



Rethinking the Museum

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Abstract: Inclusion has become an integral part of the popular parlance for transformations in furthering active citizenship across the world. The Inclusive Museum Research Network positions museums at the forefront as agencies of change. The building of this knowledge community has been consultative and incremental since its foundation in 2008. The annual Inclusive Museum Research Network conference profiles leading thinkers in the cultural domains and provides a platform for young, emerging, and established scholars and professionals. What has been problematized since the beginning is the conceptualization of the community. It is at once culturally and linguistically diverse. The dialectical processes of decolonization and contextualization through the first voice of primary stakeholders has been underlined. In this agenda, cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability is on the canvass of holistic approaches to addressing all forms of museums and heritage phenomena in their multiplicity of manifestations. Access for all and ethical engagement of all museological considerations have become central. This contribution is an outcome of the Inclusive Museum Research Network conference in Philadelphia in 2022.

Keywords: *Inclusive Museum, Ethics of Engagement, Active Citizenship*

Introduction

How can the institution of the museum become inclusive? This question forms an open-ended manifesto of the Inclusive Museum project, without seeking any constraining definition of the museum's form or reach. However, it was with the goal of bringing as many excluded communities as possible within the scope of a more expansive and transformative idea of the historical western museum—formed through international structures of colonialism—that the Inclusive Museum Research Network was launched in 2008, in Leiden, the Netherlands. The foundation partners are the US-based Common Ground Research Networks,¹ the Paris-based Cross-Cultural Task Force of the International Council of Museums (ICOM),² and the National Museums of the Netherlands.

There is always some local trigger and focus when a new movement is born. In the case of the Inclusive Museum, it was a response to the aftermath in 2004 of the brutal and silencing murder of Dutch filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, outside the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, and

¹ "Founded in 1984, Common Ground Research Networks," which is based in Champaign, Illinois, "is committed to building new kinds of knowledge communities, innovative in their media and forward thinking in their messages" (Common Ground Research Networks, n.d.).

² ICOM was founded in 1946 and currently has around 50,000 members. ICOM facilitates cooperation between museums globally through its numerous national and international committees as well as regional alliances. In certain activities, ICOM acts as a non-governmental organization (NGO) partner to UNESCO in many fields of education, scientific, and cultural heritage care.

a subsequent conference—entitled *Dancing with Diversity*—which was held in the same museum. This moment shaped a call for museums to move beyond benevolent multiculturalism and to grasp that decolonization needed much more than tolerance of difference; only activism and determined reforms could accomplish needed change worldwide. Born of this moment in 2004, *Inclusion* is now an ongoing change-program without binaries. In its continuing forms, it is led today by an international board of eminent museum leaders. The present author—Indian-born while a four-decades Australian citizen with extensive global experience in cultural diversity programming—acts as chair for the network.³

Fifteenth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, 2022

The latest annual research conference of the Inclusive Museum Research Network was held in Philadelphia, US, in April 2022. Leading-edge thinkers took the floor with researchers, presenting their ongoing exploration of multivocality and highlighting the polyvalent avatars of decolonized and socially engaged museums in 2022. The triangulation of the Black Lives Matter movement, the climate crisis, and the continuing mutations of the global COVID-19 pandemic provided a sharp intersectionality of current challenges in our daily lives. Many opportunities for action, however, were laid out during the gathering in Philadelphia in April. Presenters outlined diverse ways of remaking the institution of the museum to enable it to become more inclusive and to continue its self-transformation to become more relevant, reflexive, and agile in confronting contemporary global realities. A series of recent surveys and webinars led variously by ICOM and UNESCO, among other partners, and our seminal Inclusive Museum Research Network have updated ideas for charting inspirational, innovative, and resourceful pathways, often untrodden, for us to reconsider our work and remodel possibilities for museums' impacts.⁴

There were also outstanding leaders gathered in Philadelphia in April, who presented their experiences in the following keynote sessions.

Dr. Lonnie G. Bunch III, 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, and the Network Chair, opened the Philadelphia gathering in the form of a one-hour conversation. Trained as an historian and previously Founding Director of the now iconic National Museum of African American History and Culture, located in the Washington Mall, Dr. Bunch summed up three change movements that have profoundly influenced the world of museums over the past three decades while also emphasizing that—although all continue to be challenging—he is optimistic about positive outcomes. First, he stressed that the “impact of technology has transformed the way people approach and experience museums.” Second, he asserted that while “museums cannot simply be community centers, they have to be at the center of their communities, framing what has changed and what needs still to be changed.” Third, Dr. Bunch highlighted that the “shadow of gender and race” appears strongly across museums today, but this shadow has still not been adequately addressed in

³ See: <http://inclusivemuseums.org/>.

⁴ See: <https://onmuseums.com/about/history/2022-conference>.

terms of its transformative potential. Scholarship has provided the foundation for the positive changes that have been accomplished. Meanwhile, societal expectations now require that “museums are about today and tomorrow as much as they were formerly about yesterday.”

