

HERITAGE MATTERS

RETHINKING MUSEUMS AS CIVIC SPACES



Japanese living heritage was showcased during the opening ceremony of ICOM 2019 in Kyoto

Relevance, living heritage and interdisciplinary thinking in education and cultural democracy from the early 20th century transformed and mainstreamed design to improve life. One of the most well-known schools is the Bauhaus with the manifesto "Thinking the World Anew". Bauhaus Centenary this year interrogates the heritage of design and as to how changing values inform innovation, inspiration and creativity. In India, CEPT Ahmedabad, SPA Delhi and IIT Kharagpur have been at the forefront. Similar institutional leadership in the museum and heritage education is long awaited.

The Design Museum (MAK) in Vienna is hosting The Design Biennale in 2019 on Changing Values. MAK Conference "The Vienna Biennale for Change: Brave New Virtues. Shaping Our Digital World focussed on brave visions on handling artificial intelligence and new technologies, on shaping innovative (urban) ways of work, on new ways of living (together), and on responsible consumption." Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, General Director of the MAK, initiator and head of the Biennale, states "With the possibilities of art, design, and architecture, the Vienna Biennale will contribute to shaping a future based on values,"

which "values can the utopia of an economically and socially just and fair as well as ecologically sustainable future become reality?" Can museums get in step with such contemporary thinking?

We are familiar with the impacts of leading edge museologists of the day such as Duncan Cameron who queried the museum as a 'temple or forum' in 1967. Steven Weil argued the museum as an 'idea' and object as a 'thing' in 1989. ICOM 2002 Asia Pacific meeting in Shanghai demanded the decolonisation of the museum calling for rethinking the museum as a dynamic institution and including safeguarding Living Heritage. In 2010 ICOM adopted the Shanghai Charter on Cultural Diversity that called for a shift from Monoculturalism to Cultural Pluralism. In 2008 we launched in Leiden, The Netherlands in partnership with ICOM, as to how can the institution of the museum could become more inclusive. It is an open-ended research network for intellectual debate and discussion rather than being prescription on what is inclusion. (<http://inclusivemuseums.org/>).

The current definition of a museum in its sixth iteration since 1948, was updated and adopted unanimously in 2007 in Vienna. As the then Chair of the ICOM CCTF (2004 to 2010) I participated in the complex negotiation process through the ICOM Reform Taskforce to have 'intangible heritage' included in the definition: A museum is 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 environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

Rethinking museums as relevant spaces at the end of the second decade of the 21st Century has become imperative. At the same time as the Vienna Biennale Conference, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM in Kyoto discussed and debated the adoption of a proposed new definition, an output from almost two years of work by a group of highly experienced museum experts. But it was deferred for another year. The debate almost broke up the professional body, the largest for heritage in the world. The proposed definition:



Lonnie G. Bunch III, with his wife Maria Bunch, presenting his latest book to your Heritage Matters Columnist in Kyoto - a fool's errand Creating The National Museum Of The African History And Culture In The Age Of Bush, Obama, And Trump



Artist: Shiota Chiharu. Mori Art Museum, Tokyo. This installation: Accumulation- Searching for the Destination from the Exhibition: The Soul Trembles which epitomizes the "presence in absence" that Shiota has explored throughout her career; visitors will doubtless gain a sense for themselves of the meaning of living and journey of life, and the inner workings of the soul."



PROF. DR. AMARESWAR GALLA
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Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian, was the former Vice President, International Council of Museums (ICOM), Paris and an invited speaker on ecomuseums, ICOM Kyoto 2019

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will be presented from the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, considered one of the best museums in Asia

Past Columns of Heritage Matters can now be downloaded at the new website: <http://inclusivemuseums.org/index.php/heritage-matters/>

Credits: International Institute for the Inclusive Museum and Goli Sabahi, Iran



One of the keynote speakers at ICOM Kyoto 2019, Cai Guo-Qiang's work - Cultural Melting Bath: Project for Naoshima

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

Those of us working on cultural justice through museum and in the broader society in general felt that our life journeys have been vindicated. India is yet to join the debate. But India witnessed in 2019 a plethora of Museum conferencing raising a number of important questions interspersed with a few excellent case study of transformations as well as plenty of show and tell of the conventional demonstrations. Vendor driven culture of transformations without institutional capacity building is evident. Even if meetings are limited to burgeoning urban elites and their cultural reproduction in a market economy, these are conversations one must have to open up the legacies of the past and start decolonising the museums.

I have consistently asked the question as to what is national in the several National Museums of India and what is Indian in the Indian museum, the oldest and the largest in South Asia. The silence is resounding! Government of India has just come up with a new five-year plan with substantial budget, even to shake up the entry level training sector and to prompt professional development. Hopefully it won't be more of the same and that there will be new and conscionable change agents beyond the national capital and other major metropolis in India. More than 80% of the country, villages, are forgotten by the museums in India.

India was an active member in the UNESCO General Conference that adopted the text of a new standard-setting instrument on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society in November 2015. It was drafted in close collaboration with ICOM. It affirms the Code of Ethics of ICOM. Member States have agreed on setting and implementing a set of global guidelines for the protection and promotion of museums and collections. It is to become the cornerstone of international and national museum policies and legal instruments. It refers to the current definition from 2007. It reflects the international community's strong commitment to assisting museums in fulfilling their roles in contemporary society to promote sustainable development and intercultural dialogue safeguarding heritage in all its manifestations.

Hopefully ICOM will edit and amend through negotiation with its constituent committees and UNESCO and adopt a progressive new definition in 2020. The new Secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie G. Bunch III, historian and founding Director of the iconic and phenomenal, National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Smithsonian Mall, offers three suggestions for museum transformation when and where appropriate. "A community-driven model of interpretation, collecting, and relationships that might assist them in navigating the tensions between history and memory" so that "museums matter"; "help audiences find the contemporary resonance of a museum's efforts"; "reposition cultural institutions as sites of value that are the centres and not peripheries of their communities".



A house owner demonstrates for visitors story telling in the old days from the back of his bicycle, in the Hirano Ecomuseum, a neighbourhood of Osaka city. China and Japan lead the ecomuseum movement in Asia. One of the best scholars in the world on ecomuseums is the late Dr V.H. Bedekar, MS University, Baroda. Hope India will develop ecomuseums in future