notre-Dame[1] exemplifies this approach as a VR documentary providing an intimate encounter with the Rector-Archpriest of Notre-Dame Cathedral, Patrick Chauvet. This three-chapter narrative offers a behind-the-scenes journey through the cathedral's sacristy, office, and rooftop – spaces typically inaccessible to the public. Following the 2019 fire, this immersive performance became a form of digital historical documentation, later informing VR projects on the cathedral's reconstruction (Marasco, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, AR with the concept of "augmented space" (Manovich, 2006), where digital layers superimposed onto physical environments create hybrid experiences that reframe historical narratives. The Kinfolk App[2] demonstrates this by employing AR to bring historical figures into public spaces. Users can place virtual monuments of figures like Gaspar Yanga, a 16th-century slave-turned-liberator, into real-world locations and interact with them through multimedia content such as text, music, and video. This interactive AR experience allows users to engage with underrepresented historical narratives in a dynamic, immersive way, directly influencing how they perceive and interact with these figures in their everyday environments.

These technologies also enable users to inhabit the perspectives of historical figures through digital avatars, fostering

Figure 2. Image from the Kinfolk app

first-person interpretative approaches. The Smithsonian Institution's *Moonwalk: A Virtual Reality Experience*[3] transports users directly into the Apollo 11 mission, placing them in the astronauts' boots during the historic 1969 moon landing. Through scientifically accurate reconstructions and original mission audio, participants physically and emotionally connect with this pivotal moment in space exploration, gaining deeper appreciation of the technical challenges, historical significance, and human achievement represented by humanity's first steps on another world.

Interactive Digital Platforms and Live Online Performances

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development of digital platforms, revealing new possibilities for museum theatre. Online programs and digital storytelling platforms emerged as critical strategies for maintaining performative engagement during physical distancing, challenging traditional understandings of liveness and reinforcing digital performance's capacity to retain the relational dynamics of in-person theatre (Venieri, 2025, Auslander, 2022).

Zoom Through History, a UK-based company specializing in online live museum theatre, illustrates this evolution. By integrating dialogical experiences with digital interactivity, their productions transcend geographical limitations, ensuring sustained engagement with audiences worldwide (Venieri, 2024a). One particularly impactful project, *In the Footsteps of Vangelis Soukas*, developed by Heterotopia for the Museum of Greek Folk Musical Instruments in Athens, Greece, focused on the life of the renowned Greek Roma musician Vangelis Soukas, and addressed Roma students all over Greece. Given the historical exclusion of Greek Roma populations from official narratives and curricula, this initiative served as an act of inclusion and performative historiography – reclaiming marginalized histories through digital mediation and creating inclusive spaces for underrepresented communities. The project's success was underscored by its recognition with the ICOM

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1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLuVsFGXukc&ab_channel=TARGO
2 https://time.com/6235841/kinfolk-augmented-reality/

3 https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-and-meta-invite-visitors-walk-moon-exclusive-new-virtual-reality

Figure 3. MAMA AFRICA. The Memorial Avatar of Miriam Makeba presented at the Stereopsia 2024 Event in Brussels. Photo: XR4Heritage.
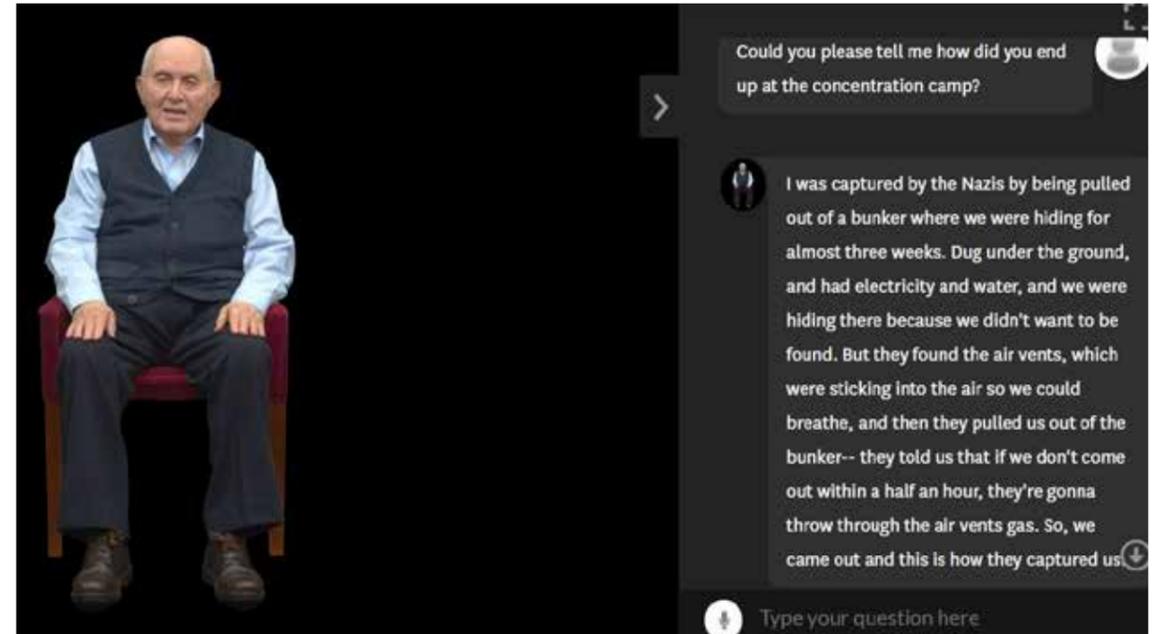

