

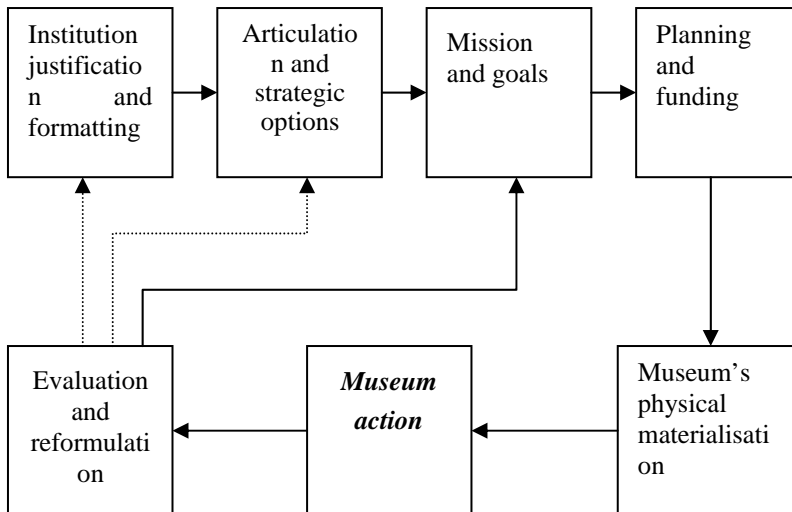
## The Creation Process of a Local Museum\*

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### 1. Introduction

The present text holds as its main goal the advance of a number of reflections around the potentialities and problems of local museums taken as development instruments.

Secondarily, it also intends to provide support to all those who, in one way or another, have faced the issue of creating a local museum. This support is intended not as a manual of the “the museum made easy” kind, but, instead, as the pointing to some pertinent issues and unavoidable options that, if not taken into account, will come to challenge the form and substance of the future organisation.



\* Monte Redondo, 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2000.

In this sense, the present text has been structured according to a logic that intends to observe two trends of internal coherence: the chronological trend, which refers to the succession of problems/decisions to be taken within the context of a museum's creation/reformulation; and the set of themes, regarding the thematic links of the cause/effect type.

Schematically, we have:

## **2. Why and what is a local museum for**

The creation process of a local museum implies, from the beginning, a continued reflection around two fundamental issues:

- i) What is the creation of the Museum intended for?
- ii) In the perspective of the meeting of such ends, will the museum be the ideal format to give the initiative?

This preliminary reflection is extremely important, in view of:

- i) The funding resources to be spent, usually high;
- ii) the energies, of difficult renovation, which will be spent by local actors;
- iii) the observation of the principle that it is worthier not to start a task at all than doing it without the necessary success guarantees; actually, to develop a project on the level of local action without success guarantees is extremely dangerous– and the opposite of what takes place –, for it induces the emergence of disbelief in collective action and feelings of impotence. Those feelings, in accumulation, surely challenges the sparking of future initiatives, within the same or related scopes; thus, the local basis museological project, by the widened responsibility it brings about, should be the object of a

conscientious initial evaluation, and, later, presented and developed in such a way as to not spark false hopes, which is the first step towards lack of will.

The expounded above implies:

i) To radically discard the idea of the “a Museum because”, that is, starting off towards the materialisation of an institution without knowing exactly why this institution is wanted; this aspect is specially important since experience has demonstrated that, in such cases, after the initial “flash”, these institutions enter a period of inactivity, since not even the institutional actors support it anymore (as they find no use for them other than the simple fact that they exist – “we have a museum!”), nor even the population feels it is theirs, as something they can enjoy and use (“they have built a museum around here somewhere, I don’t know exactly where”);

ii) Not take a decision by mimicking other local museums, based on a reasoning of the kind “neighbourhood so and so has a museum, we also have to have one”, or, “big cities have big museums, we shall build a small one”; actually, a museum is an institution of high maintenance costs (above all on the human side). The existence of a useful and dignified museum implies a local dynamics that justifies it, feeds it and constantly renews it; in case these dynamics are not to be found or the principles presiding its creation have not been compatible with such dynamics (the case of the mimetic museum), the institution rapidly gathers dust and loses dignity; and, effectively, how many museum institutions we find around the country that are completely abandoned, or, worse, consisting of veritable repositories of half-baked folklorism? It is those “orphan” or “sons of unknown parents” museums that must be considered when the electoral or localist

temptation should assault us. Local museums should, therefore, be desired siblings, for, as with those, they will also become sources of concerns and expenses that only the love for a cause and the nobility of the ends will be able to justify: and, worse, inexorably over many and long years.

