

Taking care of identity, memories and heritages: Experiences at the Museum of the Federal University of Alfenas, Minas Gerais, Brazil

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Abstract

This paper presents the project “Planning Unifal’s museum: the student’s relationship with Unifal’s heritage and memory” that is being developed since 2008 in order to guide the students of the university and stimulate the external community to participate in the basic steps of creating a museum: developing internal policies, organizing, cleaning, storing the collections, planning and setting up exhibits, among other activities. As one of the project’s outcome, we shall present an exhibit that addresses important issues about museums and heritage, emphasizing the role of museums in shaping the concepts of museum and heritage.

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century, Alfenas Federal University¹ has come up with the idea of creating a museum focused on celebrating its own memory and heritage. Through the resolution #018/2007 of the Superior Council, the university established the museum, the so-called Unifal’s museum. After hiring a museum expert, the idea started to become real: taking the first steps to the Museum of Memory and Heritage of Alfenas Federal University (MMP – Unifal – Minas Gerais) and conceding a space – a building that had been used by the university since the 1940s.

The museum is still under its development phase. Yet, it is aided by Unifal’s internal and external community in the planning of basic steps in creating a museum: developing internal policies, organizing, cleaning, and storing the collection; preparing and setting up exhibits, among other activities, through the participation in a specific goal. The project *Planning Unifal’s museum: the student’s relationship with Unifal’s heritage and memory* is being developed since 2008 and has reached its objectives in managing and coordinating the above mentioned activities.

Thus, the present paper focus on discussing this project – how it has been conceived, organized and developed – presenting its results. Yet, among its results, we highlight the exhibition *About many things: The importance of the museum and Unifal’s heritage preservation*.

About the project “Planning Unifal’s Museum: The student’s relationship with Unifal’s heritage and memory”

The main goal in creating this project is organizing, making feasible, and defining the activities that would be chosen and developed by the professors, students and the external community of Alfenas Federal University interested in joining the process of creating the museum. According to what we mentioned, this university decided to implant a museum specifically for its memory as an institution, but with limited human and financial resources. Therefore, the volunteers participation is fundamental and serves to make up for the difficulties caused by this limitation, but also to allow the community – academic and external – to experience a different activity: the participation in a museum’s creation.

The activities, since 2008, are inclined in the following trends: 1) Organization and planning; 2) Collections cleaning and research; 3) Developing and executing exhibits. Such activities, and its benefits for the participants are:

¹ Abbreviation Unifal-MG, known by the locals as Unifal.

1. Organization and planning: Reading, analyzing and discussing matters related to museums and museology; preparing the advertising of the museum and its activities; developing projects to acquire funds to restore the building and some of the objects on collections; and organizing the annual events. In taking part in the museum's management, the participant will learn basic principles of planning projects and other steps in the creation of an institution, and also contribute to a healthy cultural relationship in the society, that will bring the benefit of being a conscious professional and also a citizen responsible for the heritage's preservation for the future generations.

2. Collections cleaning and research: Cleaning the selected objects; registration, basic documentation; reading articles about preservation and documentation; researching basic information about the objects (origin, date, usage, manufacturing, and history). In this activity, the participants will develop their interest in the university's heritage and memory, as well as work straight with the history of the university's faculties from the relationship with the objects – most of them considered no longer useful according to their original scientific purpose – but still very important to the science history and progress. The participants, after a previous selection, will research the chosen objects, about its origin, usage, provenance, and other aspects. This research will be useful as a documentation method of the Museum of Memory and Heritage. However for the students it might become a study object for a deeper future research, or as a final graduation project.

3. Developing and executing exhibits: Developing the project means drawing the objectives, chronogram, goals, needed resources, defining the staff and its respective tasks; shaping the target audience; planning the space and the objects arrangement, considering the safety of the objects and the audience; and reading articles about this subject. About setting up exhibits: acquiring the necessary material, executing the project itself according to the needs that were brought up at the project's conclusion. In this working group, the participants have the opportunity to improve the methodology necessary for a project/research development that is intended to be presented to an audience: developing the exhibition's project considering objectives, justification, feasibilities, problems, expenses, among other topics. Also, executing the exhibit – thinking of an arrangement of the objects in a communicative approach that comprises an introduction, development and conclusion – moreover, reflecting about the matters that would awake the audience's interest effectively.

