

Rosanna Pavoni

The contribution of the Urban History Museums to Lifelong Learning.

Movement and change

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Foreword

I would like to begin my contribution to Symposium by taking as starting point the World Conference on Adult education organised by Unesco in Hamburg in 1997, and by the official document that came out of it. As the document says, learning as adults, throughout our lives, can help to redefine our own identities and add more meaning to life, stimulating us to review and reflect on concerns like growing older, differences between men and women, language, culture and economic status, handicaps, and so on.

The document goes on to specify that Adult education can include both formal, ongoing instruction and all kinds of informal learning, as well as all those chance occasions to learn that a multi-cultural society offers, where the importance of theory and practice can be appreciated.

From this perspective, cultural institutions like museums have been indicated as ideal places to encourage learning processes outside the formal, structured context of a school. Museums – it concludes explicitly – provide an atmosphere where it is possible to learn in an informal, flexible way that can catch the imagination, raise curiosity, expose visitors to a myriad of stimuli – visual, sensory, emotive – and above all facilitate contact with their own collective memory or with other cultures.

Paul Bélanger (director of the Unesco Institute of Education in Hamburg) emphasises that the increasing demand for lifelong learning opportunities involves all walks of professional, private and social life, and he declares that the contribution museums can make is absolutely essential for the improvement of cultural standards in sections of society that often remain excluded and discriminated against. This can happen because museums help ordinary people, presenting themselves in a more “friendly”, less dogmatic way than the academic world, for example. They help people to observe life in other countries and in other times; they encourage the local community to dig deep into their own roots: in a word they allow “visitors to travel through different scenarios and panoramas, helping them to stand aside for a moment from their own habits and customs, based on their own identities, and enjoy contact with different realities, celebrate with them, borrow from them and construct new visions for themselves”.

Together with Unesco, the European Union has also entered into the debate. When Jacques Delors was president of the Commission he emphasised the urgent need for education to lead not only to a means of increasing production (thus solving the problem of unemployment) but also to be seen as a permanent resource for the growth and well-being of us all, a concept summed up in the four “pillars” of lifelong learning: *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be*. With the Cresson report in 1996 the EU launched projects and actions to re-define education as a “Learning Society”¹

¹ European Commission, White book on teaching, training and learning. Towards a knowledge-based society, 1996

and Museums were explicitly called on to assist in the effort to offer people the chance to fulfil their individual aspirations, avoid social alienation and work together to create an active, self-aware and open-minded community,

With the “Socrates” program, the EU launched four projects in succession, all with the same common denominator: that cultural institutions have a leading role to play as places of informal learning, capable of attracting people of different ages and different social extractions, as well as transmitting knowledge and developing abilities in non-conventional ways, more in keeping with people’s own inclinations. The project, now in the concluding phase - with its title *Lifelong Museum Learning* (LLML) - for the 2005-2006 biennium aims to promote the training of museum personnel who are either already involved in adult education or are going to be involved in the near future. In fact, the skills needed to teach in schools – which in Europe are still the privileged users of the activities and services offered by museums – are different from the skills needed to offer means of growth and knowledge to a far wider, more heterogeneous public ranging from teenagers to senior citizens. This project – coordinated by the *Istituto Beni Culturali* (that is Institute for Cultural Assets) of the Emilia Romagna Region of Italy – has scheduled staff training courses in Bologna (Italy), (17-18 October 2005), the Netherlands (April 2006), Portugal (October 2006), and will conclude with the publication of a “Manual for museum teachers in the field of Lifelong Learning” containing the results of the project².

² For further information on the project and training activities for museum personnel involved in adult education, see www.amitie.it/llml

This project is a further step along the road to enhancing the services offered by museums, since they are continually called on to improve their relationship with different kinds of public, in order to provide answers to such pressing problems as social exclusion. The project follows on from previous ones, all with the aim of setting up a data base of educational initiatives for adults in museums throughout the EU: to form the so-called key-workers, that is people whose task it is to act as bridges between institutes of adult education and the museums themselves, and to plan teaching opportunities; to make a collection of projects and examples of “good practice” concerning lifelong learning, especially in museums and art galleries, and to share them on a website³.

