

Accessibility to university museums: A strategical objective

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Abstract

In the National University of Colombia there are currently 25 museums and collections including art, medicine, natural science, anthropology and history. Taken together, they comprise the largest, most diverse and most important museum in Colombia, and also the least known. The collections are the product of the conservation and research work of the university in the 141 years of its existence. In recent years, the National University of Colombia has not only become more aware of the importance of its cultural and scientific heritage, but also of the marginality of the work in the university museums. For that reason, in 2006 the university began to work on a Museums and Cultural Heritage Project to develop policies for the conservation, acquisition, documentation, research and communication of its own cultural heritage.

The National University of Colombia hopes, through the development of a stronger, structured, ethical, responsible, efficient and representative project about Museums and Cultural Heritage to be better prepared for current challenges. In addition, the project hopes to generate a new landscape of accessibility to the museums and collections of the National University of Colombia. In short, the Museums and Cultural Heritage System of the National University of Colombia, through a 'Museums portal' located in a colonial building in Bogotá known as Claustro de San Agustín (Cloister of St. Augustine) seeks to highlight the cultural heritage of the university, and become, beyond the classrooms and research centers of the campus, an important reference for the meeting of teachers, students, citizens and other cultural and academic institutions.

Open door policy

Colombia National University has 25 museums and collections, which together give the university the largest and most diverse collections in Columbia. The collections of science, art, medicine, natural science, and anthropology are the result of the research and collecting of the university during its 141 year history.

The goal of the Cultural Patrimonio and Museums System (PMS) is to provide more public access to the cultural heritage of the university so that the university becomes meeting place; a place where teachers, students, academic and cultural institutions, social actors, and citizens can come together.

In October 2007 the San Agustín Cloister opened its doors as the headquarters of the PMS of the National University. At that time we had 3 to 5 visitors daily and in December 2008, the average was 125 people daily. To date, we have had a total of 27,400 visitors. Yet even more important information can be obtained by looking beyond the numbers.

The essential question is: Why is it so important open the doors of university to the citizens? The answer is as simple as it is political: because the audience has to have access in order to contribute to the preservation of National University heritage.

Beyond the campus: The other visitors of the university museums

The museums that are located on the campus of the university are known to the community because of the importance of the campus, but access to the museums was limited in the past because the activities of the museums were primarily linked to the university's curriculum.

The cloister is located strategically in downtown Bogotá, in the main cultural zone. It is able to distribute information about the university museums, resulting in visits from people who work in the

area and the rest of the city, national and foreign tourists, and of course, scholars, and academic groups.

Citizenship as a driver of heritage management

The Cultural Patrimonio and Museums System has had other positive effects on National University museums. PMS offers visitors an opportunity to see collections with normally restricted access. This helps in getting the collections conserved. Examples are the collections of the Forensic Sciences Museum and the History of Medicine Museum that are now housed in 'visitable storage' in the San Agustin Cloister.

The National Astronomic Observatory is in a similar situation. The building is a significant part of the architectural heritage of the university but it is located in the Presidential Palace yard. For that reason, people from outside the university did not visit. In September 2008, the PMS organized the first guided visit to the observatory and since then, observatory audiences have quadrupled.

Specialized university collections that in the past had been used primarily for academic research, have been used by PMS as part of public exhibits and other projects done in collaboration with other administrative and academic units of the university. This is the case of exhibitions such as *Ants* and *140 years of the Medicine Faculty*. These exhibits were jointly organized by the staff of the entomology laboratory and school of medicine faculty and revealed collections not widely known even inside the university.

Because an exhibition requires a lot of time consuming research and planning, the PMS has developed other kinds of activities to provide access to the National University collections and cultural heritage. One is the web portal, where anyone can learn about all the university's museums and collections through pictures, contents, and articles.

The most important result of the project is the new player on the scene: the audience. Because of the success in attracting visitors, the National University has created new relationships and agreements with other academic and cultural institutions who share the aim of providing more public access to their collections. In summary, the audience is a new engine that drives a weighty machine.

The National University in the sector of culture and heritage

A simple action like extending opening hours had a positive impact on visits. Another positive action was the touring of exhibits to other locations, the launch of a web site, and the distribution of cultural events calendars and information brochures at strategic points in the city.

As a result of all these activities, we can conclude that the PMS is a distinctive venue, yet one that reflects and respects the diversity of the university's cultural heritage. One of the important characteristics of the PMS is its decentralized model of management that allows the diverse collections to retain their own personalities.

Thanks to these new audiences the National University is finding a new balance between the conservation of the collections and their uses. Citizens are helping to renovate the collective character of the university heritage and even of the university itself.

Making collections accessible is both an academic necessity and a major social responsibility. The PMS, located in the San Agustin Cloister, operates on the basis that its visitors are – first of all – citizens, and that they have the right to know about and enjoy the patrimony that belongs to all of us.

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