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## *Museum – meeting points*

### *ABSTRACT*

The following article examines museums as meeting points, as open and inviting places for encounters and interactions, shaped by the presence of cultural assets, and thus offering not only physical-geographical but also temporal, emotional and mental spaces for diverse and complex exchange and reflection.

These considerations build on the EU project REACH, which provided the opportunity to carry out extensive studies and activities on participatory initiatives in the field of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage institutions were an important pillar of this project and our contribution was focused in particular on museums.

A short overview of our work and its guiding intellectual principles will be presented here together with the insights gained through our international workshop and during our survey. Even though the study included only a small sample, it could still highlight a very diverse range of activities and frameworks, and reveal the highly complex character of participatory activities, and of museums and their work. Furthermore, the societal relevance of historico-cultural collections and the multidimensional value of interaction could be underlined.

By relating these findings to the current debate on the institution of museum, it has been possible to reflect on the changes that museums are undergoing as a result of the altering attitudes, knowledge, experiences, behaviour and expectations both among the public and within the institutions themselves. In addition, it was of special concern to accentuate the need of modified framework conditions and of multilateral commitments and responsibilities.

With this article, I would like to contribute to the ongoing debate on the further development of museums and to promote a rather simple and open form of their understanding and development as meeting points.

**Keywords:** museum, museum-communities relationship, involvement, collaboration, accessibility, historico-cultural collections

**Słowa kluczowe:** muzeum, społeczności muzealne, relacje, zaangażowanie, współpraca, dostępność

In the current debates, the institution museum is being questioned all around; in terms of the way it sets, frames and interprets themes, how it presents and whom it represents, etc. This is not only about the management of a collection, but also about its communication and interaction, and especially about its attitude toward and relationship with its constituent communities.<sup>1</sup> These questions refer to the present and the past and allow visions of a museum of the future to arise.

Participation is hereby discussed as a kind of panacea for meeting new demands, but also for overcoming traditional patterns that no longer seem suitable or valid. This can be observed not only in museums, but also in a wide range of societal areas.

Participation was at the heart of the REACH project, too, which aimed to support participatory approaches in culture and explore favourable conditions for their further development in order to enhance the dealing with cultural heritages and to foster its significance for communities and societies. Here, we have the opportunity to present the project and explain our work and results, contemplating, in particular, the institution museum as meeting points.

The titles we have given to our activities illustrate the development in our thinking and insights gained during the course of REACH (Fig. 1). They underline that it is a reflection process, that is still ongoing. These titles also guide the reader through the following explanations.

It starts with a short presentation of the project: REACH (REdesigning Access to Cultural Heritage for a wider participation in preservation, (re-)use and management of European culture). In this title, “participation” in various fields of activity is mentioned as the objective to be accompanied, observed and analysed as well as supported in the different actions of the project. In accordance to our specific expertise as an institute, which supports museums and explores and documents their work, I will concentrate in the following on institutionalised cultural heritages, in particular, on initiatives realised in museums.

Our first extended round of reflection around institutionalised cultural heritages was an international workshop with practitioners from diverse cultural heritage institutions as well as universities and associations in November 2018. It bore the title “Daring Participation?!” which underlined both a question containing a demand and/or an invitation and an appeal which was to be critically examined. It aimed to address the rich landscape of activities of engagement and involvement as well as to start an exchange of experiences and visions.

The following stage was marked by our participation in the congress “Museum for all people” in Madrid in April 2019 and already showed a further development in thought. Our contribution there was entitled “Daring Participation! – Daring Partnership?”. There, first and foremost, we wanted to deal with the question of the nature/idea of participation. Our article of the same title, to be published in the conference proceedings, expands on this consideration by discussing the implications of changing interactions and communication

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<sup>1</sup> Leontine Meijer-van Mensch supports the consideration of the museum community as a constituent community, which implies a broader concept taking into account the various groups – laypersons and professionals, inside the museum as well as externals – that support the museum and participate in its diverse fields of work (L. Meijer-van Mensch, *Von Zielgruppen zu Communities. Ein Plädoyer für das Museum als Agora einer vielschichtigen Constituent Community* [in:] *Das partizipative Museum*, eds. S. Gesser *et al.*, Bielefeld 2012, p. 86).

for the museum cosmos of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which would lead to a new kind of relationship between the museums, their communities and other (potential) stakeholders.