Figure 4. Screenshot from USC Shoah Foundation's "Dimensions in Testimony" project—conversation with Pinchas Gutter.

CECA Best Practice Award 2024 (Polyzoi & Venieri, 2024), highlighting the potential of digital platforms to broaden accessibility and engage challenging audiences.

Performative Strategies of Digital Transformation: AI and Memorial Avatars

AI-driven narrative technologies and memorial avatars introduce new dimensions to museum theatre, enabling real-time engagement with historical figures. These avatars function as interactive, pedagogical tools that sustain the relational essence of museum theatre while adapting to contemporary engagement modes.

The memorial avatar of Miriam Makeba, the iconic South African singer and activist, offers a compelling example. A digital likeness infused with AI-driven responses guide audiences through her life's journey, discussing her music and her anti-apartheid activism.[4] Such experiences enable interaction with historical figures beyond static representations, fostering embodied, affective engagement with history. The USC Shoah Foundation's *Dimensions in Testimony*[5] project demonstrates this approach by transforming Holocaust survivor testimonies into interactive conversations. Using natural language processing, audiences pose questions to digital representations of survivors who respond based on pre-recorded video data, preserving oral histories while maintaining the affective immediacy of live storytelling.

Participatory Performance Architectures: Merging AI, VR, and Live Interaction

Beyond individual engagement through AI-driven narratives, digital technologies also facilitate participatory performance architectures that transform audiences from passive spectators into active co-creators of historical narratives.

The Gunpowder Plot at the Tower of London exemplifies this integration by combining VR, AR, and live actors to transport participants to 1605. Visitors become active agents within the narrative, making choices that influence the plot's progression. Through digital representations and interactive elements, the synthesis of VR and live performance creates an embodied, multisensory historical encounter.

Immersive technologies also extend to marginalized narratives, as demonstrated by *The Middle Passage Experience: African Captivity in Brazil, 1750-1850* .[6] This VR project allows audiences not only to witness the realities of the transatlantic slave trade but also to take on the role of newly captured Africans, centering historically silenced voices and making a complex experience more tangible through multisensory engagement, including

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4 https://heterotopia.gr/news/memorial-avatars-ai-influencers-and-the-future-of-1st-person-interpretation/
5 https://sfi.usc.edu/dit

6 https://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/mpe/

Figure 5 and 6. The Gunpowder Plot. Layered Reality™ and Historic Royal Palaces. Photograph: Mark Dawson.

spatial audio and visual reconstructions that evoke the conditions of captivity and forced migration.

These methods have the potential to create relational and performative spaces where underrepresented voices can be heard, contesting hegemonic historiographies and reconfiguring museum theatre as a site of multi-layered engagement and critical inquiry. However, as digital mediation reshapes historical engagement, ethical considerations become increasingly significant.

Opportunities, Challenges and Ethical Considerations

The digital transformation of museum theatre presents groundbreaking opportunities for accessibility, engagement, and historical representation. Digital technologies enable institutions to reach global audiences, personalize interpretative experiences, and amplify historically excluded narratives. Through transmedia storytelling and digital archives, these in-

novations facilitate more inclusive and critical approaches to historical interpretation (Kidd, 2013; Simşek & Erbay, 2024). Additionally, they introduce new performative modalities that transcend physical constraints, fostering multi-modal storytelling, interactive structures, and personalized engagement. By enhancing audience immersion, emotional connection, and participation, digital innovations make historical narratives more dynamic, relational, and inclusive (Marasco, 2020).

