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Exposing the Ivory Tower

If we think about it, university museums are strange animals – an unusual result of evolution and cross-fertilization. Both universities and museums can trace their origins to a common ancestor. Over time, universities and museums have eventually diverged into different taxonomic species seeking their own specific environmental niche, but in many aspects their evolution has been parallel, shaped by the same forces, adapting, facing extinction in times of crises, interacting at times, and struggling to survive in a not-always friendly environment. In some ways both universities and museums could be seen as a fossil testimony of this evolution.

Etymologically, the word „museum” comes from „museion” meaning the temple of the muses. We believe this term originated at the Alexandria Museum in the 4th century B.C. It incorporated various collections as well as a zoo, a library and an observatory. Mainly though, a museum was a place where a select group of scholars carried out research. This community of scholars had little interaction with the local population. The „museion” was a University of the Past – more an ivory tower than a lighthouse, despite its location in Alexandria next to the Pharos. According to Strabon, the conviviality, the collegiality amongst scholars was a key component of the „museion” spirit.

This idea is similar to the original Middle Age concept of „universitas” – a term used to designate a group of individuals sharing common interests and living together. This collegiality survives in Oxbridge colleges today. It is only very slowly that the idea of a museum as a place of exhibition first, open to the public later, takes shape. Similarly, universities today, even if they find their origins in the Middle Ages, have been shaped by the Enlightenment and the humanistic values of the subsequent three centuries. They encapsulate our ideals of democracy and freedom.

There are indeed many parallels between the history of the university and the history of the museum. It is worthwhile to draw a parallel from the evolution of the „idea

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of a university” of Newman in the 19th century, which aimed to educate a few gentlemen in the collegiality of their peers, and the notion of the „research university” following Humboldt’s conception, with the idea of museum. In addition to the traditional functions of museums and universities, both in research and teaching, one sees more and more an increasing concern for their role at the „service of society” and even „social responsibility” – in other words „accountability to stakeholders”.

Facing increasing economic constraints, universities like museums are trying to balance their budgets by diversifying the sources of income, creating subsidiaries and spin-offs such as shops selling souvenirs, publishing books, and renting out their facilities for various venues. The university must become, in the view of many, „entrepreneurial”. We speak more and more of the „multiversity” and of Academic Capitalism. Universities like museums also belong to the knowledge society and the learning society, changing their methods of teaching and curating under the influence of Information and Communication Technology. It is the age of ICT for both teaching and inventory purposes.

Some are forecasting that in the future our institutions will move from bricks to clicks. We are seeing the emergence of the notion of „World Class Universities” at the same time that some have created the concept of „Universal Museum” – a Temple of the Sciences or the Art – it depends. The symbolic role of the university and the museum waver between a „church” – a place of worship – and a supermarket, with all the risks that are involved and all the inherent contradictions to overcome as we demand everything and its contrary at the same time, both from the university and the museum.

No wonder that in the USA it has become as difficult to find a president for a major university as it is to find a director for a major museum. In both cases, massification and merchandization lurk. Universities oscillate between the „Harvardization” and the „MacDonaldization” of higher education, while museums are also trapped in conflicts of models to emulate – „Disneylandization”, „Smithsonianization” or „Bilbaotization”.

In this very challenging context, universities are beginning to grasp the fact that they have a role to play and responsibilities to fulfil regarding cultural and scientific heritage management.

The Magna Carta of the universities – signed in Bologna in 1988 – spells out the repository function of the universities vis-à-vis the European Humanistic Tradition. Ten years later, the Council of Europe invited member states to pass legislation in order to preserve the collections of institutions, such as universities, whose mission was not to collect or conserve – hence the return of individual collections. At the same time, UMAC was launched with ICOM support.

What are the responsibilities of the universities vis-à-vis cultural and scientific heritage?

Universities are among the oldest institutions of the western world. They are, thus, themselves part of the heritage. In Europe, universities often have buildings with an architectural, artistic and/or historical value.

But universities also have many other responsibilities. Therefore, I was delighted to hear Professor Lars Burman’s opening speech of this Conference stressing the importance of universities in communicating values². It has been my main concern at the European University level and University Museums could indeed play a role in this

² See p. 17–20 this issue.

aspect. The theme of this conference is „Awareness and Action: University Museums Today” and means, if my understanding is correct, that the intent in the coming days is to share experiences and visions on „how to grow and strengthen university museums; both inside and outside of the universities; both vis-à-vis colleagues and university managers; and vis-à-vis the outside world – the public at large.