**Fig. 1.** REACH – Logo, CC-BY-SA

In the meantime, we are already one step further. We evaluated a survey which we had conducted in a small selection of museums in Germany to get to know their experiences with their engaging activities. It was of particular interest to us to learn about the special circumstances, motivations, objectives and results, and to gain these insights from different perspectives. The heading of this last section (and of this contribution) is “Museum – meeting points”. It is (only) an uncomplicated statement that underlines a public-friendly and open normality, and that clarifies the plurality. This title is inspired by the designation of a participatory initiative we visited.

In the following, I would like to trace the development of our work to discuss the institution museum as meeting points. We present these findings and reflections here in the hope that they will help museums and their constituent communities/stakeholders to shape their work according to their mission, needs and visions, and to act beyond short-term political activism and fashions. This is all the more important as the question “Quo vadis museum” is currently under increasing (global) discussion.

### **“REdesign Access to Cultural Heritage for a wider participation”**

The project “REACH (REdesigning Access to Cultural Heritage for a wider participation in preservation, (re-)use and management of European culture)” aimed to promote and strengthen civic engagement with culture in Europe and beyond. It considered a very broad spectrum of fields of action (as it is notable in its title) and acknowledged the rich complexity and diversity of cultural heritages; minorities’ heritages (Fig. 2), rural communities’ heritages, small towns’ heritages and institutional heritages are treated. Additionally, the collaboration of partners from six countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy and Spain) enabled more than just a local and regional perspective, and provided the opportunity and also the expertise to deal with topics on a European level. Thus, country-specific issues could be identified and discussed, and common approaches or general problems could be addressed.

The REACH project was based on the premise that culture and cultural heritages form the foundation for social cohesion. Interpersonal interactions with own and foreign, familiar and unknown cultural tangible and intangible manifestations are essential for the formation of the personal identity, community identity and mutual understanding (within one's own group and between different parties).<sup>2</sup> In this way, awareness of the societal significance of culture as a unifying and innovative element can be raised. Culture is transmitted in many different ways, and institutions (can) play an important role in this. Museums have a special function in this context, as they collect and preserve tangible and intangible assets and thus construct knowledge and strongly shape the common understanding (of one's own or others). They are also special in a further sense, because in doing so, the museum itself has also to be acknowledged as a cultural technique and it is or should be, therefore, also subjected to constant processes of rethinking and negotiating.



**Fig. 2.** REACH – Pilots: minorities' heritage (Melinda Rézműves presented the different buildings of the Country House to the workshop participants and students of Gandhi Secondary School).

Photo G. Oláh, © Gábor Oláh

With the aim of encourage and support civic engagement in the cultural sector, the REACH project developed the social platform Open Heritage which provides a space where interested people, associations and institutions can inform and be inspired, get in contact, interchange their experiences and also develop joint activities. In accordance with the complex societal significance of culture, the platform addresses representatives from very different areas – such as culture, education, tourism, science, entrepreneurship and politics – and is also open to anyone who wants to engage with cultural heritage. REACH supported the debates and development by providing a range of

<sup>2</sup> For sure, cultural work can also promote and strengthen dissociation and exclusion.