The EU’s strategy has thus been to take into account the wide-felt need not only for professional updating and refresher courses but also for cultural needs and individual growth within a society in perpetual motion and change.

And in my opinion it is on these two realities of our society today – perpetual motion and change – that museums must concentrate all their attention and ability, so as to give an adequate response to the onerous task they are called on to fulfil, since, as Edwards writes in his “Thinking in Lifelong Learning”⁴, economic, social and technical changes require continuous learning in order to prepare people to face the uncertainties that accompany them. It is a commitment for many museums to an adventure that has just begun or is about to begin, and which will require above all a clear awareness of what their mission

³ The site for this latest project, entitled “Collect & Share” is www.collectandshare.eu.com An explanatory summary of the above-mentioned projects can be found in M.Sani (ed.), *Musei e Lifelong Learning. Educational experiences for adults in European museums*, Institute for Artistic, Cultural and Natural Assets of the Emilia Romagna Region, Bologna 2004

⁴ R.Edwards, *Recent thinking in Lifelong Learning*, cited in M.Sani (ed.) op.cit. p21

is and of the instruments they must use to tackle it. In fact, it must not be forgotten that at present the legislation of most EU members with regard to Lifelong Learning does not explicitly refer to museums as privileged or at least desirable partners in adult education and therefore does not officially support their initiatives in this field⁵.

The Urban History Museum and Lifelong Learning

We all know that there are no universal recipes for good practice. What may have worked well with one museum does not necessarily guarantee equal success if applied to another. Therefore, my contribution will not give recipes and does not presume to be able to point to solid, reassuring solutions. Instead, it is meant to be a reflection on the Urban History Museum and its role as a permanent educational instrument - Lifelong Learning - for an increasingly vast and diversified public. In fact, the theme of perpetual movement and change will be one of the major threads of my argument, which I would like to introduce by quoting from two authors who, in their different contexts and times, have approached the theme of perpetual change in the city.

In his novel *Ulysses*, written in the 1920s, James Joyce expresses his awareness of the disturbing nature of change, raising doubts about his own identity with these words: “Citiful passing away, other cityful coming, passing away too: streets, miles of pavements, piledup bricks, stones. Changing hands.Piled up in cities, worn away age after age”.

⁵ For a picture of the policies of each member of the Union concerning Lifelong Learning, see www.eurydice.org

Fifty years later, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino, in his work *Le città invisibili* (*the invisible cities*), imagines a series of fantastic tales of travels that Marco Polo tells Kubla Khan, the Tartar Emperor, with the intent of discovering what has made human beings want to live in cities. To do this, Calvino dedicates a chapter to the relationship between city and memory, inventing the city of Maurilia, which becomes a paradigm for places that never stay the same, for – as he writes – “sometimes different cities follow one another on the same soil and under the same name, they are born and die without knowing one another, unable to communicate No relationship exists between them, just as old postcards do not show Maurilia as she was, but another city that happened to be called Maurilia too.”

In the passages I have just quoted there emerges the same idea, the same awareness of the city as something mercurial, that could slip through our fingers if we tried to pin it down in time, in a precise historical moment: stories about it come too fast, one after another, transforming it all the time. As Calvino also writes, cities are a mixture of so many things: memory, desire, the signs of a language; cities are places of exchange, but these exchanges are not only goods transactions but exchanges of words, desires, memories.

Therefore cities continually take on new forms, which in turn vanish to give way to the next ones. Cities exist, or rather their story exists, if we admit the impossibility of stopping their life cycle, if we are ready to accept the fact that we don't belong to a changeless, reassuring place.

Linking these considerations to the theme that interests us - the museum of the city and its educational role in the widest sense of the term – it is natural to ask ourselves a few questions. What story can be told about a city and the people who have lived in it? How can we fix our gaze on a period, no matter how glorious and important, that witnessed the birth, consolidation and maturity of the city, and then came to an end? How can that period, chosen to represent a continually evolving story, still have the power to confront us with our collective and individual identities? Should we, perhaps, tell an open-ended story, a story in progress? And in this case, with what awareness and what lucid neutrality can we comment - through the ever-present means of communication - on our daily experiences in inter-personal relationships, on our urban existence and inter-action with places and events?