There are many cultural profits for the Museum of Memory and Heritage, for Alfenas as well as for its surroundings. Most importantly, we are able to allow the audience to experience a relationship with Unifal's memory and heritage through the exhibitions; make the collections' information and knowledge known in order to bring an accessible collection to the society, through a research accomplished by the participants; the creation of a support center for all museums and cultural centers in the south of Minas Gerais, aiming to preserve and communicate its memories and its heritage. We also intend, as a possible result in the long run, to allow the volunteer students from different places to perceive museums as places for a rich experience for experts of many different fields, considering the diversity of museums: science and technology museums, history museums, virtual museums (for instance, information technology professionals), pharmacy museums, dentistry museums, community museums (e.g. professionals from human and social sciences), museums related to the geodiversity – all of them requiring professionals and experts of various fields.

We want all the people concerned during the project's execution (directly or indirectly) to perceive that heritage, memory and museum are not only resources to identity's strengthening and self-discovery, but also to each other – one to another – building strong bonds. The Museum of Memory and Heritage is a museum that intends to celebrate the memory of an important Brazilian educational and scientific institution and its faculties – from those founded in the beginning of the twentieth century up to those created recently. Thus, we want the Museum of Memory and Heritage to allow, according to its project

development and execution, this relationship between its achievers and its audience with the identities, experiences and memories – that is nothing but the museum as a phenomenon. Based on these premises, we ensure the relevance of this project that aims, with the collections, the awakening of the audience's interest: first, the university's students and professors as well as the external community (Alfenas and its surroundings) to the documentation of Unifal's history and memory.

Therefore, we present in the next section the accomplished outcome at the execution of this project and, as a case study (that also results from the development of this project), the first exhibition of Unifal's Museum of Memory and Heritage.

Results and case study – the exhibit *About many things: The importance of the museum and Unifal's heritage*

With the participation of the students and the external community during the four years of execution, we developed the following activities according to the mentioned topics:

1. Organizing and planning: Execution and assistance in creating a museum's guiding plan; making the advertising of the museum and its activities; planning an Internal bylaw and the collections; developing projects to acquire funds from federal institutions such as Petrobrás, BNDES, Rouanet Law (a Brazilian law that supports cultural institutions) and organizing annual events such as the National Museums Week, the Museums Spring (both events had their fourth edition this year at Unifal) and the National Week of Science and Technology.
2. Cleaning and Researching the collection: Documenting scientific instruments: 590 objects from the pharmacy faculty, 56 objects from the dentistry faculty, and 105 objects of general use; creating 200 documentation files with photographs; cleaning and storing part of these instruments.
3. Developing and executing exhibits: With the collection of Unifal's museum, were developed the following exhibitions: *About many things: The importance of the museum and Unifal's heritage preservation*, *Moments, memories and experiences: Efoa/Unifal 95th anniversary* (photographs), and *The right measure: The importance of scales in our daily lives*; some others with external collections: *Feminine expression: Glances over Southern Minas Gerais* and *Feminine expression: Spring, museums, women and memory*, both developed from paintings of women from all over the southern region of Minas Gerais state. And also travelling exhibits: *Brazil: Our history*" (from the Brazilian National Historical Museum), and *Leonardo Da Vinci: Mechanical wonders*" (from the Museum of Astronomy and Related Sciences).

As a case study, we highlight and discuss the first exhibition *About many things: The importance of the museum and Unifal's heritage preservation* – how it was planned, executed and its results. During the planning, we understood that it was necessary to discuss the concepts of museum and heritage – as these concepts belong to our journey between past, present and future. Therefore, this exhibition aimed to: work in a critical and educational way on issues concerning museums and heritage; point out the importance of preserving Unifal's memory and heritage through some objects of the Museum of Memory and Heritage; and set a relationship between Unifal's memory and heritage and the students, professors, employees and visitors. Our proposal did not mean to present complete answers but to bring questions; as well as we did not mean our audience to visit only once, but to come back other times.

The exhibition occupied an 82m² room split in seven different modules, and it was opened to the audience from April 2009 up to February 2010. When entering, the visitor faced a frame with the questions: "What is a museum?" and "What is Heritage?". Both questions had three possible answers, and the visitor had to choose the one that seemed to be the most appropriated. The question "What is

a museum?” had the options: 1) Place to store old things; 2) Institution – or ‘a knowledge temple’ – for valuable things, paintings, and other objects of great historical, cultural and artistic value ; and 3) A phenomenon that has been happening since humanity exists – a relationship between any human being and the reality, crossing memory and identity.