In this sense, a plausible and collectively believable justification must be found in order to advance the Museum. Two justifications, the most common, can be put forward right at the start:

i) a museum to collect and preserve the manifestations of a past considered important as reference for the present and guide for the future; this is a grounded justification basis, but one which reveals a basic incomprehension about the potentialities of the museum institution and/or a very limited ambition, in such a way that a cool analysis of the cost/benefit ratio may challenge the museum's very social fundament; on the other hand, the museum as repository (storehouse museum) poses the question if it would not be more economic and socially more adequate to take another format, such as a photo library or video library, or even straightforward storage for the pieces; if the conservation of the material and immaterial vestiges of local relevance is, in itself, a noble end, even nobler will be its extension to other dimensions, the most basic of all will no doubt be the valorisation of these memories and evidence; and it is precisely in this particular – valorisation – that the museum comes in not as a contemplation institution but one of action, since this will be the only one able to a) extend the meaning of the word valorisation from the purely economic domain into the affective and social domains and b) fulfil, in an integrated and articulated way, the consequent and

subsequent phases to valorisation – integration, identification, affirmation;

ii) a museum able to function, sometimes as a personal development instrument, and sometimes as an instrument of local development; we speak of a museum which collections are constituted by the problems of the people as individuals and as a collective, a museum in which contemplation is the ferment of action, a museum in which the processes are as important as the ends pursued; an institution of such nature, independent, uncomfortable and disquieting by nature, can play a fundamental role in any process of local development; whence its use, whence its justification and also, whence the certainty that it will never become a repository for dust; thus let there be problems, thus let there be the will to overcome, thus let there be the Museum.

### **3. The museum is not alone and should not act in isolation**

As an instrument for the effective promotion of development, the museum must not and should not act erratically and out of context. In this sense, it will be necessary that the new institution carries out a preliminary set of studies aiming not only at obtaining a faithful image of its surroundings' starting situation, but also, later, the development of strategic lines that will structure its intervention.

Considering that the diverse places present their own idiosyncrasies and that those translate into diverse panoplies of weaknesses and potentialities, the “instrument museums” have to find their specific intervention forms. That is, grounded on a theoretical-conceptual basis common to all of these institution types, it is necessary to proceed, in reality, to an adaptation to the local realities

so as to increment the pertinence and efficacy of the individual museum action.

Thus, it is necessary to, from the beginning; carry out a diagnosis of the concrete insertion situation:

- i) carry out an exhaustive survey of all the texts, studies and planning instruments within the museum's area of influence;
- ii) carry out the analysis of such instruments so as to synthesise the diagnosis carried out and to find out, on the various scales, the existing development strategies;
- iii) to develop a critical reflection about the diverse matters found;
- iv) start the studies considered necessary for the updating of the diagnosis and/or to detail/complement the pre-existing development strategies.

Independently from the scope and depth necessary to effectively carry out these previous tasks – that depend on the pre-existence and the validity of the identified documental collection –is indispensable in the end to obtain a clear image of the following local level components:

- i) identified potentialities;
- ii) identified bottlenecks
- iii) opportunities and threats;
- iv) development strategic goals;
- v) action strategic vectors.

After this step, the Museum must define its own strategic action, articulated with those components, in the diverse dominions in which it considers its action pertinent. To guide its action in several

dominions so as to maximise the effects of the mobilised resources should not imply the closing of doors to actions of different nature which relevance derive from the individual development dimension, which, in no circumstance should be demeaned.

#### **4. The museum as local development instrument**

Schematically, the museum action is centred on two domains - internal and external – which, though different and implicating non-coincident forms of action, and beyond not being mutually exclusive, they do feature obvious complementary links.

##### *4.1. The internal domain*

The internal domain is understood as the museum action directly aiming the promotion of material and immaterial well-being of the population of its area of influence.