Reflecting on this, I thought that the most efficient way to share with you my concerns – my own visions and frustrations – as a university leader and a museum researcher, would be to offer you a kind of brief SWOT analysis – that is: to schematically outline what I perceive are the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of and for university museums as if they were a business. After all, the topic of this meeting is a classical marketing problem.

I do not have much time, and university museums are very diverse, so keep in mind that what I am going to suggest does not apply to all university museums indiscriminately. My goal is to offer you some insight into what you could consider in order to achieve the main purpose of this meeting: „Awareness and Action”. I will try to be as practical as possible, but I apologize if what I am going to say is not very systematic and sometimes repetitive.

Strengths of University Museums

- Collections are often rare and unusual and include some unique objects.
- Museums often have highly dedicated and motivated staff.
- University museums are embedded in institutions offering easy access to a diverse body of highly qualified experts and to cutting-edge knowledge and technology.
- Those in charge often have a very pragmatic approach.
- Dynamic and creative staff, eager to share knowledge and attract new audiences.
- Prestige and credibility gained from association with higher education institution.
- Thanks to UMAC and a general trend in favour of heritage management and conservation, there is increasing concern for a new management style for university museums – one option being to concentrate university collections in one place with one person clearly in charge.
- Environment keen to support research and experimentation.
- Profitability is not a major concern in university culture.
- University museums display concretely the university’s achievements and ideals.
- University prestige directly linked with its age and context – the older the better. As a witness of the past, museums add to the university’s image and legitimacy.
- Universities often have ancient buildings acting as landmarks that already attract the attention of tourists.

Weaknesses of University Museums

- Lack of visibility of most university museums and collections.
- Dispersion of museums in various departments, faculties and locations.
- Involvement is museology not as either „research” or „teaching”, but as a kind of „hobby,” thus not adding much to a CV (i.e. not very useful in obtaining a promotion).
- Lacking funds and often managed in addition to other academic responsibilities, university museums tend to be more traditional, less creative and engaging than their counterparts outside the Ivory Tower.
- The person in charge of the museum may feel, sometimes for good reason, that it is „his own” rather than that of the university. Risk of the „collector syndrome”.
- Lack of experience in museology and very amateurish style of management. Worst case: some like the prestige of being Museum Director but would rather keep it closed to visitors, especially students.
- Turf wars between colleagues.
- Need for long-term strategy, not short-term tactics.
- A clear strategy for university museums is often lacking. It is difficult to make choices: the tendency, in order to get recognition from the institution, is to try to do everything (this is a problem shared with many museums around the world, and ICOM has its share of responsibility).
- No long-term fundraising.
- Quality of collection often uneven or of interest only to highly specialized visitors.
- Research associated with university museums often not very strong.
- University museums have arrived at their present position through a series of accidents. However, accidents need not control their future existence, as pointed out by John Spencer.
- High heterogeneity of university museums inside the same institution (from the collection in the basement to world-renowned, fully-fledged museums). A need for central university administration to deal with them in different ways.
- Integration of a museum in the university structure leads potential visitors to believe one must belong to the university in order to visit the museum.
- No real acquisition policy.
- No fee policy.
- No „friends of the museum” policy.
- For collections of scientific instruments and devices, it is often difficult to document just how a specific apparatus was used in the past and thus make it more interesting to non-specialists.

Opportunities from the University Perspective

- It is prestigious for a university to be able to display its riches and the testimony of its glorious past.

- University museums could play an important role in building identity: old tradition of research, famous alumnae of the past, century-old tradition of contribution to the city, the region and the country – services, culture, and politics.
- Rectors and University Presidents are increasingly aware of the university's social and cultural responsibilities, but are facing excruciating choices at a time of diminishing public funding.
- Increasing concern for the university's responsibility vis-à-vis its scientific and cultural history.
- Use of the university museum to promote the unique history and values of the university.