The nut to crack – museologically speaking – is the overwhelming presence of movement, flux – the flow of people, things, facts, ideas, relationships – which demand the attention needed to grasp in this instability (a term I use without any negative stress) elements that can be used to tell a story, that is the story spread out in the Museum of the City.

We all know the diehard nature of commonplaces concerning museums, first and foremost that they are static places, almost frozen in their closed form, both physically and intellectually. So the challenge is even greater and more involving for museums that accept the task of telling a tale of “perpetual movement”, as the life of a city actually is, and making sure that the tale becomes a living part of the

personal growth and culture of anyone who lives, works, visits or stays in the city.

It is like searching for harmonious rhythm between what moves about outside the museum and what is narrated inside. Outside – inside: perhaps it is this very dualism that needs to be broken down for the rhythm to become a shared one, for the museum to become part of the perpetual movement of the city.

What does all this mean, materially, culturally and technically, for a city museum? It means first of all asserting, on one hand, and denying, on the other, claims to certainties and responsibilities. It means, above all, that the museum must see itself as a **living part of the city**.

The city speaks, it communicates with its own instruments and in its own places : from the centre with its monuments, internationally known and acclaimed, to the locally known outskirts. All this, too, belongs to an ideal museum of the city, that is to a museum that can make use of these places and those instruments to narrate aspects – maybe even narrowly circumscribed ones – bound to a determined event – of the city's history.

Let's look at one example out of the many that could be chosen: anyone who has travelled on the Paris metro will have seen information panels by means of which, with extreme clarity and graphic simplicity, are illustrated historical characters, ground-breaking inventions, events that took place in that precise part of the city. Rapid flashbacks, each graphically part of a series (famous people, great buildings, etc.) adapted to be read or simply glanced at

by people waiting for a metro, that is people momentarily waiting to be on the move again. If therefore, as in this case, History is the tale of what has been, fixed in the past, the means of telling it takes into account the present vitality of both the city and the people passing through it.

This leads us to a second affirmation: the museum of the city cannot be confined behind closed doors, in spaces defined as museums, inside buildings, no matter how perfectly set up and museologically state-of-the-art. The museum of the city has to pour itself out on to the streets, inter-act with them, be “contaminated” by them, as it were. This can be done by creating other locations for the same museum scattered around the city, as some great museums have done (I am thinking, for example, of the Museum of London, which presented its extension project right here in Seoul). But the same objective can also be followed acknowledging that the city itself has the ability to tell stories, if the user has been primed to hear them. Therefore in this case the museum’s role becomes that of a signpost (a theme we will return to later) where visitors can get their bearings and acquire the necessary information and know-how to go out of the building and begin a journey of discovery and re-discovery which will last not just the length of an official visit but all the time needed for the individual to investigate , learn and reflect on what the city is and what it has been. In the best of cases, the whole experience can be part of lifelong learning .

This reflection leads us on to a final consideration: the museum of the city – in order to become an effective institution for lifelong learning - must accept the idea that its own public is a world on the move, with

which to inter-act mainly in the open space of the city and its surroundings; a public that will spend a minimum part of the time inside the building itself, but which can be involved in journeys of exploration and learning, if the places and actions of everyday, such as waiting for a metro in fact, are to be wisely exploited.

Paradoxically, the museum will have to “drive its visitors out” and encourage them to find in the city the practical, living proof of what has been merely hinted at in the exhibition rooms.

The EU's *Socrates/Museums, Keyworkers and Lifelong Learning* project should also be read in this sense. Developed in 1998, its aim was to identify and document innovative ways in which the key-workers (who may be museum staff, teachers, social operators in the community or others employed in the public services) can link the museum –as a cultural learning resource –to the potential learners in the city. One of the partners in the project was the city of Stockholm, which decided with a program of courses (mainly carried out by means of walks around the city) to address people who in different ways work and move about Stockholm on a daily basis, such as bus drivers, policemen, taxi-drivers, traffic-wardens, and so on. The idea was that if these professionals knew more about the city they lived and worked in, if they knew more about its history, its monuments and culture, they would feel more confident and be more warmly disposed to tourists and the public in general, and above all they would sense that they were playing an important role in the city's life and culture. The result was that the enthusiasm with which they followed the courses and started to communicate what they had learnt sparked off a new interest and new sense of involvement in the local residents, their families and colleagues, creating an ever-widening spread of

concentric circles of new-found awareness, to the enrichment of the single individual and the city itself, which in this way found actively involved “instruments” of communication to tell its own stories.