Independently from what the place's specificities and each museum's specific strategies reveal as pertinent, one points, from the start, to the following intervention vectors:

i) Promotion of local identity through studies, exhibitions and/or other actions that concur to make evident aspects relevant to the material and immaterial history of the places; research around the identity elements should unfold on two intimately related plans, a) the affirmative elements of difference with other places, its own specificities and b) the elements that reveal unity with other external spaces, the integration;

ii) Promotion of the inhabitants' territorial identification, so as to gradually make their lived space become a felt space; this trend,

among others, will be undertaken by means of actions tending to render transparent previously opaque spaces;

iii) Promotion of personal links in the sense of the strengthening of the aggregating mortar able to transform a group of people into a community; this goal can be achieved by means of the actions leading to emergence of memories and the generalisation of collective feelings structured by a common past; any of these aims should be tackled from the perspective of a) the explanation of the common problems existing in the present, as well as b) the real possibility of, by means of a concerted collective action, undertake the building of a desired future;

iv) Promotion of the integration of the recently-arrived and/or marginalized groups by means of a) diffusion of the identity bases of the hosting places, b) the exploitation of all the expedients for the diffusion of the cultural outlines and the specific problems of the groups in lack of integration and, finally, c) the fomenting of concrete collective actions able to promote the cooperation and collaboration between groups around the resolution of well-identified and globally relevant problems;

v) Promotion of studies related to traditional knowledge and techniques in the perspective of the standardisation of procedures aiming its valorisation in terms of the personal and/or local economies; this dimension should be complemented by training action geared towards the finding, based on these traditional knowledges, of the mechanisms and refinements able to introduce the modernisation factors and elements capable of better adapting these knowledges to the present aesthetic and commercial environment (traditional knowledges → constitution of an offer → promotion of demand).



vi) Promotion of an environment of individual and collective dynamism, by means of the foment of actions able to induce feelings of self-confidence and the valorisation of direct action;

vii) Promotion and undertaking of training actions in the domains considered pertinent by part of the population within the museum's area of influence and/or that are adequate to the museum's and local development strategies (strategic domains); within those, among others, we can highlight handcraft, management of collective projects, community tourism;

viii) Promotion of other actions that directly link to the Museum's main collection, the population and the problems existing in its area of influence.

#### *4.2. The external domain*

The external domain is understood as that which indirectly aims the promotion of the population's material and immaterial well-being.

In practice, this domain is characterised by a set of initiatives to be developed in the exterior of the area of influence and/or directed towards the elements of external origin (though these initiatives can be developed in the interior of the Museum's area of influence) in view of the obtaining of surplus values on the local development level.

As this kind of action can be very diverse, its point of union is translated on the goal of collaborating in the production of financial fluxes from the exterior into the interior of the desired place.

From this typology, we highlight the examples:

i) Promotion, in touristic terms, of the local attraction potential, by means either of the conception of a museum chiefly geared towards being a touristic attraction pole, or of the materialisation of specific actions aiming such goal;

ii) Promotion of the place's external visibility by means of initiatives, in the exterior and interior of the area of influence, tending to the diffusion of heritage characteristics (natural/human; material/immateral) of the place considered;

iii) Promotion of local products and their consequent valorisation with the undertaking of the local productive system of traditional base;

iv) Promotion of local values in view of the education of tourists and visitors in the perspective of responsible tourism and committed to the values of sustainability and the local base dynamics;

v) Promotion of other pertinent initiatives, geared towards the exterior, aiming the increase in the local populations' life conditions.

Against the background of the two action plans presented above – internal and external – the local museum should define which is its chief vocation, that is: to privilege the internal “combat” or to privilege the external dimension.

This decision, which should be well expressed in the museum's strategic plan, is important as its very nature (action, relationship with the populations, installations, adopted museography...) will be distinct if the institution's structuring stress is placed on one or the other dimension (independent of the possibility of the secondary actions be carried out outside the privileged strategic domain).

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Finally, this strategic option – internal plan, external plan – will equally coincide with the very nature of the museum’s intervention/relation with those who build/enjoy it. In the first case, of stress on the internal action, the museum, in order to be completely efficacious, will have to take itself up as a detonator of a direct action process, in which, more often than not, most of the benefits will be obtained through the processes that lead to products/goals (for instance, the temporary exhibition will be important chiefly in the conception/building phase, as catalyser of the meeting of knowledges, promoter of creative dialogue and generator of confrontation and contradictions resolution, the process-exhibition). In the opposite corner (action geared towards the exterior), the museum should take itself up chiefly as a space for contemplation, in which the induced effects derive above all from the quality of the end products obtained (e.g., the temporary exhibition will be important as the effects produced in the beholder, the product-exhibition).

It is worth noting that in the case of the museum as action inductor, we will find ourselves before a lived institution, whose main actors will be the diverse population segments with their knowledges and limitations, and on the other, the museum as a space for contemplation, an institution made and structured by specialists will emerge, in which the population’s participation will be limited to punctual help and to playing the role of a privileged observer. In other words, in one case the museum will be an “auto” space, and in the other, a “hetero” space.

