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Deconstructing the museum’s task of representing and advocating for memory and Human Rights. Developing social change through activism.

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I would like to first thank the organizers of this conference, the International Committee of Memorial Museums in Remembrance of the Victims of Public Crimes and the Jewish Museum Munich, for the acceptance of my paper and the invitation to contribute to this event as a speaker.

My name is Carla Prat and I work at the academic department at the *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* which it translates as: Memory and Tolerance Museum, located in Mexico City.

Today, for my presentation I would like to reflect on the role of Memory and Human Rights Museums and explain the case study of a project that the *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* is developing in order to activate social action after the visit at the museum. As a matter of fact, I would like to reflect on how the museum seeks to engage the visitors in the memory work of historical events through heritage, but also to address the present and the future in a country with serious problems with violence and lack of justice. Moreover, seeking to use the museum as a space to promote greater individual responsibility, human rights but also to mobilize communities into taking action.

If you allow me, before entering the reflexion on my Museum, I would like to briefly deconstruct the museum’s task (from a museologist point of view) of representing and advocating for memory and human rights before I can deepen into the reflection of social action development in the *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* case study.

Heritage and memory

Heritage, either if it is cultural, historical, tangible or intangible, is inevitably associated with memory. Art, buildings, museum collections, all of them have the effect on us. They relate individually to our memories or experiences, but they also do it collectively; relating to the present, past and future, explaining a story, a memory of all, a fact that has often been used inside institutional spaces such as Museums to explain a fragmented or selective memory. This process involves the selection of what will be remembered, what will be commemorated as a society and what will be forgotten.

Museums have a close link with objects, and that has made them, for years, institutions of power and design tools to tell a story and build memories. They are spaces that lead to innovation and the creation of identities, but they can also be places where these are disabled or oppressed.

Museums acquire, preserve and put into value their collections as a contribution to safeguarding the natural, cultural and scientific heritage, but their mission, today, is much broader. The operation and role of museums in society had to diversify because the needs and interests have been, and are, in constant change.

In recent years museums have changed and have become aware of their social responsibility.

I am not going to deepen my presentation into the matters of new museology, but as we all know, in the second half of the twentieth century awareness of the social role of museums was developed. Later on, heritage was understood as a tool for social development, and the museum as the facilitator for carrying it out.

Museum's role as a facilitator

The museum's role as facilitator has been given by a global change, where globalization and the political, economic and social changes affect us implicitly in our lives. Museums found in a context where the narratives used for years are no longer compatible with its current visitors. The process of preservation of memory has been transformed over the years. The objects in museums have come to play an active role. The role of people, visitors or agents related to the

museum have also changed, participation and decision making marks a new role for the museum; understanding community participation as one of the key concepts of contemporary museology. According to Janes (2009), this new generation of human rights museums has called into question the social purpose of public museums, and this in response to observations that the institution has “unrealized potential” as an essential social institution and a key agent in civil society.

Heritage

That takes me to Laura Jane Smith’s definition of on the concept of heritage. For her, the heritage is not so much a "thing" but a cultural and social process, which is related to acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and commit to the present (Smith 2006: 2). From Smith’s definition we can extract the idea that memory must be considered as a living process, constantly evolving, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, so important in the work of museums. This relationship between memory and heritage in the museum space is intensified because through their areas, saves and documents, cultural identities represented in their collections.

Memory and Human Rights Museums / Everything is political

By the nature of their collections and exhibitions, museums are integral sites in the representation of past abuses, and they are becoming increasingly responsive to human rights violations in their programming (Carter & Orange 2011). Clearly, defining the museum as a political space, providing its own interpretation of the historical and current events, stating that they have a role as an essential social institution and a key agent in civil society.

However, is the role of the museum to go further? To what extent should museums actively campaign on behalf of issues? What ethical and moral issues do museums encounter as they reinvent themselves as institutions of social change? How do museums define concepts such memory or human rights? Moreover, who decides?

After all this questions and before entering to review the case study of Memory and Tolerance Museum, I believe I should explain a little bit the museum for the ones that have not visited it yet.

