

DEBATE III

# Museum, Cultural Center or Both?



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**Introduction**

What does “collection” mean? If a physical collection is not exhibited, does it mean that it is no longer a museum, but a cultural center? Can a cultural center include a museum? Is the content suitable to transmit the historical and architectural values of the building? Should temporary collections and activities not directly associated with the collection of a museum be programmed even if they do not contribute to the museum’s mission? Should they be programmed if they do not contribute to this purpose?

These and other questions were posed during this working session chaired by Georgina DeCarli, Director of the Latin American Institute of Museums (ILAM, Costa Rica) while expert Luckner

Christophe, from the Haitian National Pantheon Museum, acted as rapporteur.

The ILAM<sup>1</sup> (Latin American Institute of Museums and Parks) currently led by Georgina DeCarli, is a non-governmental organization with headquarters in Costa Rica since 1997.

Its purpose is to support Latin American and Caribbean museum institutions by disseminating their work (Directory of Latin American Museums and Parks), training the staff (face to face and virtual training), providing access to specialized information and developing research, projects and advisory services.

## COLLECTION VS. HERITAGE

The definition of a museum has evolved throughout time. Today, in accordance with ICOM Statutes, adopted at the XXII General Conference held in Vienna (Austria) in 2007, a museum is defined as a non-profitable, permanent institution in the service of society and opened to the public, which acquires, preserves, studies, exhibits and disseminates the tangible and intangible heritage for study, education and recreation purposes.



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Before 2007, the definition of museum referred to material evidence, not to tangible and intangible heritage. This change broadens the concept of collection to heritage, and the cultural institution is no longer centered on the collection, but on the heritage.

This breakthrough has an impact on the concept of cultural institution itself, where the building, the presence or absence of a collection, the plan of activities and research on the content displayed, has as much significance as the collection itself previously had, based on the most traditional concept of museum.

### Content of a Museum

The purpose of a museum is to exhibit the tangible, cultural and natural heritage of the world. In order to achieve this objective, the museum must include several functions, namely, preservation, research and communication.

Preservation ensures the safeguarding of collections; research is associated with their curatorship and communication refers to content dissemination and activities to the public.

Nowadays, the use of Internet and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) acquires special significance to communicate and inform regular and potential users about exhibits and cultural programs in museums. In

the case of Cuba, access to this kind of information is not wide enough.

As important as it might be, the collection does not liven up the museum. The cultural institution management of its functions is what makes a museum dynamic and active.

#### **Content of a Cultural Center**

The objective of a cultural center is to promote cultural values among the members of its community. Its structure is based on broad spaces where different cultural manifestations enrich and liven up the cultural life of the local population.

Depending on the structure, there are two different types:

#### **-Cultural Center (in the field of university or country).**

These are large buildings including, in general, an auditorium with a stage for theater performances or film screening; a library and videotheque; computer hall; halls for academic activities or workshops; language laboratory; galleries and sometimes, memorials or permanent exhibits.

#### **-Community Cultural Center or Cultural House.**

These are more modest spaces, generally located in public buildings. They have a library, an area for workshops and small cultural presentations, and a hall for temporary exhibits. They are very significant for the community, especially for rural areas, since this is the only space they have to promote cultural activities.

#### **Museum or Cultural Center?**

Both museums and cultural centers are non-profitable, permanent cultural institutions which are opened to the public and in the service of society and its development.

Activities conducted in parallel with permanent or temporary exhibits in a museum do not turn it into a cultural center. It is still a dynamic, creative and living museum. However, some cultural centers have their own collections and halls for permanent exhibits.

This is clearly stated in the definition contained in article 2 of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) on museums, cultural centers and other entities promoting the preservation, continuity and management of tangible and intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity).

This is the case of the Eduardo León Jimenes<sup>2</sup> Cultural Center (Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic) which, even though known as a cultural center, includes a museum with several halls for permanent exhibits.



The León Center's mission is to promote creativity through research, protection, display and dissemination of Dominican artistic and cultural manifestations and everything that might contribute to create a society more sensitive to outstanding values, prouder of itself and capable of actively participating in the betterment of the nation's quality of life within the Caribbean framework.

On the other hand the Borges<sup>3</sup> Cultural Center in Buenos Aires is not a museum, is a cultural center. Housed in the Pacific Galleries, one of the most outstanding historical buildings of the city, it has an active program of national and international artistic manifestations, including films, theater, dance, literature, visual arts, as well as internal publications and training workshops.

#### **Relationship between the Building and its Content.**

The relationship between the building and the content can bring about a typology of cultural facilities which can be easily distinguished.

a) When the content recreates the original space, then it is a museum-house.

b) The content is associated with the theme and history of the building. This could be the case of the Palacio del Segundo Cabo (Havana, Cuba) which, originally being the Postal House and residence of the Second Corporal, projects itself as a center for exchanging cultural experiences between Cuba and Europe.



Latin American and Caribbean Museological Institutions  
© ILAM



c) The content has no association whatsoever with the historical evolution of the building as is the case of the Building of Universal Art in the National Museum of Fine Arts<sup>4</sup> (Havana, Cuba). Today, the Asturian Center houses a broad collection of artistic pieces from different geographic origins from Ancient History up to now.

**Palacio del Segundo Cabo: Interpretation Center, Museum or Cultural Center?**

Following the content description and analysis, the session discussed the name of the new center to be housed in the Palacio del Segundo Cabo (Havana, Cuba), the term should be consistent with the contents to be exhibited.

From its beginning, the project considered calling it interpretation center of Cuban-European relations. However, some experts rejected this proposal, because the interpretation center should be located in a historical site, where evidence is to be interpreted, and this is not the case of the Palace.

Other experts refused to use the term museum and proposed the use of an original term: Palace. This proposal was not welcomed because, though it can be used from the colloquial point of view, the institution should reflect a cultural reference.

That is why participants expressed the possibility of calling it cultural center or even museum, since this term is currently plagued with negative connotations linked to past traditional and poorly interactive museography forms having nothing to do with current museums ■



Stairs of the Palacio del Segundo Cabo ©Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHCH)

In order to preserve the historical memory of the building, a monographic hall should be included to explain the building's history, as foreseen in the case of the Palacio del Segundo Cabo or as found in the Napoleonic Museum or the Music Museum, both located in Havana.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup><http://www.ilam.org>  
<sup>2</sup><http://www.centroleon.org.do>  
<sup>3</sup><http://www.ccborges.org.ar>  
<sup>4</sup><http://www.museonacional.cult.cu>