The question “What is heritage?” had the options: 1) Inheritance left by our ancestors and/or goods acquired through a lifetime; 2) Tangible goods that have great meaningful value for a society, being esthetic, artistic, documental, scientific, social, spiritual, or environmental; 3) Communicative resource that is able to tell continuously the relationships between humans and its worlds.²

The next information shown in the exhibit was related to the concepts of heritage and museum, emphasizing the development of its concepts and its manifestations in Brazil. A brief history of these concepts were also shown, as well as two different definitions of each concept:

Heritage – The act of preserving a historical place and certain objects in order to keep the esthetic and symbolic models. Preserving it means witnessing the essence of a glorious past that survives through changes.³

Museum – Nowadays ICOM defines museum as

“a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (MAIRESSE 2005, 16–17).

Relating to the concept of museum, it is relevant to mention that we also displayed the importance of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to the world.

After that, we invited the visitors to rethink the exposed concepts, based on the idea that humanity dedicated its entire experience to ponder its endurance on earth. Then we brought the following questions to the visitors: To whom should we preserve something? To humanity? We pointed out, as a possibility, that heritage can be a communicative resource of the history of those it relates to. We also presented the concept of museum as a phenomenon, taking its complete shape, existing in all places and all times. What is nullified is the existence of an ‘ideal’ museum: “the museum takes its possible shape in every society, under the influence of their values and representations” (SCHEINER 1999, 139–140). Seeing through this perspective, we bring again another question: “maybe the origin of the Museum would be the human body, where memory lives, and from which it is originated all the evolution of the Museum and its processes mediated through reason and emotion?” (SCHEINER 1999, 137–138).

Thus, concluding this part of the discussion, we displayed a frame with photographs of Unifal’s different moments: events, ceremonies, classrooms, laboratories and also informal events – highlighting the importance of these moments to the university’s memory.

On the other hand, we presented an exhibit of scientific instruments that belong to the collection, most of them pharmacy and dentistry objects from Unifal’s first faculties. Instead of displaying the information with subtitles, we displayed it as a documentation file, in order to make the audience familiar with the museum’s methods and internal work. Among the objects we also included information such as: the difference between conservation and restoration; how to create a museum as an institution; the importance of documentation through the lack of information in some objects; the importance of the exhibits; the different types of museums.

² Based on SCHEINER 2004.

³ Based on SCHEINER 2004.

At the end of the exhibit, we displayed the following information:

“If the idea of Museum and Heritage can be built from the way we cope with our reality; from our references, sources, memories and identities. So, what do Museum and Heritage mean for you? You are free to represent it: through comments, poems, drawings, etc – use your imagination!”

Then the visitors could express their thoughts and impressions on two frames.

How did the audience ‘react’ to the exhibition? At the beginning of the exhibit, on the board with the question “What is a museum?”: 9% of the visitors answered “A place to store old things”; 81% answered “Institution – or ‘a knowledge temple’ – where valuable things, paintings, and other objects of great historical, cultural and artistic value”; and 10% answered “A phenomenon that has been happening since humanity exists – a relationship between any human being and the reality, crossing memory and identity”.

On the frame with the question “What is Heritage?”, 45% of the visitors answered: “Inheritance left by our ancestors and/or goods acquired through a lifetime”; 46% answered: “Tangible goods that have great meaningful value for a society, being esthetic, artistic, documental, scientific, social, spiritual, or environmental”; and 9% of the visitors answered: “Communicative resource that is able to tell continuously the relationships between humans and its worlds”.

The last frame, where people could express freely their impressions of museum and heritage, we noticed that most visitors were students from the university and also from other schools (private and public). During the visit, we always asked, after explaining the power of heritage, what this concept meant for the group. Many children related it to their religious beliefs. When we asked about museum, they associated it to family photographs, albums, objects that were inherited from generation to generation. As an example, we mention here the comment of a ten year old visitor, Ana Flávia da Silva:

“Me, Ana Flávia da Silva, loved knowing this museum. I hope I'll have more opportunities to know this cool place. I hope that you guys will maintain this place so special and who knows within twenty years I hope I will bring my children here. Maintaining this place is everyone's duty, because this place is not only a museum but a place where people can express himself.”