However, despite these advancements, digital museum theatre must navigate significant technological and artistic challenges. Ensuring multivocality and a sense of authenticity in virtual environments requires more than technological sophistication – it demands thoughtful curation that prioritizes historical integrity, contextualization, and emotional depth (Farthing, 2011; Scarso, 2021). Furthermore, disparities in technological access risk reinforcing cultural inequities rather than bridging them, limiting the reach of these digital experiences (Duester, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning and a reflexive approach to digital curation to ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

Beyond technical and artistic considerations, the algorithmic mediation of cultural narratives raises profound ethical concerns, particularly regarding marginalized histories and the risk of perpetuating systemic biases (Manžuch, 2017). Central to these concerns is the need to preserve individual and communal agency in digital storytelling, ensuring that AI-driven narratives and digital reconstructions adhere to ethical standards of consent, representation, and self-narration (Scarso, 2021). Successfully navigating this complex terrain demands a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach. By integrating perspectives from performance practitioners, archivists, museologists, technology experts, and community representatives, digital museum theatre can develop more nuanced, ethically responsible narratives (Alrutz, 2011, Dalziel, 2021).

Discussion and Conclusion

Digital technologies offer innovative storytelling methods, deeper audience engagement, and expanded accessibility while simultaneously raising important questions about authenticity, artistic integrity, and long-term sustainability.A central finding is the inherent duality of digitalization in museum theatre. While technologies like AR, VR, and AI significantly expand possibilities for audience immersion and historical representation through interactive, adaptive storytelling that accommodates diverse needs, they also fundamentally challenge traditional conceptions of live

performance, prompting critical examination of theatrical presence and human interaction in cultural narratives.

The financial and infrastructural implications present another critical dimension. Museums and theatre institutions with limited resources may struggle to invest in and maintain high-quality digital tools, potentially exacerbating the digital divide within the cultural sector. This disparity raises concerns that only wealthy or well-funded institutions can fully leverage digital transformation, potentially widening inequalities in access to technologically enhanced performances.

Moreover, integrating digital tools in museum theatre introduces complex ethical and curatorial challenges. The digital adaptation of historical narratives can remove context and diminish cultural nuance. The imperative for historical accuracy and respect for diverse perspectives becomes even more crucial when digital formats enable instant modification and audience-driven adaptations.

Ultimately, the future of museum theatre depends on successfully navigating between established practices and innovation – embracing digital transformation, preserving the distinctive artistic and educational value of live performance, and viewing digital technologies not as replacements for live performance, but as transformative extensions of performative potential.

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BIOGRAPHY

A highly experienced Communication Professional and Doctor of Social Sciences, Anna Verulashvili has nearly two decades of expertise in cultural heritage across both public and private sectors. She served as Head of Public Relations at the Georgian National Museum from 2005 to 2022. Currently, she manages strategic communications at TBC Bank, overseeing PR for TBC Concept exhibition halls and CSR initiatives. With over 10 years of experience in higher education, she is now an Associate Professor at Business and Technology University, teaching marketing and public relations. Anna is also an active member of International Council of Museums, International Committee for Marketing and Public Relations – ICOM COMMS (then ICOM MPR) and European Marketing and Management Association -EUMMAS.

EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EXHIBITION'S COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES: VERA PAGAVA EXHIBITION

Anna Verulashvili, Strategic communications Manager for TBC Concept exhibition halls and CSR initiatives; Associate professor at Business and Technology University

In today's digital age, museums and cultural heritage organizations face both opportunities and challenges in reaching their audiences. Effective communication is crucial – not only for promoting and interpreting cultural heritage but also for engaging diverse groups, from children to adults, in meaningful ways.

This article focuses on the Effectiveness of Exhibition Communication Technologies, using the Vera Pagava exhibition as a case study.

This very article shares the communication strategy behind two exhibitions of the Georgian artist Vera Pagava (1907–1988), who spent much of her life in France. The first exhibition took place in 2012 at the Georgian National Museum, and the second is currently being held at the TBC Concept exhibition space in Tbilisi, running through 2023 and 2024. I am not an art historian, I am a communications professional. Therefore, I will not assess Vera Pagava's exhibitions in the same way an art historian would. I had the privilege of being involved in both exhibitions as a key part of the PR and communications teams at both institutions.