Dr. Nick Merriman, Director of the Horniman Museums and Gardens in London, also led a strong keynote session. Dr. Merriman emphasized that participation is critical for his own museum to become relevant to its topography in the UK. Participatory cultural engagement in all sections of the community is crucial. As a former director of the Manchester Museum, the largest university museum in the UK, Dr. Merriman highlighted a continuing gulf between the theory of museum studies and the actual practice of museums. This gulf between the rhetoric and reality of museums’ practice, he emphasized, needs to be bridged. Emerging inclusive practices are affirmative, but the target audiences are small and still without sufficiently transformative impacts across the overall museum demographics.

While recognizing that mass participation by all takes time and effort for museums to achieve, some of Dr. Merriman’s key approaches were presented for the audience. His examples demonstrated that a crucial power of the museum is in enabling visitors to handle objects (and connecting this activity with their lives), that visitor host-teams can become expert facilitators of engagement, that analyzing the demographics of visitors enables matching and cross-referencing to build profiles of diversity, that such information can enhance organization-wide focus on the core purpose of the museum, and that understanding cultures in their diversity can also enhance sustainability-knowledges in the wider world. The central idea for Dr. Merriman is not simply increased access but a more expansive and interconnecting idea of engagement with the museum’s multiple resources and communities. In this framework, engagement is not only the core of performance but molds the whole personality of the museum.

Professor Deborah Thomas, a dancer and interdisciplinary scholar grounded in performative ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania, provided a lucid presentation about innovation in exhibitions. She demonstrated the potential of pedagogical exhibitions to bridge the chasm of theory and practice through creating learning environments.

Professor Thomas paid homage to the crucial contextuality of indigeneity with land acknowledgement as the first principle of a reformative museum engagement and a needed unravelling of the many knowledge-sites built historically on violence and erasure. She outlined pathways for transformation through programming in museums—pathways that are embedded in layers of historical significance, ensuring that “museums should be for the living,” not the past. Such changes are contingent on both the ability and capacity to respond through transformative practices of knowledge-building. Radical creativity is critical for situating principles such as multivocality and multimodality in present day relationship-building as we commit new focus and resources to address enduring legacies of an exclusionary past. Professor Thomas’ collaborative practices of teaching and learning address layered legacies of falsifying history (including scientific racism and polygenesis) to embrace both contemporary and new ways of seeing each other, transiting beyond the circumscribed values of living derived from capitalist modernity.

Dr. Manal Ataya, Director General of the Sharjah Museums Authority and a member of the Global Cultural Districts Network, inspired the platform presentation on Universal Access/Access for All. Positioning that “accessibility as not a privilege but a right,” Dr. Ataya’s leadership is ensuring intersectionality as the guiding principle within the confluence of all terms and policies impacting across cultural borders in Sharjah. In doing so, she has seamlessly ensured the Sharjah museums’ potential to become exemplary in universal design models and to partner with all other service providers across social policy zones. For example, health, palliative care, transport services, and museum services are interconnected within a framework shaping culture, health, and wellbeing to support integrated outcomes. For museums, the focus is on empowering staff through accredited training programs. Meanwhile, customizing services and access for particular sectors, such as working-class groups and women, is proactively facilitated. Dr. Ataya stressed, however, that such service-practice was not aimed at disaggregation and segmentation but rather a total approach to integrating services for all persons with abilities or disabilities across all cultural borders.

At the end of the Philadelphia conference, Professor Galla recalled Dr. Lonnie Bunch’s three pathways for museum transformation to be realized when and where appropriate (see Bunch 2019): (1) to achieve “a community-driven model of interpretation, collecting, and relationships, to assist museums in navigating the tensions between history and memory,” and thus ensuring that museums matter; (2) “to help audiences find the contemporary resonance of a museum’s efforts;” and (3) “to reposition cultural institutions as sites of value, ensuring that they are at the centers rather than peripheries of their communities.”

Pandemic Impacts Increasing Community Focus

During the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, both ICOM and UNESCO have conducted surveys of the numerous impacts on museums through a number of online forums convened by both organizations. One convergent finding highlights the centrality of communities to museums. While museums cannot be all things to all people, they can effectively foster connectivity and partnerships with many agencies that are service providers for communities. This emphasis gives meaning to the critical orientation of museums in ICOM’s definitions of a *museum* since the 1970s; museums are “in the service of society” (ICOM 2022)—not alone but together—in an interconnected system of institutions and cultural centers serving their respective communities.

There are inevitably different economies of scale and effectiveness in scoping and finding synergies for a society-centered mission for museums. While museums must urgently reveal and confront legacies of colonialism and racism in their long histories, they have ever-expanding opportunities to anchor their work in a sociocentric vision of service and relevance to living cultures and communities.

In pursuing this strategic direction since 2008, the Inclusive Museum Research Network is an online service network supporting activities that culminate annually in a physical meeting in different parts of the world. At these annual gatherings, the network aims to

interconnect museum leaders, innovators, and researchers through plenary sessions and case-study papers, enabling skilled presenters to further new models and examples of how the institution of the museum can continue to pursue the transformative ideal of inclusivity.



Figure 1: Lonnie G. Bunch III and Amareswar Galla in Conversation at the Opening of the Fifteenth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, April 2022

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