

Ecomuseums for social harmony

How ecomuseums, within the broader framework of contemporary museology and sociomuseology, can help to create social cohesion

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It was during the Santiago Roundtable, held by ICOM and UNESCO in 1972, that the idea of an integral museum, involving communities in search of solutions for social problems, was first raised. This gathering gave way to the concept of the ecomuseum, bringing a symbolic end to authoritarian hierarchical models within a democratised new museology and sociomuseology.

Ecomuseums: a new typology

The concept of ecomuseology is based on prioritising participation in and expansion of cultural heritage and territoriality. Ecomuseums are a new typology of museum, which offer alternative approaches, objectives and practices. Following the initial years of vigorous debate on the very meaning of ecomuseology, ecomuseums are now consensually recognised as being a fundamental part of museology.

Time has shown that two models of ecomuseum can be identified. The first is concerned with social and economic development and is organised in a participative manner, based on the concept of community in a particular territory. The community assumes various levels of responsibility with a view to promoting its heritage. These museums explore cultural and territorial specificities as resources for development, while at the same time reinforcing identity ties.

The second, although organised in a less participative manner, aims to present the cultural resources of a given territory to as wide a public as possible. Both models are active in terms of social and economic development, and consequently contribute significantly to creating social harmony within our society.

Ecomuseology, which is unable to encompass this new reality of contemporary museology, has been absorbed in the broader stream of new museology, and more recently, in the disciplinary field of sociomuseology. Sociomuseology is focused on collections of objects that are made up of each human being's personal heritage, in times of peace and of war, of wealth and of poverty.

The sociomuseological approach is more complex, since working with people requires human and professional competences different from those required when working with objects. It is within this complex reality that sociomuseology helps to adapt museological structures to the conditions of contemporary society. By so doing, it brings modern society closer to achieving a harmonious balance.

Ecomuseums offer alternative approaches, objectives and practices

Opening the museum up to its environment and social context has created the need to structure and clarify relations, notions and concepts. Sociomuseology has evolved as a disciplinary field of teaching and research, which enhances the presence of museology, particularly in areas such as human and political sciences, development studies, urban and regional planning and social and environmental sustainability.

Ecomuseology in practice

Since the 1970s, consistent ecomuseological practices have been observed in France and Latin America. These practices spread to Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Canada, the US and certain African countries in the 1980s, and reached Italy, Japan and Vietnam in the 1990s. The concept grew in China in the



▲ The Maré Museum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

21st century, with a focus on issues of ethnic minorities. This growing practice can be recognised in a democratised museology where perhaps the main principle is the right to be different.

Brazil's Maré Museum, located in Rio de Janeiro, was built on the territory of the Maré *favela* (shanty town), at the initiative of the community. From this original nucleus, educational alternatives for the younger population were created, as well as alternative leisure and cultural production areas with implications for household resources. After learning the basics of participation, the community was able to better engage in dialogue with municipal authorities and public health and transport authorities.

A new museological facility is now located in a converted manufacturing plant where special projects, workshops, training programmes and cultural activities are hosted.

In another social context, the Ecomusée du Fier Monde, located in the city of Montreal, Quebec, is achieving similar goals in terms of social development for the neighbourhood.

Ecomuseology, and more broadly sociomuseology, are essential components for operating museums on an international level, encompassing rural and urban realities both in developed countries and in those still striving for socio-economic expansion. Ecomuseums are constantly striving for dialogue, tolerance, coexistence and development. In other words, they are working towards social harmony. ■