Independently of the nuances and of the association degrees that these two museological options can take up in practice, these are, in our understanding, two areas that the local museum, in the construction or re-structuring phase, should elect as intense reflection domains, since, as mentioned above, from the options taken in this

particular (due to, obviously, the personal positions of the driving core, or the pre-existing conditions and strategics at local level), will derivate not only the format of the institution, but also its museum practices.

## **5. The museum's materialisation**

The physical materialisation of the museum should correspond to the convergence of three trends that, together, should translate the reflective work and the options taken previously and that, on the level of results, will allow for the grounding of the future institution's objective and subjective bases.

### *5.1. The sparking of wills*

Although the museum should be an institution featuring a strongly collective character, as we have stated, be it in regarding its genesis, be it in what is linked to its management and intention practices, it is not credible that the idea of advancing towards the creation of the museum will emerge at once to the whole of the population.

It follows that there must be an initial core – the driving core – which, above all during the lift-off phase, will have to play the role of the “innovation avant-garde”.

The central issue to be put forward is how the process will have to be conducted during this necessary and unavoidable phase of “enlightened avant-garde”. Three paths can be taken:

i) Of the small group of enlightened ones who, owners of the idea and holders of knowledge, by scientific arrogance or for fear of

defacing of the “purity of the museum”, promote and develop the project in isolation; aware of the “population” factor, their idea of interaction is limited to the sporadic providing of information; a museum that is born like that will hardly be viable, since not even the institutional actors – because they were not heard – feel they are responsible, nor the population will feel it as something their own;

ii) Of the group that, in order to shorten the way or due to a distorted view of what is to prospect/interact with the population, channels all efforts towards the institutional actors since, in their understanding, these actors and not only those who will “pay” the museum, being the legitimate representatives of the population, will be able to “speak” for them; this position, common and generator of an illusory popular participation – by means of elected interposed agents – is extremely dangerous, since it does not effectively involve the diverse population segments in its definition and genesis, and one can hardly expect, *a posteriori*, a greater involvement than the sporadic visit; ignored and abandoned by the population, it will not be long before the museum is equally abandoned by the institutional actors, since they, as is known, in their cost/benefit reasoning, will rapidly conclude that the costs will surpass the benefits – personal or collective – they will be able to extract.

iii) Of the initial core that is constituted as the yeast of a collective project; it follows that beyond the institutional contacts, the main efforts should be strongly directed towards the widening of the project’s base. This widening can take place by force of the creation of the conditions for the increase in numbers of the innovators’ core, or by the widening and stabilising of the pre-existing body of ideas; this last task, prolonged in temporal terms and complicated regarding the management of collective wills, if on the one hand dilates the process of the emergence of the museum’s physical structures, on the

other is the only one able to secure the constitution of a collective root museum of solid theoretical and conceptual bases and, by accretion, the constitution of a truly participated, loved and lived museum.

Within the outlines defined by this last perspective, it is necessary, among other initiatives:

i) Define and schedule a widened set of “crossroads moments” between the initial core and the diverse sectors of the population, in view of a) advancing pre-existing ideas and “kick off”, b) collecting and synthesising the diverse ideas and concepts about what the museum should be – its ends, c) confronting the diverse population segments with the detected theoretical and conceptual contradictions, d) fixing and stabilising a set of globally accepted key ideas on the museum, e) listing the possible path lines for the museum and detect the diverse meanings in terms of collective will, f) building, giving shape and approving the museum’s Magna Charta, above all regarding the institutional and social insertion modalities, g) discussing and according on the museum’s spatial format, paying special attention to the options previously taken;

ii) Define and materialise the most efficacious ways, together with the crossroads moments previously mentioned, for the mobilisation efforts towards the creation of conditions for the museum’s participative functioning; in this regard one should mention from the start a) the voluntary gathering of material and human resource b) the definition and the materialisation of the available resources (individual and institutional actors), c) the forms of access, use and fruition of museum property.

### *5.2. Development of the working pre-plan/script*

In this phase, based on all that has been established above, the task is the preparation of a pre-plan able to:

- Systematise, articulate and imprint coherence – internal and external – to all the acquisition and options previously gotten;
- Establish a basic set of fundamental concepts and proceed to its justification;
- Explicit and justify the general aims, the specific aims and the strategic options that will structure the museum's Strategic Plan;
- Explicit and fundament the parameters that will guide the museum's architectural project (contract provisions);
- Establish the chronological coherence to the working plans regarding the materialisation of the museum.