It can thus be said that with this project the link in the chain between the museum and the city in motion was discovered in the key-workers – also defined as “living ambassadors”.

My own professional experience also confirms the merits of this approach. In 2000, while I was director of the Bagatti Valsecchi museum in Milan, I organised a history and art course on the various districts of Milan for hotel porters and receptionists. Such people are of course in direct daily contact with tourists from all over the world, and it is important for them to be familiar with what their city has to offer. Let me tell you that Bagatti Valsecchi is a nineteenth century mansion in the heart of the city, in what is in fact known as the “golden rectangle” of fashion. It is a favourite destination for tourists, so involving the hotel staff gave opportunities to introduce them about lesser known itineraries as well as the usual ones. The training course for hotel staff seemed a good chance not only to improve the tourist information services in Milan but also to give publicity to the Museum itself. The initiative was highly appreciated by everyone involved: in fact the hotel managements paid for their staff to enrol in the course and the staff themselves “invested” some of their holidays in it.

So we can say that with the Stockholm project (and, in its small way, the Bagatti Valsecchi one in Milan) it was possible to identify in the keyworkers – also defined as “living ambassadors” – the vital link between the museum and the city in motion.

Let us now consider the instruments that museography and museology put at our disposal to enable us to plan itineraries of learning devoted to the city. First of all, to imagine the dynamic involvement with the city as we presented it before, it is essential for the museum to be able to count on excellent relations with the other political, administrative and cultural institutions. I know this recommendation may seem superfluous, but unfortunately we know how complicated, if not impossible, it can be to achieve this aim. In other words, it is as if every institution, office or department operating in and for the city were to feel part of the museum project and thus decide to become – we might say – a kind of periscope ready to put its own special skills and instruments at the service of the museum itself, so that the lifelong learning project might spread everywhere and in the most efficient of ways.

As underlined by Pat Davies, Secretary of EUCEN, the European University Network for Lifelong Learning, it is essential for universities, professional training and adult education bodies and cultural organisations including museums, to begin to work together, exchanging experiences in spite of their very different approaches and methodologies. And I would also add to the list the many departments in city administration (from traffic to viability to public works, and so on), each in a position to offer its own contribution to ensure that the city becomes a “workshop” for lifelong learning.

This is obviously no easy objective, but it is a priority for any museum that intends to express what has distinguished the story of the city through time – elements that still belong to the present and future of the place and its community – and gather it all together in a sort of

“archive” to consult and from which to draw inspiration. As Walter Benjamin wrote, continual mediation between past and present is the role of every museum piece, in front of which we can expect an adult public to be able to “abandon” a placid, contemplative attitude and become aware of the critical constellation in which this fragment of the past exists together with the present.

Every city institution can and should take part in creating this “museum/archive”.

As already recorded by the colleagues who preceded me in past years in this venue, in the urban history museum exhibition focuses on ideas, social, economic, political and cultural configurations that have involved the city, as well as critical re-reading of both every day facts and exceptional events that have “**also**” produced objects.

And it is the adverb “**also**” we should pause at: the objects on show in a museum devoted to telling the story of a city’s evolving identity are the material witnesses of social, religious, economic and cultural values and processes.

In a word, the products of “human ingenuity” are offered to the visitor’s gaze in a context aiming to bring out, not so much their single, artistic, material and technical individuality as their ability to represent - concisely and appropriately – facts, ideas, beliefs, convictions, projects.