About Vera Pagava

Vera Pagava is a Georgian painter, engraver and designer, attached to the Second School of Paris. Figurative in her beginnings, her painting evolved in the early 1960s and took a more personal and demanding path, which led her to abstraction "experienced as a necessity", she said, and "as the absolute search for the pictorial transposition of the light ".

Vera Pagava, born in 1907 in Tbilisi, Georgia, grew up in a cultured and liberal family. Her father, George Pagava, was a lawyer, and her mother, Alexandra Nane-ichvili, a literature professor. Surrounded by intellectuals and artists like painters David Kakabadze and Elena Akhvlediani, Pagava was immersed in a vibrant cultural scene in Georgia, which, during the early 20th century, was a crossroads for avant-garde thought.

In 1919, due to her father's health, the Pagava family left Georgia and moved to Berlin and Dresden. The Red Army's invasion of Georgia in 1921 prompted many exiles, including the Pagavas, to settle in Paris in 1923. There, Vera began her artistic journey, studying at the Preparatory School of Decorative Arts and the Arts and Publicity School. She later joined André Lhôte's studio in 1929, where she honed her skills in sketching.

In the 1930s, Pagava studied at the Ranson Academy under Roger Bissière. During this time, she formed lasting friendships with artists like Jean Bertholle and Maria Helena Vieira Da Silva. In the 1940s, during World War II, Pagava contributed to the Red Cross and, in 1943, began collaborating with gallery owner Jeanne Bucher, which marked the start of her successful career. She participated in several exhibitions, including the Salon des Surindépendants.

Throughout the 1950s, Pagava gained artistic recognition, exhibiting regularly at important galleries in France and abroad. She also painted monumental works, such as "Christ Receiving Souls in Heaven" for the Universal Exhibition in Brussels. In the 1960s, her art evolved toward abstraction, and she represented France at the Venice Biennale in 1966.

Pagava continued to be active in the art world through the 1970s and 1980s, working on significant commissions and participating in retrospectives. Her final work was a series of stained-glass windows for the Saint-Joseph Church in Dijon, completed shortly before her death in 1988 at 81.

2012 Exhibition at the National Gallery

Let me begin with the first exhibition in 2012, held at the Dimitri Shevardnadze National Gallery. This exhibition, titled "Balance, Meditation, and Silence in the Restlessness and Anxiety of the Modern World," features around 50 of Vera Pagava's works, including paintings, sketches, and watercolors.

Educational programs were organized for schoolchildren, alongside lectures for university students, to complement and enhance the understanding of the artworks. These programs aimed to bridge the gap between art and education, providing both younger audiences and university students with deeper insights into the significance of the pieces.

For schoolchildren, the programs included interactive activities, guided tours, and discussions that helped them engage with art in a hands-on way. They were encouraged to explore their creativity and express themselves through their own art projects inspired by the works they encountered.

University lectures, on the other hand, were designed to offer more in-depth analysis and context for the artworks. Students studied the historical, cultural, and artistic significance of the pieces, while also learning about the techniques and processes behind them. These lectures were led by experts and aimed to foster critical thinking and discussions among the students, enriching their academic experience.

Together, these educational initiatives helped deepen the connection between the art and its viewers, offering valuable learning experiences and fostering an appreciation for the importance of art in various academic and personal contexts.

At the time, our communication efforts mainly focus on traditional platforms – posting information on the museum's website and Facebook page, as well as engaging with the media. The National Gallery, being centrally located, uses banners and posters on the main avenue of Tbilisi to attract visitors. However, due to our limited budget, we were unable to invest in more extensive advertising strategies like outdoor billboards, additional banners, or the production of merchandise. This meant we had to rely on more cost-effective methods to reach our audience and maximize our visibility.

2023-2024 Exhibition at TBC Concept

TBC Concept exhibition halls hosted Vera Pagava's artworks in 2023-2024. This exhibition was different from the earlier one, both in terms of content and communication strategy.

The exhibition centers on Pagava's exploration of cities and architecture, featuring paintings, watercolors, and drawings from both public and private collections – some of which are being shown to the public for the first time. Exhibition curators also include historical documents and photographs that give insight into Pagava's site-specific projects.

One of the significant advantages of the TBC Concept space is its exclusivity. It allows us to target a very specific and high-

end audience – VIP clients of the bank, business leaders, and an affluent segment of the population. This requires us to rethink our communication strategy and tailor it to the interests and expectations of this group.