This pre-plan should be carried out respecting a set of crossroads moments/areas that allow for the confrontation of opinions and sensibilities of the population's various sectors in face of the diverse production phases of this pre-plan. On the other hand, after its stabilisation, this document should be the object of wide diffusion, followed by its discussion and later incorporation of the opinions and criticisms.

### *5.3. The museum's strategic and operational plan, the architectural project*

After the stabilisation of the great structuring axis of the museum, its global and specific aims as well as the necessary strategic options, one should proceed to the elaboration of a strategic plan

capable of illuminating and imprinting coherence to the long and medium term museum actions.

This plan should later undergo an analysis phase of the starting situation in the double internal and external perspective, a prospective phase capable of organising future scenarios, their validation and probable outcomes, a phase of strategic diagnosis on the basis of the detection of strong and weak points, opportunities and threats, a phase of strategic consolidation that stabilises and validates the bigger strategic options, a phase of a proposal embodied by an intervention plan and a marketing and diffusion plan of the museum, and, finally, one of the production phases of other complementary support products, such as the social chart of the museum (relations and aims of the museum/population links), the user's guide and the service guide made available to the community by the museum and the installations' directive guide (the architectural component/contract provisions/forward plan).

Thus, this strategic plan will give body to the museum's constitution, will allow the framing of the diverse operational planning (e.g., the yearly plans) and budgetary instruments; in short, it will format the museum regarding:

- i) Concepts and actions;
- ii) Coherence and hierarchisation of actions;
- iii) Placing and type of installations;
- iv) Organisation and functioning;
- v) Scheduling of interventions;
- vi) Relations with other actors and agents;
- vii) (...).



## **6. The museum, an institution in permanent construction and change**

A local museum of the kind we defend as truly at the service of the population cannot deny care to the internal trend of its action. Hence it is necessary that the museum:

- i) promotes collective experience;
- ii) stimulates participation and reflection processes;
- iii) takes up the importance of all knowledges, independently of their professional or scientific character;
- iv) privileges the processes more than the final products;
- v) is conceived and built by the population, eventually with the technical support of museologists;
- vi) is managed with and for the population;
- vii) is evaluated not only regarding economic parameters, but also in terms of services rendered to the social dominion.

This kind of institution, because it deals chiefly with the people and their problems, is placed within an extremely dynamic context (the people change, the problems are solved, new issues emerge). This fact, in addition to the unavoidable rigidity of any plan, forces a permanent updating and re-dimensioning effort regarding the Plan and the Museum (sliding or continuous planning – the taking up of the plan as something in permanent construction and change).

In order to do so, it is indispensable: the continuous evaluation of the undertakings and effects, based on sets of indicators previously associated in the Plan, on the diverse levels of intervention.

Not willing to prolong too much the scientific dimension of what should be a continuous process of evaluation, it should be added

here that its eminently technical nature should be tempered with the necessary sensitivity and good sense, the only guarantees that, amidst the figures, important dimensions will not be obscured or escape the eye, dimensions of difficult translation by means of quantitative grids.

Along those lines, we suggest that the evaluation studies of the Museum and of its Plan should encompass, among others, the following analyses:

- i) pertinence of aims *versus* local contexts;
- ii) equity regarding the protagonism and results inherent to the various kinds of actors;
- iii) aims coherence *versus* programmed and carried out actions;
- iv) aims efficaciousness *versus* results and effects;
- v) efficaciousness of the results and effects *versus* the means and resources mobilised;
- vi) conformity of practices and results *versus* guiding principles of the museum (the museum's *Magna Charta*– key ideas and basic options).

These types of analyses will allow the periodical confrontation of the Museum with those who build it and live it (self-evaluation and reflection), in addition to, more importantly, serving as bases for the subsequent phases of the museum's dynamics on the level of its ethical, conceptual and integration structuring.

We have referred to the Plan's updating, by means of the reframing of the initial ideas, of the means and of the resources, of the concepts grounding and the actions and practices planned and developed, and we have referred, additionally, to the transformation of the museum itself, within a perspective that it should not, and must

not, be a definitive construction, but instead a collective path of permanent construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.

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This new museum, placed within this perspective and built in this way, we believe, will rapidly take itself up as a corner stone in any development process, be it the total sum of the interior growth of each one of the individuals, be it the increase of material and immaterial well-being of the collective. Let's thus be capable of not fearing the word "museum", let's thus be capable of trusting the populations' creative energy, let's thus be capable of taking ourselves up as amateur museologists.