Conclusion

According to what we mentioned above, this exhibit stimulated us to continue the work, investigating and researching the concepts of museum and heritage of the academic community and Alfenas' people. We want to study concepts of museum, memory, heritage, focusing on heritage education. We propose this work in the following way: 1) Applying forms with questions in order to find more about the social imaginary that surrounds these concepts; 2) Presenting workshops about these topics, exposing contemporary discussions; and 3) Presenting workshops in Alfenas schools in a more appropriated language for the young audience. However, our objective is, that our proposal be considered and built along with the participants, using the topics we mentioned above, but also opened to other trends.

This activity will take place simultaneously with the first actions we have been developing since the beginning, because they are a crucial step into the Museum of Memory and Heritage's creation. The exhibit we referred to above, only stirred up the need to work on the concepts of museum and heritage and how they were (re)built throughout time, up to the creation of the Museum of Memory and Heritage and its local relevance, establishing bridges and keeping dialogues about concepts that are not brought to the audience in most museums.

We defend museum not only as an institution, but also as a phenomenon related to the various ways of representation of the reality (SCHEINER 2001, 17). Acknowledging museum as a phenomenon, allows it to be perceived through the life experience of each individual, according to the diversity of multiple and complex relationships that each human being or society sets with reality. Relating to museum: the emotional connections happen more frequently caused by identity perceptions relied on the memory, that can be individual or collective. Representations of identity have essentially an emotional character, filled with the symbolic aspect of the individual memory and that acquire other meanings through the boundaries of the social imaginary, the creation, and the emotion.

Gorgas (2008) defines museum as a permanent construction along with the social dynamics, as an agent of power and cultural dynamics. She points out the difficulties and responsibilities that the Museum has when building its own concept to its audience/community. Soares (in print) claims that the Museum manifests itself in the community through its relationship with the Real, “preserving the memory, the values, and the experiences in a democratic and whole way”. Through this process the community becomes the Museum itself:

“considering museum as a phenomenon means seeing it in constant movement, a steady process of self-renovation, for this is how a phenomenon behaves. This is a process that follows the transformation of the individual (or community), because the museum relates straight to them. [...] The phenomenon, a totality of the appearance, is the change itself, or it has the change as its essence, and it ends up working almost as a mirror in which the one perceiving and the one perceived are seen reflected one in the other, within the supersensible world (SOARES [in print]).

It is in the contemporary changing world, that different types of manifestation of the museum as a phenomenon take place. It is in this post-modern world that we understand museum not only as spaces where ancient objects are found, but spaces of non-formal learning; spaces of experimentations, places for research and knowledge; where debates, cycles, experiences and other relationships with different audiences take place.

For this relationship to happen in a whole way, it is necessary the participation of the society/community in planning the museums discourse and dialogue, because no “intellectual approach could substitute this view over the community life, only possible when the community speaks up and represents itself as a social fact, with a multiple character” (SCHEINER 2004, 161– 162). Thus, museums need to consider its own journey and all the controversies here discussed (relating to the concepts of museum and heritage) when dialoguing with the audience. When exposing itself to the audience, it is not enough to inform on the collections and the knowledge field that are being displayed, but also informing its own history as a part of a greater phenomenon; which concept of museum is considered as the guide of its discourse; and what the museum defines and understands as memory and heritage. We propose that the Museum of Memory and Heritage allow this relationship among its achievers and audience with their identity, experiences and memories – that is nothing but the nature of the museum as a phenomenon.

It is relevant to mention here the difficulties faced during the project's execution: we still have a very small number of students who are also participants according to the number of Alfenas Federal University students; the number of professors who are active in the memory and heritage field is almost zero; and budgetary problems, as the resources provided by the university are not enough, and our projects for fund acquisition have not yet been approved.

Museums must consider the questions and demands of the contemporary world to lead its acts: without dialogues, discussions and participation from those who are interested in preserving the heritage comprised by the collections, it is not possible to have a fair museum action. This project

essentially come to build bridges; connections between the Museum of Memory and Heritage and those who are interested in participating in it. In a more and more changing world, museums need to be aware of the changes but always appraising the bonds, spaces and phenomena of its communities' identities and memories – even if they also change and rebuild themselves throughout time.

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