

Lesson 5 : New Museology, Communities, Ecomuseums by Prof. Peter Davis, Newcastle University, UK

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In this lecture, Davis reviews key concepts of museology and traces the emergence of conceptual frameworks in the 1970's which led to "New Museology." New museology is significant because it places an emphasis on intangible aspects of cultural heritage, such as collective memory, identity and belonging. It also shifts our view of museology from the curation of objects and specimens to the 'museum as place'. It recognizes that cultural landscapes reflect the uniqueness of localities and prioritizes community participation. These are the defining attributes of the ecomuseum.

1.0 Definitions of Museology and New Museology

Davis begins with a review of the definitions of museology and new museology. He cites ICOM's definition and other definitions of the museum, to reflect on their complexities. He then turns to the reconceptualization of museology during the 1970s. Since then, museums have expanded the scope of their exhibitions and curatorial practices to include living heritage, such as oral history and memory, craftsmanship, festivals, ritual and performance, and in this regard, museums are increasingly being recognized as important partners in the effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

1.1 Museology: diverse definitions

"Museology is the branch of knowledge concerned with the study of the purpose and organisation of museums. It has to do with the study of history and background of museums, their role in society, specific systems for research, conservation, education and organization, relationships with the physical environment, and the classification of different kinds of museums."¹ Davis cites the definition of the museum as given by the International Council of Museum (ICOM) and compared this with the definition offered by the Reinwardt Academie in the Netherlands. "Museology covers the complete range of, and working with, cultural and natural heritage."

According to Davis, the second definition offers a wider framework than ICOM, because it moves beyond the traditional idea of museology as defined by a building, collections and special expertise.

¹ Please see more detail in http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Key_Concepts_of_Museology/Museologie_Anglais_BD.pdf, pp. 53

This broader definition of museology can encompass the conservation, interpretation and management of heritage sites within the landscape, thus liberating museology from the museum building.

Before delving deeper into the new museology approach, Davis briefly traces the development of museums towards the end of 19th century, particularly in Europe and America. During this time, practices and techniques of traditional museum curatorship were developed, such as, storage and research, conservation, documentation, and education. All of these practices are key facets of museum work and we still use them today. However, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of social unrest and political activism around a range of issues including civil rights and the environment. People became increasingly concerned about the impacts of technology, industry and development on the natural world and the environment generally. Moreover, this was a time in history when many former colonies were liberated. This period of political and intellectual ferment resulted in the emergence of new social movements, and the concept of new museology emerged at that time.

1.2 New Museology : origins and development

An important meeting in the world of museum professionals took place in Santiago, Chile in 1972. Referred to as the "Round table of Santiago," this meeting brought together museologists from countries in South and Central America, such as Brazil and Mexico, with representatives from UNESCO and ICOM.

The discussions that took place during that meeting focused on how to rethink the meaning and role of museum. How can the museum play a role in economic development, particularly in places where people were still living in poverty? How could museums link to a social purpose and contribute to regeneration and development in poor urban or isolated rural communities? The meeting gave rise to the idea of community museology, that is museums developed for and with the people. This was linked to a more democratic vision for museums; one in which museums are associated with a development agenda by working with local communities.

The term "new museology" did not come into being until 1980, when André Devallées, a French museologist, wrote a piece for an encyclopedia using the phrase "Nouvelle Muséologie". "New Museology" became the catchphrase for museology linked to a community development agendas, and it gradually became popular in many European countries such as Spain and Portugal. The term

was formally accepted when ICOM established the "International Committee for New Museology" (MINOM) in 1985. MINOM is a very active committee, with their most recent meeting being held in 2011 in Amsterdam.

1.3 New Museology and the Ecomuseum

Hugues de Varine, former Secretary General of ICOM, was the person who first proposed the term *éco-musée* to distinguish the approaches promoted by new museology. Both ideas promote museums which involve local communities and use heritage resources to support sustainable development. The word, *éco-musée*, first used at a meeting of ICOM in Dijon, France, in 1971 is anglicized as 'ecomuseum'.

The ecomuseum concept emerged in the early 1970s, a time when environmentalism was becoming a critical issue of growing concern to society. Several international organizations focusing on environmental protection were founded around this time, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. The choice of the term ecomuseum is a direct reflection of the social and political climate of a time when ecology and concern for the environment were high on the agenda. Ever since, the terms new museology and ecomuseology have been applied to community-based heritage projects concerned with environmentally sustainable social and economic development.

Another important figure who promoted the museum's role in local development was a French museologist, George Henri Rivière. He and Varine conducted experimental projects working with local communities in many rural areas of France. The core concept of these projects was about how local people could use their heritage to strengthen the local economy, aid local identity and improve their lives.

However, de Varine and Rivière held different points of view regarding the framework. George Henri Rivière was an ethnographer particularly concerned with aspects of cultural heritage which were disappearing from French rural society. By contrast, de Varine was more focused on the democratization of museums." Taken together, we can see how these perspectives broadened the roles of the museum, with greater emphasis on place, territory, identity, development and democracy.

