

## “Museology of Reconciliation”: Theme of the Revived Dubrovnik Course Organised by the Universities of Victoria (Canada) and Zagreb (Croatia)

*Martin Segger*

*University of Victoria, Canada*

In May 1998, Universities of Victoria (Canada) and Zagreb (Croatia) reinstated its museum studies course in the Inter-University Centre, Dubrovnik, Croatia. The topic of study was the role of museums in the aftermath of armed conflict. Twelve students from the Universities of Montreal, Victoria and Zagreb participated in field tours and discussed papers presented by eleven faculty from Canada, Croatia, Israel, Italy and the Netherlands under the co-direction of Professors Ivo Maroevic and Martin Segger. Prof. Segger (Canada) provided an overview of the theme with an introductory paper, “Danger, Museum Ahead: An International Survey of the Role Of Museums in the Aftermath of Armed Conflict”. Dr. Maroevic (Croatia) brought matters into a local and practical focus with his presentation, “Museums and Their Role: The Development of Local Communities after a War – Croatian Experience”.

Ms. Marina Desin (Croatia) directed a field tour to the nearby town of Cilipi to review the ongoing reconstruction work which she explained further in her optimistic discussion, “Cilipi – Presentation of Culture Historical heritage through Tourism: War, Destruction and Revitalization”. Ms Nada Guzin-Lukic (Canada) spoke on the Forum UNESCO project, “Universities and Heritage: a New Convergence – the Challenge of Peace”. Dr Mira Krizmanic (Croatia) drew on her trauma treatment experience during the Croatian/Serb war for “The Psychological Aspect of Reconciliation – Accent on Cultural Input”. Pierre Mayrand (Canada) led a discussion: “Beyond the Ecomuseum. Toward a Philosophy of Transterritorial Reconciliation and Community Sensitization: Applying the Principles of Third-Generation Ecomuseology”. Franco Melis (Italy) provided an historical case study “Museum Architecture after the Second World War in Genoa”. “Communicating Controversy: Museums and Reconciliation” was the subject of a discussion session directed by Peter van Mensch (Holland). Sandra Siano-Weinreb (Israel) focused on Jewish architectural monuments now undergoing post-war restoration in “The Changing Role and Function of Synagogues in East European Communities Today”. Kathryn Zedde (Canada) provided a seminal study “Societies in Conflict: Museums and the Creation of ‘National Identity’”.

Field trips in the historic walled city of Dubrovnik itself provided participants with the opportunity to study first-hand the post-war repair and reconstruction efforts of the commune, including both historic monuments and museums. A field trip to the historic city of Ston illustrated the complex issues surrounding reconstruction in a town

which suffered not only war damage but also the ravages of an earthquake which followed shortly thereafter.

The course participants agreed that the general topic of museums and their role in promoting both regional and world peace should be the subject of further course-work within the Dubrovnik programme.

## **Summary, Comments and Discussion**

Discussion opened on the ability of war to destroy communal memory, or parts of it. It was the British architect and former director of ICCROM, Sir Bernard Fielden, who coined the phrase “cultural war”, the purposeful destruction of cultural group identity for political ends. Thereafter, to the victor goes not only the spoils but the power to adjust the message, the meaning and history itself. War and its social consequences have given rise to a new academic field of study: victimology, which has become almost an industry in its own right. The way to reconciliation is to preserve objects, not to celebrate victory or mark revenge, but to start the process of constructing new memories which will promote social harmony.

The history of museums is bound up with armed conflict, particularly the systematic looting, bounty and trophy getting, and the displays of spoils by the victor. Major museums such as the Louvre and the British Museum have benefited directly or indirectly from the exploits of conquering armies or colonial expeditions. In modern times, the primary response of the international museum community to war has been the series of conventions, treaties and declarations aimed at protecting cultural property during times of armed conflict.

The origins of the Hague Convention, and the series of international treaties to preserve cultural property during times of war, go back to 1899. Blue Shield is a more recent United Nations sponsored initiative to mobilise international efforts for the rescue of cultural artefacts during armed conflict and natural disasters. The modern period has seen the evolution of the “peace museum”, either as Holocaust centres memorialising those who died during the WW II Nazi ethnic extermination programmes or, as in Japan, reminders of the human toll exacted by belligerent governments and the atomic bomb. Today UNESCO is noted for its role in co-ordinating the post conflict recovery of cultural property and conservation of monuments. However, the lesson in all this lies in the manner in which the museum community has constantly avoided the need to take a position on the more fundamental questions of peace and reconciliation: the horror of war, the dangers of radical nationalism, the intolerance of fundamentalist religions, the conflicts inherent in autocratic political power structures. A retreat into artefacts for their own sake is as dangerous as some of the most belligerent political manifestos.