The Museum

The Memory and Tolerance Museum is located in Mexico City. The mission of the institution is to focus on the importance of tolerance, non-violence and human rights by creating awareness through historical memory. It concentrates particularly on matters such as genocide and other crimes in order to warn against the danger of indifference, discrimination and violence. As such, the museum stimulates the creation of accountability, respect and awareness for each unique individual.

The goals of the institution are to promote the values of tolerance and respect, to encourage the search of a wholesome and committed coexistence in the new generations, to bring the visitor into a state of introspection to generate a change of attitude, to contribute to reflections that can lead to social actions and to educate and to create a conscious commitment towards the necessities of unprotected communities.

Regarding to whom we speak, the message aims to any kind of audiences, although we have a special interest in Mexican youth. Willing to provide a new space where young people will find a place for dialogue, reflection and participation. The Museum is located in Mexico City's downtown area, and is important to mention that shares the square where is located with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building and the Family Court building (as I was saying before, everything is political).

Moreover, the Museum has seven thousand square meters of construction, comprising seven floors. It includes also a library, a temporary exhibitions gallery, an auditorium and an free of charge educational center. The Museum exhibition space is divided in two major sections: Memory and Tolerance. Memory: exhibitions about 20th and 21st centuries genocides. Before the overwhelming amount of crimes that have outraged the course of human history, it is not easy to define a criterion to structure the exhibition. It is necessary to point out that the

selection does not intend to establish hierarchical order of the evils, the victim's suffering or the importance of the crimes committed. The adopted definition of "genocide" is that of the "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" of 1948. For this reason the crimes exposed are those perpetrated from the 20th century on, which have been officially recognized as genocides or are being examined by courts or truth commissions in order to obtain that status. (Again, the decision making process is a political process)

Tolerance: this exhibition area covers a range from everyday life to public issues through its different galleries. It deals with subjects such as: tolerance, dialogue, discrimination, Human Rights, the power of the media, the richness of diversity, among others.

At the end of the tolerance area, the visitor nowadays can find the space where the museum is performing a pilot test room in order to engage with social action. I will develop the pilot test room further, but before, I would like to reflect on how since the opening of the museum, five years ago, the Museum was related to the concept memorialization in all the exhibitions.

The way the museum calls upon engagement to memory was related to commemoration. However, nowadays, the museum is looking for something else, the museum seeks to put much more attention on to the tolerance area, in order to engage its visitors on citizenship practices and methods of activism.

Susan Sontag: "Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory and not enough to thinking."

Susan Sontag

How can you get your stakeholders to go further than simply being empathic with the topics at hand? Is being a forum for cooperation and information exchange enough for a Memory and human rights museum? Five years after the opening of the Museum, we've found that visitors take awareness of the importance of having a great will to create change after the Museum tour. However, they lack the means and information to carry it out. Therefore, it was decided to incorporate in a new section of Tolerance room called " From reflection to action" those mission is to fulfill this will and desire to turn their ideas into action. This is the only room in the Museum that invites the visitor to participate by an interactive platform in order to provide a range of social actions to choose and begin to change society. This application was developed

especially for Ipads for this room that allows visitors to select an action after choosing their topics of interest. The Museum began a pilot test on May 14 in order to detect opportunities on the experience from the beginning to the end.

From reflection to action

From the pilot, we extracted some points that didn't work with the visitors. Some of them were related to the general image and design of the space, for example the fact that the look & feel of the space was too technological and futuristic. Other facts that we discovered were related to the platform where people were invited to take action. There was too much information and too many complex topics we provided to be explored (nine topics related to minorities, extreme poverty, memory and genocides, violence against women and children, etcetera).

Also, we realised that not everyone is as engaged and committed into taking action as we are. From June to October we had around thirty eight thousand visitors passing through the room. Ten thousand of them didn't leave any contact email, another ten thousand said that they were not interested, almost four thousand wrote their emails incorrectly. To make the story short, from all that group, only five hundred developed an action. So, as you can see, this is not an easy task.