Enhanced Communication Technologies

The communication strategy for TBC Concept exhibition utilizes a broader and more diverse range of tools to increase visibility and engage audiences. These include:

- Traditional media such as newspapers, TV, and radio
- Digital channels including social media, blogs, and video content
- Outdoor advertising, such as billboards around the city and at bus stops
- Collaboration with Playmakers, a communication agency that handles

branding and video production
- Merchandise production with Georgian companies like SOKO Toys and Meena Design Studio

The team also organized curator-led lectures, exhibition tours, and educational programs for children, ensuring that the exhibition's educational value extended beyond the visual experience.

The team took a comprehensive approach by organizing a range of curator-led lectures, exhibition tours, and educational programs specifically designed for children. These initiatives were aimed at enriching the exhibition's educational value, ensuring that visitors not only engaged with the visual elements but also developed a deeper understanding of the artworks. The curator-led lectures offered detailed insights into the themes, techniques, and historical context of the piec-

es, while the exhibition tours provided an interactive and immersive experience. The children's educational programs were thoughtfully designed to foster creativity and critical thinking, allowing young visitors to engage with art through hands-on activities and discussions. Through these efforts, the team ensured that the exhibition provided a well-rounded educational experience that went beyond simply viewing the art.

Evolving Communication Strategies

As a communications specialist, it is fascinating to observe how exhibition communication strategies have evolved over the past 12 years. These changes have been driven not only by advancements in technology but also by shifts in strategic approaches. With the rise of digital platforms, social media has become a key tool in reaching broader audiences, enabling exhibitions to engage with visitors in more interactive and dynamic ways. Additionally, the integration of multimedia elements, virtual tours, and interactive experiences has transformed how audiences experience and connect with art. Strategically, there has been a growing emphasis on audience engagement, with a focus on creating more personalized and immersive experiences that cater to diverse visitor needs. The shift toward storytelling and content-driven communication has also played a significant role, allowing exhibitions to build narratives around their themes and connect with audiences on a deeper level.

In 2012, our efforts were primarily focused on classic PR – press releases, media cov-

erage, and traditional advertising. In 2023 and 2024, branding and marketing communications have become an integral part of the process. We also see the increasing role of artificial intelligence, which helps communication professionals execute tasks more efficiently.

Today's PR specialists must blend traditional PR competencies with marketing skills to meet the growing demands of the public. The role of the communication specialist has expanded significantly to include managing cross-platform campaigns and engaging with a diverse array of audiences.

Looking ahead, communication technologies will continue to evolve, presenting both opportunities and challenges. As digital platforms and data-driven marketing continue to develop, we must remain adaptable and open to new tools and strategies.

Exhibition communication today is not just about publicity – it's about building relationships with audiences and ensuring that cultural heritage reaches people in ways that are both meaningful and memorable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two Vera Pagava exhibitions provide a compelling case study of how exhibition communication strategies have evolved over time. These exhibitions demonstrate the growing complexity and richness of engaging with audiences, moving from traditional methods to multi-faceted, technology-driven approaches.

Key takeaways from this journey include:

- Be Flexible: Communication strategies need to change as audience needs and technology evolve. Museums must use both old and new methods to stay connected with their visitors.
- Focus on the Audience: Successful exhibitions are about more than just showcasing art – they're about connecting with people in ways that matter to them.
- Work Together: Partnering with creative experts, local businesses, and educators makes exhibitions more exciting and impactful.
- Use Technology Wisely: Digital tools like social media, AI, and data can help museums reach more people and manage limited budgets better.
- New Skills for PR Professionals: Communication experts today need to combine traditional skills with modern tools like branding and digital marketing to succeed.

Looking ahead, as exhibition communication continues to evolve, there are exciting opportunities to:

- Use new technologies like virtual reality or interactive displays to make exhibitions more engaging.
- Try personalized outreach that uses data to better understand and connect with visitors.

Build global partnerships to share cultural heritage with audiences around the world.