It was noted that ultimately reconciliation as a condition must be personalised, and it follows a process of confidence building. This is the activity museums must address if they are to be players at all. Reconciliation does not have to include love, or forgiveness, or trust – perhaps it can begin to operate at the foundation level of *tolerance*. And perhaps this is as much as we can hope for within this generation. *Tolerance* means to put up with, to suffer someone or something. And oddly enough tolerance will begin with practical matters such as commerce and trade. Passive tolerance will have to build towards active tolerance, that is being able to meet and help your former enemy at the most elemental level of economic or social co-operation. Ultimately all sides of this conflict will have to find a new commonality of shared experiences such as the grief of those who have lost children. At this personal level of experience a new social order might be built, but this will not be government or institution led because the institutional establishment has already failed massively; it is not to be trusted. In the end, only time will amortise pain.

The Dutch museum experience has faced issues such as complicity with the WW II Jewish pogroms, Indonesian colonisation and current immigrant/refugee problems by mainly responding with avoidance. Indeed museums are marked for their cultural insensitivity, for instance failing to recognise the position of Muslim security guards during an exhibition of pornographic art. These kinds of institutional biases creep into museum programmes, policies, collecting activities – even the symbolism of buildings – without thought or recognition by the host, usually majority, community. Reconciliation should begin with respect. But without this being practised at a very basic non-confrontational level, what hope can there be of practising respect in the polarised aftermath of armed conflict?

Museums chronicle success not error. So particularly to winners in any conflict goes this prize of defining the subsequent world view in favour of their own image and making. The link between museums and nation building is deep, socially and historically. For this reason museums have become both targets (in terms of munitions) and suspect (in terms of local communities). The currency of museums thus rises and falls with the fortunes of the ruling elites. For this very reason museums must professionalise and de-link themselves from state (or other) ruling elites. Yet the very nature of a museum's integration with its funding sources, educational institutions and political/cultural structures of power make this very difficult. The pristine objectivity of curatorial activities and public exhibitions has long been a myth. Only now is the museum profession coming to terms with this reality. The unsolved conundrum is whether or not the current obsessions with popularisation, so-called democratisation, or commercialisation will improve or further compromise "academic integrity". At the local community level new museologists point to examples where this is resolved by supplanting the traditional museum (purpose-built building, professional staffing structure, etc.) with a museology of process, for instance participatory hands-on interpretation. At the national level however, museums still seem to be mostly about nation building!

Recent experiences in Croatia in regard to the reaction of museums and galleries to the war are dominated by heroic efforts to protect and preserve cultural heritage sites and property. But the war as subject matter has been largely ignored. And museums have yet to address even the conditions that lead to war. For instance, museums have yet to show any leadership in addressing such issues as cultural diversity: at what point does cultural identity become cultural conflict? Curatorship is rife with “ideological disease”. The awareness of this must be factored into any methodology for dealing with post-war situations which essentially boils down to finding ways of approaching your former enemy. Such an outline plan could include the following elements: first finding or triggering motivation; second a learning phase for which a curriculum and instructional methodology is needed; then discussion leading to consensus on an action programme. Museums could play a role in this process, particularly as an action programme: i.e. museum exhibits and educational programmes which focus on tolerance, illustrating the other point of view, or consensus building around shared values.

“New Museology” focuses on the study of museums in the context of societal change: interdisciplinarity, the breakdown of traditional systematics, transworld cultural revolutions, new developments in liberal democracy and the search for a “liberation museology”. New Museology calls for museums to actively join in the discourse of society. New Museology has built on the ecomuseum movement of the 1970s but in reaction to the “museology of spectacle” generated by the contemporary commercial focus of neo-liberal governmental attitudes. In 1984 at the first international conference of New Museology, the Declaration of Quebec identified the need for an “active museology”, a museology which would present changing social values through collections: the museum as exhibitor of things and forum for popular discourse. As this is essentially a sociological museological model, reconciliation themes can easily be integrated into this transformational process: i.e. musealisation, discourse, revelation, animation, mobilisation, reconciliation. Institutionally this process begins with the repatriation of collections (physically and intellectually), the engagement of experts (i.e. curators) who reflect the community, the statement of a mission which focuses on a set of moral and social responsibilities, and embedding in the organisation an “institutional conscience” which forms the core of all community programming activities.