“A single gem can show us the whole of nature” wrote Pliny in the XXXVII book of his Natural History, concerning the fashion for collecting precious stones in Imperial Rome, and in this sublime aphorism can be seen the evocative value of an object situated in a historical context. The object on show is, in fact, endowed with the role of ‘medium’ of an entire world of knowledge, it becomes the

symbol of a category of knowledge, of an age, a civilisation, an artistic trend, place, natural phenomenon – of something, after all, that we cannot quite grasp. It is what museology calls “resonance”, most clearly defined by Stephen Greenblatt as the power of an exhibited object to overstep its formal limits to assume a wider dimension, evoking in its beholder the complex dynamic forces of its cultural origin, of which the observer can consider it a representative sample. This brings us back to the idea of evocation, which we have alluded to many times before. The literal meaning of “evoke” is to bring to mind through association with the memory. But how and where is memory constructed? Certainly in the course of study, but obviously through our daily experiences too: a “day- by- dayness” that to a large extent is expressed in the city, and which is then evoked to find associations, deeper meanings, but also changes, corrections, new keys to reading what memory has given us.

Evoking thus becomes a clear-cut strategy for museums strictly linked to the city and its future, and part of its incessant movement and change.

In this respect the words of the American museologist Gaynor Kabanagh seem enlightening. She writes that, basically, exhibition will present the object in a form of negotiated reality produced by everything the object can represent, the needs of the exhibition, the general ideology of the museum, the competences and interests of the curators⁶.

This means that every museum speaks the language of its own time, the society it is called upon to represent, the culture of its planners. It

⁶ Gaynor Kabanagh, *Making histories, making memories* in idem (ed.) *Making Histories in Museums*, Leicester Un. Press, London and New York 1996

is a language that evolves and transforms, changing the relationship between meanings and signs - that is the objects - themselves words to be structured in a discourse.

In a museum set up like this, an important role will be played by the instruments and installations that virtuality and multi-mediality make available today. In fact, just to underline once again that the educational service a museum provides is not limited to its rooms inside, but spills over to the outside, it seems desirable to place the documents/objects together with the electronic devices, screens, simulations and interactive installations, everything that belongs to what we could call the virtual-technological sphere, and which helps us to go out, linking us with patrimonies - both material and non-material - conserved in the city and its territory. These instruments will further empower the museum to present itself as a signpost –a signpost that can be understood in two complementary meanings: on one side through paths of learning and discovery about the history of the city that can be followed once outside the museum (in its physical sense). On the other side, a signpost understood in the wider sense, as a service offered to the public. As we have observed, the growing weight of responsibility placed on adults, as self-taught pupils whose duty it is to construct their own learning course, renders this service essential. The Museum is thus recognised as having the authority to provide professional guidance and impartial advice on the range of courses offered by museums in general, the possibilities and qualification courses and links with other public bodies, since museums have the important role of making people aware of issues that are essential to the whole community.

In conclusion, the image the Museum could represent of the city today is still an image associated with movement and change: a **hub** like a great international airport where flights arrive and depart in all directions, opening out to the whole world – a place to meet before we head off on new itineraries.

Interactive Art: an example of museum-created evocation.

The importance of digital technologies applied to museum teaching has long been accepted internationally. Not only do they facilitate and/or accelerate learning, they also permit activities that would otherwise have been impossible. Besides – and this is particularly interesting for us – they offer new approaches to learning for different publics with different objectives. In fact, in the digital age, learning can and must become a daylong and lifelong experience⁷. In particular, lifelong learning, museums and digital technologies share many of the same attributes, with emphasis on learning from objects (rather than about objects) and on strategies for discovering information (rather than the information itself)⁸.

After this necessary premise, I would like to present an example of how museums, including the Urban History Museum, can take advantage of other instruments - not only canonical objects or documents - to carry out their educational projects for an increasingly demanding, active and dynamically involved public.

⁷ M. Resnik, Rethinking learning in the digital age, cited in the report of Roy Hawkey, Learning with digital technologies in Museums, Science and Galleries, published in the NESTA Futurelab site (www.nestafuturelab.org/research/reviews/09_02.htm)

⁸ ibidem

I refer to a particular area of multi-media - that is, **interactive digital works of art**. These, as we know, involve the spectator so directly that without him or her they seem inert and insignificant, coming to life only when the spectator interacts with them. This means that body language - be it gesture, change of position, movement, whether intentional, spontaneous or involuntary - plays an important role in the relationship between user and work of art: works that often play on our natural capacity to feel amazement, which is a formidable generator of curiosity and desire for knowledge.