As I mentioned before, the invitation to action goes from a call to action to the youngsters to discuss human rights at school, seeing a movie about peace or developing a campaign against violence against women in their neighbourhoods and later on promoting it through social networks and friends.

This idea worked for the pilot, but now the project is redesigned and reconceptualised. Less topics are presented, they are much more synthesised and the division between donating and taking action is clear. In case of donation, the museum has been collaborating with audit firms in order to provide serious ong's recommendations. Providing the big names such as ACNUR or Amnesty International, but also presenting small ONG's from the country that will benefit from monetary help.

On the other hand, the museum also provides tools for those who want to get involved with organisations or projects, but also informing people about their rights, providing statistics and infographics in order for them to use the material in their communities (school, neighbourhood, friends). Moreover, and one of the newest additions to the platform “from reflection to action” is being a place where ong’s can upload what they need in regards of volunteers and if the visitor is interested, they can get involved.

We ask ourselves at the museum if it is the role of the museum to do all of this. If it is ok to make a selection of causes to be aware of and by doing that, forgetting about others?

Are we patronizing our visitors by providing all this information, already selected and processed, in order to get people involved? To what extent should museums actively campaign on behalf of issues rather than facilitate the dissemination of these issues through more traditional models of information representation? (Carter & Orange 2011) It is acceptable for a museum to ask you to help to a specific cause?

Many dilemmas flourish from all of this questions and if I am sincere, I am not sure on how to answer all of them. What we surely know at the Museum is the situation that we face nowadays in Mexico. We live surrounded by social, economic , and political problems currently facing a serious crisis of public security and high levels of violence in cities across the country and it is not understandable how a strong social movement has not flourish. Indeed, there are various theories to explain the phenomenon of why people are not reacting to all of this. A researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, provides various explanations ranging from the idea that Mexican society only sees the present and not the future, to those who argue that we are a purely individualistic society. That is, the Mexican say: " While I does not happen to me , there is no problem."

¿Apathy, disinterest or lack of citizenship? Maybe is the fact that given the distrust in our government, politics and institutions, people have decided to think individualistically and provide for the individual aspirations, without thinking about our life in society.

This is where I believe Museums, especially the Memory and Tolerance Museum plays an important role by activating social action and encouraging moral reflection about civic duty and citizen behaviour. Obligating itself to be creative and inventive on how to educate, meditate and create critical reflection.

Conclusions

In order to conclude, I would like to go back to the beginning of my presentation where I said I wanted to deconstruct the museum's task of representing and advocating for human rights and memory. I will develop some ideas that come to my mind for this final reflections:

The Memory and Tolerance Museum is not community museum, neither a grassroots project. I would say that is more close to a top down approach museum. Its heading to the public and trying to get them involved with a program of exhibitions, outreach projects, educational events and activities. Actually, the museum bears the challenge of reinventing the logic of community engagement in increasingly unstable and unequal urban contexts such as Mexico City. Because, in one way or the other, we all know that a museum cannot exist alone, visitors and source communities are needed.

Despite all the difficulties, I believe that we should be inspired by the opportunity the museum has to create positive social change. Maybe we have not found the proper methodology on how to do it yet, but the possibility of being an agent of social change is empowering.

Furthermore, human rights are continually evolving, and that puts the museum on a state of alert all the time, being able to engage in campaigns against human rights violations, at the local, national and international levels. Furthermore, reevaluating continually to whom the museum represents, to whom it speaks and in which way the message is interpreted.

On the other hand, not only human rights change. Indeed, social movements, for instance, are appropriating heritage tools. Networked modes of organizing knowledge and action in society deeply influence museums. And even further, the complexity of roles, seeing how the

museum's involvement in memory and human rights work can affect the public opinion, which may then have the effect of affecting its government's laws.

The Museum is facing memory on its exhibitions, but is also interacting with contemporary society, responding to its audience with a viewpoint. Seeking to create a human rights culture, but more than that, to create an understanding of these rights, how they are acquired and who is permitted to exercise them and who is in lack of them.

So, we will keep waking to be a museum that creates public value. Let's see what happens.

Thank you.

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