Sociomuseology: a look on Urban futures and Historical Urban Landscapes

Heritage Matters - AnantU Webinars
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Heritage Matters Webinar 10:

This conference takes place in times of insecurity and impoverishment.
Time of insecurity as no one knows what our life will be in the coming weeks, months and even years.
Times of impoverishment of the value of work, where we are all, can be thrown away after use.
Times of impoverishment, due to the ways for wealth creation that were crime yesterday, become a norm today, within the rules of financial capitalism.
Times of impoverishment in an economic system centered on the accumulation of wealth and the consequent exclusion of most of the world population.
Impoverishment of human rights and dignity.

And cities are central to this impoverishment. More than 50% of the population lives in urban areas & this is expected to reach nearly 75% by 2050.
Times when xenophobia, racism and obscurantism, enter the parliaments of so many countries. And in cities, sometimes anger and revolt take up the streets.
Times of declared and underground wars against human rights, to support the predatory logic of Neoliberal Capitalism.

But this is time we live.
And it will be the understanding of the contemporary world, that will make us face the social and environmental challenges. And if awareness of this uncertainty and impoverishment is necessary for us to live in our time, it is also necessary to point and give meaning to the place that we intend to occupy as citizens, in our relationships, in our jobs, in our universities, in our museums .
Let us remember how Alma Wittlin in the post WWII described his idea of a museum:
Museums are man-made institutions in the service of men; they are not ends in themselves. (…) What can museums do with regard to the unmet needs of people?
Museums are not islands in space; they have to be considered in the context of life outside their walls. This truism has become a verity under present conditions of accelerated change and at a time when every institution has to take measure of itself as a means to legitimate survival.
Exposure is not enough. One of our blind spots, in all manners of educational environments, is the assumption, that the contact of people to experiences, necessarily results in learning and stimulation.[1]

When Alma Wittlin talks about the unmet needs of people, she is actually pointing out that the place of museums will be to look at the world not as a thing from the past, but as a need of the present daily challenges.

It took years for the social dimension of Museology to be recognized.
There were years of affirmation of an innovative, sensible, dignified, rebellious and militant museology.

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[1] Alma Wittlin: Museums: In Search of a Usable Future, - The Museum. Its history and its tasks in education (1949) (1970) The MIT Press. pp.204 & 211

But nowadays these processes have a growing global expression. They highlight the social responsibility of Museums, they assume the role of communities and cultural heritage in its diversity, as factors of development.

This new reality has had a significant impact on the academic and professional environment, revealing itself in the increase of national and international scientific meetings dedicated to the different forms of museology with social and community matrix, as well as in the increase of undergraduate, master's and doctoral university training. in many countries, and the consequent production of dissertations, theses and post-doctorates as a result of an progressively more consistent scientific research.

These museums, that deal with the unmet needs of people, more and more have an expression in the so-called Social Museology and particularly in what we want to call Insurgent Museology

This museums' approach, was recognized in the final document of the MINOM-ICOM International Conference, which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, in defense of a museology aiming at the:

Understanding community museums as political, poetic and pedagogical processes in permanent construction and linked to very specific worldviews.

Recognizing that these organizations give and take, make and unmake their memories, feelings, ideas, dreams, anxieties, tensions, fears and live their own reality, without asking permission from the established authorities.

Recognizing that all these museums and museological processes have their own ways of 'musealizing', appropriating and making use of diverse knowledge and heritage, in the way that can better deserve their challenges. 2

But the rationality of these changes in museology, did not occur alone within museology itself. On the contrary, they express profound changes that have occurred in the field of Social Sciences as a whole

In the last decades, with particular relevance since the 1980s, the social sciences have been facing profound transformations, in relation with social and political changes, inscribed in the neoliberal model that characterizes the contemporary world.

We are thinking about the emergence of the Public dimension of Sociology, Anthropology, Archeology, Pedagogy, History or Philosophy, among others.

After a long period of struggle for recognition within the Social Sciences, these "Public schools of thought are now recognized for the contribution they have made to the understanding of social processes, as a theoretical approach, but also, and inseparably, as a strategy for overcoming it.

In all cases, the local dimension of the issues are present, in its territorial and social implications.

In result of an identical process, the Museology with social responsibility has been recognized as part of the Social Sciences, has been assumed as a "public" Museology, and known as a School of Thought, which today we can call Sociomuseology.

And it is this Sociomuseology that, making appeal to the broadest interdisciplinarity, seeks exactly to contribute to the clarification, of the concepts generated in the innovative museological practices.

Practices resulting from the openness to the challenges of contemporary society, assuming various denominations depending on the contexts that give it life: Social museology, Community museology, Indigenous museology, Native museology, LGBTQI + museology, Ecomuseology, Critical museology, among others.

In all cases the community dimension is present, the recognition of the primacy of dialogical processes, the involvement with social, environmental and sustainability issues.

In other words, we live a time were the unmet needs mentioned by Alma Wittlin, as well as the proposals highlighted by the Roundtable in Santiago de Chile 72, by the Declarations of Quebec 84, and Rio de Janeiro 2013, by the 2015 UNESCO Recommendations become tools for Museums.

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2 *Final declaration, XV International Conference of MINOM, Rio de Janeiro 2013*

In consequence, Sociomuseology is not a new term for the new museology. It should be instead understood as a Public Museology, based in a systemic interdisciplinarity with other areas of knowledge, doing and thinking the new trends of museology, as a resource for the sustainable development of mankind.

In this sense, Sociomuseology become part of social sciences, as Per Uno Agreen dreamed[3], establishing paths to understanding the various contemporary museological practices, at the same time as being an instrument in service of museums endeavor.

Sociomuseology, it is about recognizing a new disciplinary area which aims to clarify and, to a certain extent, enhance new museological practices in the service of development.

The starting point for Sociomuseology seems to be rather distant in time.

But if we consider its epistemological roots, it is also impossible to sustain Sociomuseology without also reclaiming the same sources and the same references of other Public's Social Sciences.

This is most evident when we have as support and reference Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas or even the 'misguided' vision of Foucault on museology. In other cases, it is also hard to think of Sociomuseology without Marx, Weber or Durkheim, whose contributions continue to support a more consistent understanding of contemporary society. It is hard not to consider the thinking of a host of researchers who have contributed, in particular since the 1970s, to the knowledge in the field of museology, such as Georges Henri Rivière, Per Uno Agren, Hugues de Varine, Zbynek Stránsky, Anna Gregorova, Peter van Mensch, Marta Arjona, Sharon Macdonald, Vinos Sofka, Geoffrey Lewis, Mario Chagas, Cristina Bruno, Maria Celia Santos, Bernard Deloche, Jean Davallon, Peter Davis, Richard Sandell, Ulpiano Bezerra, or Pierre Mayrand, to name just a few.

For us, Sociomuseology represents the possibility of looking at the complex reality of museums with social responsibility, in its diversity of concepts and priorities but also trying to understand their relationship with other museums' concepts, priorities that are the result of other political and social contexts.

For us, Sociomuseology also represents the possibility of understanding new rationalities, of building new professional and academic curricula, new partnerships, new solidarities for a more respectful world of Cognitive Justice.

Sociomuseology can be the link that enhances Museology's place in contemporary social and environmental challenges, based on the need to promote critical thinking about Contemporary World. And for us it will be this critical thinking that will allow us to understand Urban futures and Historical Urban Landscapes as an aspect of the impoverishment of humanity.

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[3] Per Uno Agren, P.U. (1992) 'Museology - a new branch of humanities in Sweden?', *Papers in museology 1/Acta Universitatis Umensis* 108 (Stockholm) 104-113.