2.0 Ecomuseum: definition and identification

In this section, Davis turns to a detailed discussion of the definition of the "ecomuseum" and

considers the process whereby an area, landscape, environment, people and culture can play a role in local development.

2.1 Ecomuseum: a conceptual framework

René Rivard, a French-Canadian museologist, provided a definition of the ecomuseum as being a territory encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage, including the memories of the people who live there. Since then, the ecomuseum model has been developed, particularly in Europe, where a group of European institutions created the "European Network of Ecomuseums." This network defines the ecomuseum as "a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for a sustainable development. An Ecomuseum is based on a community agreement."²

In 2007, Davis published an article about ecomuseums and sustainable development, where he provided a concise definition of the ecomuseum as "a community driven heritage project that aids sustainable development."³ The main issue he raises here is about the philosophy and practice of the ecomuseum, which centers on the conviction that local people should play a central role in supporting heritage projects and activities that in response to their own particular situation.

2.2 Comparison between the traditional museum and the ecomuseum

Traditional museums developed in Europe some 400 years ago as private collections; eventually museums became synonymous with extensive, valuable collections conserved in prestigious buildings. These museums were run by experts in particular subjects who possessed specialized curatorial knowledge and techniques. Visitors to traditional museums receive the wisdom imparted by expert curators.

By contrast, knowledge in the ecomuseum is held by local people who designate their own heritage, place and territory. A territory encompasses aspects of the landscape (geology, scenery), built heritage (architecture), natural heritage and intangible heritage (dialect, songs, stories). The size of the ecomuseum territory is determined by local people. Davis mentions that the largest ecomuseum, the Kalyna Country Ecomuseum, covers an area of approximately 10,000 square miles of Alberta,

² Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop, Trento (Italy), May 2004 in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecomuseum#Definition_from_the_European_Network_of_Ecomuseums , retrieved on 5 December 2011.

³ Davis, Peter. (2007). New museologies and the ecomuseum. In: Graham, B. and Howard, P, ed. Research Companion to Heritage and Identity. Ashgate..

Canada. Alternatively, an ecomuseum might be a very small site, perhaps one relating to a former industry.

The idea of the ecomuseum is embedded within places, capturing their distinctive characteristics and histories. They reflect a particular geography and the ways in which people have used and modified the land over time. The boundary of the ecomuseum's territory need not be defined in by geographical features such as mountains and rivers, or by existing political boundaries. Instead the boundary can be defined by culture, for instance, a dialect, musical traditions or particular forms of dress. In fact, it is the people who decide what they value in the environment or what they want to preserve, cherish and interpret for themselves and for visitors.

2.3 Three pillars of the ecomuseum ideal

2.3.1 Sense and Spirit of place

What is special about a place should be defined by the locals themselves--it should actually reflect what they value, how they picture their own 'sense of place'. Moreover, in working with communities on safeguarding their heritage resources, cultural practitioners should be concerned with revitalizing cultural heritage in the local environment. This kind of heritage work is called *in situ* conservation and interpretation. The heritage will be conserved and interpreted in its own situational context and it will not be moved to a special building or a museum.

2.3.2 Community involvement

At its heart, the ecomuseum is premised upon a democratic approach. This means that decisions regarding heritage management are made by the local community of cultural bearers. This democratic ideal of the ecomuseum often presents challenges in contexts where there are deeply entrenched social hierarchies, and in countries where the government takes a more top-down approach to heritage management.

2.3.3 The flexibility of the Ecomuseum model

Another defining feature of the ecomuseum is its flexibility. It can be adapted to the unique context and history of each place. Thus, the ecomuseum can be a project focusing on an industrial

site or an archaeological site, or it can encompass a whole range of intangible cultural heritages in a given territory. In sum, the ecomuseum can be adjusted according to the community of culture bearers and the specificities of place.

3.0 Principles of ecomuseums and community museology

Building upon the three main concepts of the ecomuseum, Davis has worked with colleagues in Italy and at Newcastle to develop what they call the 21 key ecomuseum principles. The principles fall broadly within three categories: 1 through 6 are about participation, 7 through 12 are about ecomuseum functions and ways of working, and 13 through 21 are about the goals that the ecomuseum might achieve.

These principles provide a way of assessing how successful each museum has been in reaching its goals. However, these principles express the ideal ecomuseum model, and it is not necessary for every ecomuseum to achieve all of them.

