Contribution of Museums to Development

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With the purpose of exchanging ideas, discussing and providing experiences on the current status of refurbishing old buildings to be re-used for cultural purposes and their subsequent management in the Latin American and Caribbean region, the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean in Havana, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy in Cuba, and the collaboration of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHCH), the National Council of Cultural Heritage, the UNESCO Cuban National Commission and the National Museum of Fine Arts organized Workshop Transforming historical buildings into museums: cultural management, education and development, in Old Havana, on December 5 to 7, 2011.
Cultural infrastructures and their contribution to development

Within the cultural sector, museums play an important role in the transmission of knowledge, learning and understanding of cultural identities. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines the 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 environments for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

In a museum, accomplishment of research, education and leisure objectives depends on the precise definition of its mission and the adequate management of the institution in correspondence with the internationally agreed deontological code for museums. The museum’s mission defines the knowledge to be transmitted and valued. The successful achievement of this mission will depend on display of the adequate collection, as well as the correct management of collections and means to transmit them.

The museum conveys its mission through many ways, namely, research tools, educational activities, organization of exhibition spaces and use of state-of-the-art information and communication technologies. Besides, the location of museums, either in open spaces or buildings, can also play a significant role in the way information is transmitted. Location is often determined in keeping with the objectives and mission of the museum to be founded. In some other cases, existing buildings are adapted to house a museum.

When an open space or a building is built to house a museum, the place should comply with the museum’s objectives and mission for a given time. The promotion of research, education and leisure objectives, as well as the use of technologies, should be foreseen in the museum installation and building plan. However, if the mission varies or the collection is enlarged, both the space and the technology should be adapted to the new demands of the museum.

When an existing space or building is adapted to house a museum, space organization and means to be used will depend on multiple factors, not only on its mission. For example, the inclusion of a building in the list of safeguarded cultural heritage must guarantee that the value of the building included in the list is not adversely affected by its use as a museum. At the same time, when a building is adapted as a museum, its preservation and value should be guaranteed. Likewise, the preservation of the building should prevail over the use of the museum with a specific mission.

A monument’s value is determined not only by the abovementioned criteria, namely, its geniality, outstanding value, exceptional nature, authenticity or integrity but, above all, by its value as a symbol transmitting a complexity of knowledge resulting in its construction. From the financial viewpoint, the current market value of such a building, or whatever is left of it, might be not only below its symbolic value, but also below the aggregated value of the investment already made since its construction and maintenance to this date.

On many occasions, especially when historical urban areas are restored, some monumental buildings are selected as ideal spaces to house a museum due to their size and emblematic nature. The reason for this is usually associated with the need to collect the funds needed to refurbish the building that is transmitting, by itself, certain knowledge and even more important, a sense of identity and pride within the community. The building should also be seen as a product of outstanding quality belonging to the society that can attract visitors and contribute to local development due to its impact on the historical urban area.

In many cases, refurbishment forms part of a larger plan for the restoration and management of a historical center. In these cases, the restoration objective is not only to convey the mission of the museum, but also to improve the preservation status and its own value, as well as that of the historical area. This new use of the museum or cultural institution will help preserving its symbolic and architectural value.

The building intervention has three purposes:

- its preservation,
- education and research, and
- leisure for the local population and tourists through activities conducted by the museum and its architectural value.

However, the connection between these objectives is not always evident. Restrictions associated with the building refurbishment are aimed at preserving and enhancing its historical value, which could be in conflict with the museum’s mission. In fact, if
the museum’s mission is not closely related to the cultural processes guiding the building, construction and reforms (which is the basis to determine its authenticity), then the building will neither comply with its objective nor its mission. The challenge is to determine how its use as a cultural institution can benefit the building preservation and how the building can be efficiently used to achieve the museum’s mission.

Today, at a time in which unfortunate measures are being taken to reduce the financial crisis impact, cost-benefit analysis is important, as well as showing that social and economic development is based not only on cultural products, but on cultural processes as well. Thanks to their use as museums, the preservation and management of historical buildings can contribute, in a significant way, to local social and economic development since, due to their high symbolic value, both the building and the collection on display are ideal means for the synthetic acquisition and transmission of knowledge.

Experts and participants to the workshop visiting restoration works at the Palacio del Segundo Cabo (Old Havana).

Workshop Transforming historical buildings into museums: cultural management, education and development

Havana, December 5-7, 2011

The workshop, organized by the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean in Havana, with the support of the Norwegian Embassy in Cuba and the collaboration of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHCH), the National Council of Cultural Heritage, the UNESCO Cuban National Commission and the National Museum of Fine Arts, was attended by museology, museography, architecture and cultural management experts from Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Costa Rica, Cuba, Haiti, Italy, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic.

Among them, participants included representatives from international museology institutions such as ILAM Foundation (Latin American Institute of Museums and Parks) and Goppion. The meeting was also attended by officials from Cuban cultural institutions and experts from the UNESCO Regional Office for Culture in Latin America and the Caribbean.
The general objective of the workshop was to identify and debate challenges faced by an institution when refurbishing a historical building to be reused as a museum or cultural center and to guarantee the building preservation as the main museum’s mission, through education, research and leisure.

As outlined, the main objectives are:

- To promote a dialogue between experts from the Caribbean and other regions in order to exchange knowledge and experiences, identify strengths and weaknesses and improve museums in general.
- To study the heritage and cultural infrastructure impact on the community development.
- To analyze the Palacio del Segundo Cabo, located in the Arms Square in Old Havana, as a case study during the workshop and support the cultural conception of the OHCH.

The workshop agenda included five thematic debates and each theme was introduced and chaired by an expert and a rapporteur. The working sessions were characterized by questions to be answered by participants so as to reach collective conclusions.

The working sessions and debates included:

I. The museum’s mission.
II. The adaptation of historical buildings for future cultural uses.
III. Museum, cultural center or both?
IV. Objectives of a museum: education, research and leisure.
V. Impact of Cultural institutions on Local Development.

Besides the working sessions, participants and experts to the workshop enjoyed two guided cultural tours where they were able to witness the refurbishing process and outcome of a historical building to be transformed into a cultural space.

During the first tour, the OHCH team opened the doors of the Palacio del Segundo Cabo, in Old Havana, which is being restored for its future transformation into a cultural center.

The second tour to the Building of Universal Art in the National Museum of Fine Arts was magnificently guided by architect José Linares, in charge of restoring works of this building for its future use as a museum.

Following you will find the papers and debates of each thematic session, some case studies from Cuba and Haiti, a brief historical analysis on the evolution of museums and their adaptation as historical buildings and to conclude the workshop conclusions.

Notes

1. The promotion and consolidation of museum institutions was one of the priorities set forth in the UNESCO Cultural Program during the previous 2010-2011 biennium.

2. UNESCO multilateral cooperation project between UNESCO, the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana and the European Union to work on the restoration, conception and transformation of the building into a cultural center.