The post cold-war world has witnessed a gradual process of addressing numerous historical social justice issues. Among these has been the restitution of property to rightful owners, enshrining religious freedom as part of constitutional reform, and mitigation of overt racial discrimination in economic and judicial systems. The Jewish Diaspora has thereby been a beneficiary, particularly throughout Eastern Europe, with the reclamation of historic and sacred sites, and restoration of synagogues. Poland alone has registered 440 such sites of Jewish significance. In many places however, with local host communities dispersed or eradicated, these sites function only as musealised symbols. It is therefore easy to lose sight of the fact that these architectural monuments are firstly part of a local, regional and indigenous history as were the populations which built and used them. This component can easily be lost in the new tourism economy of cultural utility. The rediscovery of this spectrum of meaning and symbolic association is part and parcel

Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Commonwealth Association of Museums’ Triennial Conference, Barbados, May 5-12, 1999

of the transition of these states to democratic government and market economics. Questions now surround the interpretation of these sites: memorialising the holocaust, witnessing the depth of Jewish culture embedded in regional histories, or world class monuments of artistic or architectural significance. In the light of a “museology of reconciliation” a primary function should be to engage local communities in dialogue: to expose and combat anti-Semitism, and on a wider scale to focus on conciliation, anti-discrimination, and social justice community value building.

The emergence of the Universities and Heritage Forum, as it developed out of the Forum UNESCO meetings at the University of Valencia in 1995 to the University of Quebec meeting in 1997 produced the Declaration of Quebec. By means of the Declaration this group defined its purpose as mobilising the world’s university intellectual and technical resources for the preservation of cultural heritage, and stimulating inter-university co-operation to further those ends. Given the global dimension of this Forum, themes such as those relating to societal reconciliation would be appropriate topics for co-operative research and application. An analytical model could be developed which linked intolerance to ignorance, generating inter-cultural tension and conflict, and allied tolerance with knowledge, generating inter-cultural pacification and reconciliation. Museums, whose exhibition and educational programmes can lock into universal themes, are well positioned to promote inter-cultural tolerance, even playing the role of trans-cultural mediator.

Using a post WWII example of a palazzo restoration/conservation project in Milan, discussion focused on the ethical problems which come to light as a building is changed and modified to reflect the context of the moment, rather than the context of its original construction and use. Restoration values can err on the side of both “purity” and idiosyncrasy, as in post armed conflict situations where autocratic management (and even scholarly bureaucracies) take advantage of the reconciliation process to impose their own personal historical or even philosophical interpretations on the fabric, seriously compromising the heritage integrity of the monument.

## **General Conclusions**

Firstly, in the museological sense there is as yet no formula for reconciliation. The specific charge to museums must begin with a challenge to reflect broadly on ethical questions and issues. An ethic of reconciliation can only be built within a reflective system of inclusiveness, an inclusiveness which re-integrates heritage elements (i.e. artefacts) into the cultural and social life of a community. The restoration process, whether it is the reconstruction of monuments, the repair of exhibits, or the reconstruction of collections must contain a new conversation. This conversation must start with personal stories of both victims and aggressors, stories which illustrate their commonalities, shared sufferings, common values – while respecting international justice.

With such first steps perhaps museums can at least play a mediation role. Improving levels of tolerance, or ultimate reconciliation, may be too lofty an ideal.

Secondly, museums must be prepared to address the realities of power, its shifts and balances within society and among nations. Within political structures a climate of suspicion leads to a general lack of confidence; this can deteriorate into conflict and violence. Museums need to address these issues at the grass-roots level, that is to break-down racial, religious or cultural barriers. Museologists must be prepared to change the structure and mission of museums. From a history of materialism, or focus on the artefact, new thinking must emerge which puts greater emphasis on the intangible, “spiritual heritage” or “memory”.

Ultimately however, museums have to face the issue of truth – as something beyond point of view. Indeed in any conflict there is an aggressor and victim; the application of justice is part of the resolution. Museums cannot be silent about human conflict, about wars. What this symposium requests of a new museology is to look beyond these facts to find, demonstrate, and illustrate – to act as a medium for the realization that commonalities of the human condition lie behind these events.

The papers, along with a summary of discussion, are available on-line through the website: <http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/tmr/>

**Discussants:** *Ivo Maroevic, Martin Segger, Nada Guzin-Lukic, Mirjana Krizmanic, Franco Milis, Sandra Siano-Weinreb, Kathryn Zedde, Peter Van Mensch, Pierre Mayrand, Diyet Johnson, John Moss, Mirjana Ovanin, Warren Schmitke, Tracey Stefanyk, Zelimir Koscevic, Darko Babic, Divo Basic, Petar Curcic, Aunska Deranja, Sanjica Faletar, Zrinka Hacic, Helena Ivetic, Snjezana Lozovina, Anna Pazanin.*