Exhibition communication has significantly evolved over the years, shifting from a focus on merely promoting events to prioritizing the creation of meaningful, immersive experiences. This transformation now emphasizes engaging audiences in ways that foster deeper connections to art, culture, and history. Rather than offering a passive viewing experience, modern exhibitions aim to spark curiosity and encourage exploration through interactive content, immersive storytelling, and educational initiatives. The goal is not just to present visual information, but to provide contextual understanding that enhances the viewer's perception and knowledge. By prioritizing audience engagement and inclusivity, exhibition communication has redefined how people interact with and comprehend cultural narratives, making the experience more dynamic and enriching. This shift is indicative of a broader trend in how cultural institutions approach public engagement, ensuring that exhibitions not only inform but also inspire, provoke thought, and build connections across diverse audiences.

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BIOGRAPHY

Niloofar Yazdkhasti is the Museum Curator and Head of International Relations at the Iran Dolls Museum, where she leads innovative projects, organizes events, and drives marketing strategies to enhance the museum's international profile. In 2022, she was awarded a fellowship at Université Polytechnique Hauts-de-France, where her research focused on the intersections of cultural heritage, artificial intelligence, and the Metaverse. She is currently a fellow in Digital Leadership at ICOM IMREC (International Museum Research and Exchange Centre), further developing her work on museums as agents of change, digital heritage, and intercultural dialogue. Her work explores museum communication, visitor experiences, and public engagement strategies. Niloofar is also the founder of The Museum Matters, a social media initiative dedicated to promoting cultural heritage. She holds a Master's degree in Museology from the National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation, and Museology (New Delhi), a Master's in Art Studies from Tarbiat Modares University (Tehran), and a Bachelor's in Museum Studies.

CONNECTING PAST AND PRESENT: THE IRAN DOLLS MUSEUM'S ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

Niloofar Yazdkhasti, Iran Dolls Museum

This article examines the innovative strategies of the Iran Dolls Museum in promoting community resilience, inclusivity, and dialogue through exhibitions and programs that address women's rights and endangered heritage. Drawing on case study research, the paper analyses how the museum has evolved into a dynamic cultural institution that bridges past and present by engaging communities in creative, participatory, and socially relevant ways. Through initiatives such as interactive storytelling, gamified tours, exhibitions on feminine myths, environmental themes, and the Doll Suitcase outreach program, the museum fosters cultural unity, empowers local communities, and amplifies marginalized voices. The findings suggest that museums can serve as platforms for social transformation, particularly in contexts where cultural spaces provide opportunities to discuss sensitive issues such as gender equality and environmental challenges.

Introduction

Museums have increasingly shifted from being static repositories of artifacts to becoming dynamic institutions that actively engage with society. In recent decades, scholarly and professional discourse has emphasized the museum's role as an agent of change, fostering dialogue, inclusivity, and community resilience (Simon, 2010; Kelly, 2007). Within this evolving landscape, the Iran Dolls Museum provides a unique case study of how cultural institutions can connect heritage to contemporary social issues such as gender equality, community cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

The Iranian context makes these initiatives especially significant. In a setting where restrictions often limit opportunities for open cultural dialogue, museums have the potential to create inclusive spaces for critical conversations. By foregrounding women's narratives, reclaiming marginalized myths, and providing interactive and participatory learning experiences, the Iran Dolls Museum exemplifies how cultural heritage can be mobilized to strengthen communities and promote inclusivity. (Figure 1)

Figure 1.

This article explores the museum's strategies for connecting past and present, focusing on exhibitions, outreach programs, and community-based initiatives that position the museum as both a cultural and social institution.

Literature review

The role of museums in contemporary society has been reconceptualized through theoretical perspectives that view them as active agents of social transformation. Kelly (2007) identifies key learning principles in museums, emphasizing creativity, participation, and personal meaning-making. Simon (2010) advances the notion of the participatory museum, where visitors co-create knowledge and engage in dialogue rather than act as passive consum-

ers. Falk and Dierking's (2013) "Contextual Model of Learning" further highlights the multi-dimensional nature of museum experiences, shaped by personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts.

In parallel, feminist museology highlights the need to reclaim women's narratives historically overlooked in cultural institutions (Porter, 1996; Levin, 2010). Recent international examples include the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibitions on feminist art and the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which have reshaped how museums address gender equality. These practices suggest that gender-focused exhibitions not only expand representation but also resonate with broader societal debates.

Community resilience and inclusivity have also emerged as critical themes. Scholars argue that museums can strengthen communities by amplifying underrepresented voices, preserving endangered heritage, and fostering intercultural dialogue (Sandell, 2007). The National Museum of the American Indian, for instance, integrates indigenous voices directly into its curatorial practices, while smaller grassroots museums worldwide use participatory approaches to link local identity with global conversations.