Studio Azzurro is Italy's most important multi-media group today, and since 1995 it has been working on inter-active art projects. Among them are some projects worked out specifically for museums:

the first case, the museum of Lucca, introduces the city through its stories, both great and small, some historically confirmed, others the mythical fruit of popular belief, hearsay and gossip: stories that, taken all in all, are the narrative tissue and identity of the territory. The museum visit begins inside the monumental sixteenth century walls, and the tale is told by six characters who in various ways represent different historical moments in the life of the city, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The visit then "exits" from the museum and returns to it, guided by numerous telecameras placed in strategic points round Lucca, in real time linking the spaces in the museum to the places in the city connected in some way with the characters in the narrative, for example, the image of the monument to the composer, Giacomo Puccini, set in a square, or the tomb of the noblewoman, Ilaria del Carretto, masterpiece of the fifteenth century artist, Jacopo Della Quercia. With constant to-ing and fro-ing between "official history", myth and modern image, the city experience is introduced and the

city can then be visited and lived in, with the knowledge that its identity consists of a great ensemble of superimposed ages.

The second example is a museum on the partisan struggle for liberation during the second world war, “Memory of a Resistance”, which caused much drama and civilian sacrifice. Result of the determination of the association of partisans from the Sarzana and Massa Carrara area, this small but concentrated museum starts from the premise that it is not a nostalgic niche of memories built on physical remains (objects, documents, papers, photos..) but rather, as requested by the promoters, “a means of bringing to life the experiences of the old in the language of the young” that is, by using the language of the new technologies.

In this direction the choice was to enhance the power of direct oral transmission, an element it is usually difficult to “show”. But it is actually the great “talking” portraits of some eye witnesses whose presence characterises this exhibition space. With the expressive mobility of facial geography and the aid of audio-visual historical material produced by the interactive gestures of the visitors, these portraits succeed in reviving the emotional charge of memory (it is indeed the visitors themselves who set in motion the faces and recordings of the people interviewed).

Likewise, in the last example, the Museum of the factory of la Ruota (the Wheel), the identity of the wool production that characterises the area around the city of Biella (historically one of the most important wool-producing centres in north Italy), is told by the machines that signalled its growth. Great transparent sheets come between the visitor and the machine, intercepting video images that seem to bring the mechanism to life and in so doing to evoke the memory of the gestures, events, dramas that made up that industrial culture, today in

a process of profound transformation but indelibly imprinted on the identity of the people of the area.

Some considerations can be drawn from these examples and in particular from the results in terms of interaction between visitors and territory: the new language has revitalised communicative codes, transversely attracting the attention of different generations of visitors. The language of the multi-media now belongs to everyone: young and old, and has become a necessary, though not the only, component in effectively projecting the museum.

But even more significant, as underlined by *Studio Azzurro*, is the fact that “these museums not only express contents in the language of the new technologies but also simultaneously express the new technologies themselves. That is, they teach a twofold lesson: they recount the historical experience, bringing to mind facts, people and places, but at the same time, through interactive devices, sensitive arrangement, audio-visual materials, they create the conditions to produce an experience in the dominant language of our age”, playing a significant part in promoting the learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be, which has been the keystone of this discussion.

Besides, including these installations in a museum means giving visitors a decisive role in telling its story. Only they - with their own moving bodies and speaking voices, with their own deliberate or spontaneous gestures - can set in motion a tale which without them might not even come into existence. The visitor is therefore part of the story, the one who makes it happen, with an action no matter how slight, how apparently insignificant. This mechanism – unless it degenerates, through excessive faith in the spectacular power of technology- reduces the passive part of learning and stimulates in the

user awareness of taking part in a personal quest for enrichment that is shared by all who make the same journey.

I would like to conclude this reflection on the relationship between Lifelong Learning and the Urban History Museums with the words of Henry Cole, who was the first director of London's South Kensington Museum, today the Victoria & Albert Museum. In 1853 he wrote: "[A] Museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like a youth, and the necessity for teaching the grown man is quite as great as that of training the child".