1. Originated and steered by local communities
2. Allow for public participation in a democratic manner
3. Joint ownership and management-double input system
4. Emphasis on process rather than on product
5. Encourages collaboration with network of partners
6. Dependent on substantial active voluntary efforts
7. Focus on local identities and sense of place
8. Encompasses a 'geographical' territory, which can be determined by different shared characteristics
9. Covers both spatial and temporal aspects -diachronic rather than simply synchronic
10. Fragmented 'museum' with network of hub and antennae of buildings and sites
11. Promotes preservation, conservation and safeguarding of heritage resources *in situ*
12. Equal attention given to immovable and movable tangible and intangible heritage resources
13. Stimulates sustainable development and responsible use of resources

14. Allows for change and development for a better future
15. Encourages an ongoing programme of documentation of past and present life and interactions with environmental factors
16. Promotes research with different inputs-from local 'specialists' to academics
17. Promotes multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches to research
18. Promotes a holistic approach to interpretation of culture/nature relationships
19. Illustrates interconnectedness between: nature/culture; past/present; technology/individual
20. Provides for an intersection between heritage and responsible tourism
21. Brings benefits to local communities e.g. sense of pride, regeneration, and economic, social and cultural capital

The following principles are particularly relevant to the safeguarding of ICH: Number 5 is about encouraging collaboration among stakeholders in the area; Number 7 focuses on local identity; Number 12 raises awareness of both the tangible and intangible, specifically referring to ICH; Number 21 focuses on local pride and sense of place.

4.0 Examples of Ecomuseums

Davis offers four examples of ecomuseums in China, Brazil, Japan and Italy.

4.1 The Soga Ecomuseum, Guizhou, China

The Soga Ecomuseum is located in a remote village in Guizhou Province in China. It was selected as the first ecomuseum to be developed in China. The idea came from the central government, particularly from the Chinese Association of Museums. The project was approved and supported by the Norwegian government, which provided Norwegian overseas aid to fund the development. The budget was allocated for various purposes. Besides the ecomuseum development, a school and hospital were built, and new infrastructure, including piped water and new roads, was developed. This model had been implemented in different parts of China.

A documentation centre called the Documentation Center of the Soga Ecological Museum was created to house information and resources about local culture, including local dialects, local

traditions, and photographs. They created a database, partly in digital format and partly paper-based. The museum exhibition focused on local culture and local ways of life, and it was very interesting when it was first opened.

However, when Davis went back to the documentation center a few years later, he discovered that all the paper records were lost, and there was no climate control. All the digital equipment was broken/. In fact, local people had not been involved in the process of establishing the documentation center, and they did not have the knowledge or the financial means to run it. The government had initially invested in it but local people lacked the capacity to look after the centre or the museum by themselves. This project reflects that the ecomuseum was developed using a top-down approach, which ultimately led to its failure.

4.2 Ecomuseu do Quarteirao do Matadouro, Rio de Janiero, Brazil

The Ecomuseu do Quarteirao do Matadouro was initiated by several local groups. Opened in 2001, the Ecomuseu focuses entirely on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage including dance, poetry, songs, story telling, and music. Visitors can learn more about these elements of ICH at various locations in the community network. However, by and large, this ecomuseum is mainly for local people; it has not been developed for tourism. One activity affiliated with the ecomuseum is a Samba School where the local dancers perform and transmit this tradition intergenerationally.

4.3 Hirano Cho, Osaka, Japan

The Hirano Cho project was initiated by a priest from a local monastery who is interested in the art of Kamishibai--traditional storytelling using storyboards. The tradition is a disappearing art form in Japan, and the priest wanted to find a way of keeping it alive among younger generations. The priest then went on to consider other aspects of local heritage and created a network of about sixty people, all of whom were fascinated by aspects of Hirano's heritage. The sites include the local sweet shop, a bakery, the bicycle shop, and a poet who worked in the village. The priest developed a map of the community to encourage people to go and explore these places for themselves, and they also used video to document local festivals.

4.4 Ecomuseo della Canapa, Carmagnola, Italy

This small ecomuseum was developed by a group of local people keen to conserve the last

remaining hemp rope factory in the town. These local volunteers wanted to make sure that the knowledge of handmade hemp rope production would not be lost. The ecomuseum is not a tourist attraction, attracting only about 700 visitors a year, but it does encourage school visits and involve children in demonstrations. The museum is now recognized by the town council, who help with running costs, marketing and promotion.

5.0 Conclusions

New museology has had a number of significant impacts on the realm of traditional, Western museum practice:

- To challenge the idea of what heritage is valuable and how this is judged.
- To question the ethical aspects of museum activities.
- To challenges the political stances or versions of history (ies), art or science adopted by museums or exhibitions.
- To shift away from the curator as the sole source of authority.
- To question who has the right to represent others or oneself.
- To recognize the importance of intangible heritage in the historical record.
- To re-evaluate the relationship between objects, specimens and their academic interpretation.
- To shift away from the idea that a museum is a building.
- To recognize the ongoing, contingent and subjective nature of the historical record.
- To increase attention given to stakeholders and participants, which means getting the local people involved.
- To encourage the use of the museum as a "public" space where local people are involved in decision-making.

Davis stresses the diversification of the roles that museums are expected to play. New museology and community museology allow the museums to play a role in local development, particularly in remote and poor areas. The ecomuseum is a form of museum which encourages democratization and community involvement. It is also important to recognize that in ecomuseums it

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is not necessarily the end product which is important, but that the processes of involvement, discussion and co-operative decision-making are paramount.