The Iran Dolls Museum aligns with these discourses by integrating participatory practices, gender-focused exhibitions, and outreach strategies that foster resilience and inclusivity.

Data and methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology, which is well suited to examining the nuanced practices of a single institution. Data were collected through the following approaches:

- Interviews and community workshops with artists, doll makers, and local women involved in creating dolls and narratives. These sessions documented both personal experiences and collective heritage knowledge.
- Visitor feedback and anecdotes, gathered through informal dialogue and structured comment cards, providing insight into the audience's engagement and perceptions.
- Observation of programs, including storytelling sessions, gamified tours, and outreach programs, allowing for

the analysis of learning dynamics and inclusivity.
- Review of exhibition materials, including catalogues, interpretive texts, and artistic works created in collaboration with communities.

This multi-source approach enabled a triangulation of data, ensuring that findings reflect both institutional strategies and community perspectives. The study does not aim to provide a comparative analysis of all Iranian museums but rather offers a focused examination of a single case that illustrates broader principles. A limitation of this methodology is its reliance on qualitative accounts rather than quantitative measurement; however, this is consistent with the study's emphasis on meaning-making and community engagement.

Results and discussion

Interactive Engagement and Inclusive Learning

The museum employs interactive storytelling, hands-on experiences, and gamified tours to engage visitors across age groups. These activities shift the museum from a passive display to an inclusive learning space. Particularly for younger audiences, gamified tours create a playful yet educational environment, fostering deeper connections with cultural heritage and reducing barriers to participation. (Figure 2 & 3)

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Reclaiming Feminine Myths and Women's Rights

A central initiative is the exhibition on women, which reclaims feminine legends from diverse Iranian ethnicities, religions, and sects. These stories, often forgotten, highlight the essential roles women have played in society. Newly created dolls embody these narratives, symbolizing resilience and wisdom. One example involves a doll based on a Baluchi legend, crafted in consultation with community elders, which now serves as an educational tool in regional schools. By aligning local myths with global conversations on women's rights, the exhibition contributes to both heritage preservation and gender equality. (Figure 4 & 5)
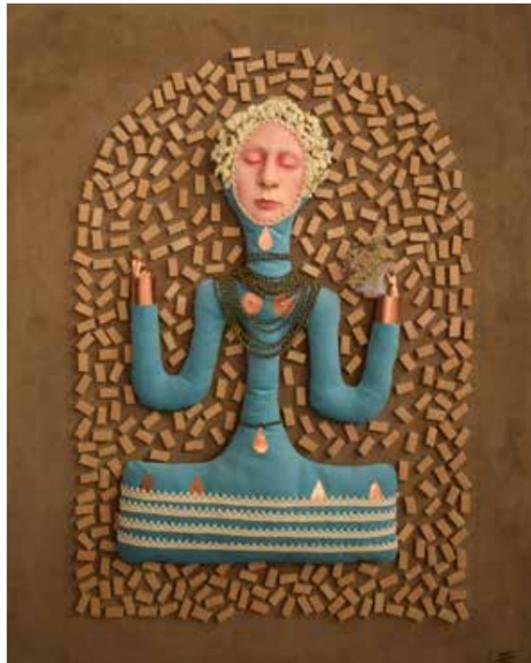

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Linking Heritage with Environmental Issues

The exhibition further connects myths to contemporary environmental challenges, particularly drought and water scarcity in Iran. By portraying women as custodians of nature, the museum integrates ecological awareness into its cultural programming. In community workshops, participants emphasized the role of traditional knowledge in sustainable water management, demonstrating how heritage can inspire modern environmental resilience. (Figure 6)

Creative Expression and Community Participation

The museum fosters artistic expression through sculptures, drawings, and performances inspired by folklore. These participatory formats allow children and community members to co-create cultural content, blending traditional heritage with experiential learning. Performances staged in collaboration with schools illustrate how folklore can be used not only to preserve identity but also to foster creativity and dialogue. (Figure 7)

Figure 7.