Opportunities from the Research and Teaching Perspective

- Growing concern to attract more young people to embrace scientific career. Need to make sciences more appealing.
- There will always be students who love to help, and with the flexibility offered by the Bologna reforms, they could earn credits from their museum work.
- In the context of the Bologna process – the need to go from teaching to learning – university museums could play a significant role in providing students with a hands-on opportunity with real objects and concepts in an increasingly virtual world.
- University museums could act as a place to attract potential students with their collections or events. They could be perceived as spaces for scientific exchange and also to foster creativity and exchanges between artists and scientists. It could also be used as a „university in a nutshell” to display the many roles of today's universities.
- From exhibitions to experimentation, and vice-versa.
- Use of the university museum to teach students practical aspects of museology, conservation, promotion, etc.
- Trans-disciplinarity on the rise inside the institution as traditional boundaries between territories and disciplines are more and more blurred, and also because of the need to address major issues like epidemics, global warming, terrorism, and ethics that require cross-disciplinary approaches. Museums could play a role in demonstrating tradition of trans-discipline and service

Opportunities from the Museum Perspective

- Museums are moving to a more market-oriented approach.
- Attention should also be paid to the conservation of the immaterial heritage – academic and student life, rituals, songs, symbolism of attire, etc.
- Use of website to promote the university museum.
- Captive audience inside the university.

- Strong interest from secondary and primary schools. Interest in demonstrating that scientific research is fun (at the ULB, we have created an „Experimentarium”, where primary and secondary school pupils can come to observe and participate in physics experiments).
- University museums may help to open the university to the city. University museums could make students more aware of history of services, of various aspects of research in the past and opportunities to link with the history of the university.
- University museums often have a large degree of flexibility as they are not institutions as such.
- Development of networking approaches of the various museum and collections inside a university in order to improve visibility and attract more resources.
- University museums are well placed to attract funding from private sources if they develop a long-term fundraising strategy.
- Cooperation with university libraries who are also concerned with conservation
- Many collectors and amateurs may be willing to help or to donate something to the university museum.
- With a strong research program, many opportunities in universities for temporary exhibits.
- The very existence of UMAC – ICOM and meetings such as this one.
- The University museum could become a laboratory on its own, even a „test case” museum.
- There are also opportunities, including heritage management, in the international cooperation policy of the university.

Threats

- University museums are not seen as part of the „core business” of the university.
- University museums are not a priority. As universities are experiencing decreasing funding and increasing numbers of students, university museums are seen as a source of spending, not a source of revenues.
- Demand overload on universities leads to „multiversity”, which leads, in turn, to reaction against dispersion of university activities in a time of diminishing funding.
- The development and professionalization of fundraising inside the university may compete with the funding appeal for the university museum.
- Insufficient autonomy and flexibility as the administration and structures of the university are not museum-oriented.
- Lack of a clear status of the university museum within the university.
- Increasing pressure for vital space, with the risk of losing or dumping less meaningful collections.
- Virtual collections competing with the real thing.
- Perception that university museums belong to the past.
- Future over-dependence on a single or a few individuals with little or no Human Resources policy in place.

- Conservation may play a too-important role. Unlike in a traditional museum university museums should encourage students to touch and manipulate objects, to get a hands-on experience.
- Small and dispersed collections often not listed and at risk of being discarded without anybody noticing it.

You may agree or disagree with some of my points, but I hope that you will find this tentative SWOT analysis useful and that I have provided some fuel for the debate in the coming days. There are, of course, some problems, but they are outnumbered by opportunities. As a new member of the board of the European University Association (EUA), I am quite willing to raise our associates' awareness of cultural heritage management issues in our university and to develop closer links with the European Union, UNESCO, etc.

Museums are our heritage from the past; they are witness of past achievement and endeavour, while universities are major contributors to the future. I am convinced that in order to know where we are going, we need to know where we came from. The future is rooted in the past.

In order to transform the Ivory Tower into a watch tower, or even better, into a lighthouse – a beacon to attract students and public interest – university museums must become a revolving light, highly visible on top of or at the centre of the academic tower, highlighting the values, the traditions, and the role of our Alma Mater.

However to keep their specificity, I will advocate that – confronted with the inescapable choices that universities, museums and university museums have to make – university museums must become more research-oriented than their counterparts in the outside world, and that research and teaching should prevail over conservation as often and as sensibly as possible. That could be the real added value – the unique specificity of university museums.

STRESZCZENIE

Ekspozycja Wieży z Kości Słoniowej

Wykorzystując tę paralelę oraz komplementarną ewolucję muzeów i uniwersytetów, niniejszy artykuł przedstawia krótką analizę SWOT, dotyczącą obecnej sytuacji muzeów uniwersyteckich, oraz zawiera sugestie, co jest potrzebne, by opracować skuteczny plan działania.