The Dolls Suitcase Program

Extending beyond its physical space, the museum curates traveling collections of dolls to schools, community centers, and remote regions. In one instance, a suitcase of dolls reached a rural village in south east of Iran where children had never previously visited a museum. Teachers reported that the program enhanced cultural pride and introduced new perspectives on identity. This outreach program demonstrates the potential of mobile cultural heritage to bridge geographical and social divides. (Figure 8)

Empowerment of Women and Local Artists

By involving professional doll makers, artisans, toy designers, and educators, the museum has generated economic opportunities, particularly for low-income women. Workshops on doll-making techniques not only provided income but also
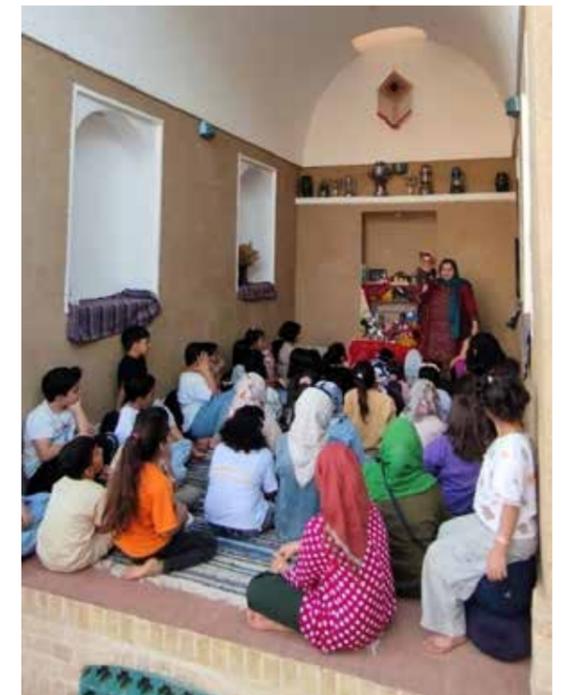

Figure 8.

revived traditional crafts that were at risk of being forgotten. For many participants, these initiatives created pathways to both cultural and economic resilience. (Figure 9)

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Cross-Cultural Unity and Shared Heritage

Through collaborations with institutions in countries such as Turkey, the museum celebrates shared traditions and strengthens cultural unity. Joint exhibitions and exchanges highlight common narratives of resilience, demonstrating how local heritage can contribute to regional and even global dialogue. (Figure 10)

Dialogue and Co-Creation

The museum collects visitor stories and encourages two-way dialogue, transforming audiences into active contributors. Narrative walls in the galleries invite visitors to share personal experiences, some of which are incorporated into future pro-gramming. This participatory approach positions the museum as a living, evolving institution where heritage and community voices intersect.

Concluding comments

The Iran Dolls Museum illustrates how cultural institutions can transcend traditional roles by addressing pressing social and environmental issues. Through exhibitions, interactive programs, and outreach initiatives, the museum fosters inclusivity, promotes gender equality, and preserves endangered heritage.

These efforts contribute to a wider rethinking of what museums can achieve in contemporary society. Globally, cultural institutions face the challenge of remain-ing relevant while maintaining their responsibility to preserve heritage. The case of the Iran Dolls Museum suggests three recommendations for museums seeking to enhance their social role:

1. Integrate participatory practices that allow communities to shape museum narratives.

2. Foreground marginalized voices, particularly those of women and underrepresented groups, to promote inclusivity.

3. Link heritage to contemporary issues, such as environmental sustainability, to ensure cultural relevance.

In doing so, museums become more than cultural repositories; they emerge as agents of social transformation. By connecting past and present, the Iran Dolls Museum demonstrates how cultural heritage can inspire resilience, inclusivity, and dialogue in both local and global contexts.

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CONCLUSION

Participants of ICOM COMMS 2024 Annual Conference at the terrace of the Vani Archaeological Museum, Georgia

ICOM COMMS 2024 Annual Conference titled *"Museum Communications at a Crossroads: Empowering Our Communities in Times of Change and Crisis,"* held in Tbilisi, Georgia, marked a critical moment of dialogue and solidarity within the global museum community.

In the midst of complex geopolitical realities, professionals from around the world gathered to share experiences, courage, and visions for a more resilient and inclusive future. During several days at the beginning of December, active discussions highlighted the vital role of museums as communicators of truth, empathy, and hope. Museums were discussed as institutions that can play an essential role in shaping democracy, fostering understanding, and empowering communities.

We, members of the ICOM COMMS Board, are deeply grateful to everyone who joined us — speakers, participants, and partners for their valuable contributions. Our appreciation goes especially to our host institutions in Georgia for their dedication and generosity during challenging times.

Together, we carry forward our shared commitment to ensuring that, even in times of crisis, museums remain spaces of connection, learning, and dialogue for all.

– ICOM COMMS Board