information: Data on projects and initiatives in Europe and beyond; lessons learnt from pilot projects and surveys, conferences, workshops and local meetings; analyses, reflections, recommendations and guidance documents; and information on events and publications. The gathered and exchanged insights and expertise can create a broad and diverse basis for discussing possibilities and difficulties in the implementation of participatory initiatives, sounding out trends and identifying the need for further development. In this way, the REACH project helped to reflect on the current state of involvement and engagement in the cultural sector, to create a network of interested and engaged stakeholders, and to encourage reflection on the importance of culture and its comprehensive and sensitive treatment for communities and societies. It was very beneficial to connect the diverse areas of activity. In this way, REACH could not just underline the overlappings and interconnectedness of the various sectors. Beyond this, synthesising the findings supported also cross-disciplinary reflections. On this basis, mutual enrichment and support as well as new ways and directions of thinking and acting could be developed.

REACH was funded by the European Commission under the “Horizon 2020” programme. It started in November 2017 and lasted until December 2020. Still after the end of the project period the collected data are available to interested users via the Open Heritage platform. In doing so, the REACH project sought to have a long-term and sustainable impact on the continuing discussion.<sup>3</sup>

One focus of the REACH project lied on participatory approaches around institutionalised cultural heritage. It analysed the performances of activities in cultural heritage institutions, their framework conditions and impacts. Due to the involvement of the Institut für Museumsforschung/Institute for Museum Research in REACH, the coverage of institutional heritage in this project was mainly centred upon museums in Germany.<sup>4</sup> In the following, I would like to briefly present our contribution to REACH.

## “Daring Participation?!”

As one part of the REACH project, we organised the thematic workshop on cultural heritage management, which thus focused particularly on cultural heritage institutions. We gave this workshop the title “Daring Participation!?” somewhat inspired by Willy Brandt’s saying “We want to dare more democracy!”. For this exchange, we assembled representatives from museums, archives and libraries, universities, civic associations and ministries in order to examine in which areas of cultural heritage institutions and to what extent involving and engaging activities are already carried out, what they mean for the institutions and society/communities and what impact they have. Additionally,

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<sup>3</sup> For further information (in particular, for deeper insights into the events and activities, and into the debates and findings), please, visit the web pages <https://www.reach-culture.eu/> (2017) and <https://www.open-heritage.eu/> (2018) [accessed: 10.01.2020] respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the question of the societal role and relevance, including the rethinking of work objectives and approaches, is important in all cultural (heritage) institutions, as they are confronted with similar expectations, wishes and needs of the public, and also of the staffs. A multidisciplinary exchange would be very enriching and supportive.

we discussed why, for which reason and how such initiatives should be expanded. As the participants were from different countries – Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Poland – it was also possible to consider different framework legislations. This enabled us to discuss solutions and strategies with regard to the specific circumstances and also to identify general trends.

The initiatives presented on this workshop showed a rich variety of approaches, formats, methodologies, procedures and ways of interaction. The range of activity areas is enormous: exhibitions, events, research/exploration of content, education and management. The nature of the participatory approaches is equally diverse including interactions with different scopes of intensity and extend, which are realised in analogue or digital form and inside or outside the institutions. Apart from their great variety, it became evident in all presentations that a new thinking of the relationship with visitors/users (and other communities), which needs and creates new forms of interaction, is at the heart of the considerations and concepts as well as the societal role of cultural institutions. Graham Black, in particular, expressed it drastically in the discussion about the future of the museums. He stressed that they will not survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century unless they change. Here, not only the (potential) audience must be taken into account, but also the entire museum staffs have to be involved in the development/implementation of such activities or at least accept them.

It became clear that the museum work is constantly increasing in complexity. The new technical possibilities thus enable and change ways of action and especially communication. New modes of interaction and reflection result in a changed self-image of individuals and communities, which also includes the institutions and their staff. At the same time, this development affects the perception and handling of culture (and cultural institutions). While this brings new possibilities, new expectations and desires for action are awakened at the same time. With this shifted self-image (on both sides), the changed (mutual) perception and awareness and thus an emerging feeling of common and mutual social as well as ethical responsibility move to the centre of consciousness, which increasingly influences all interactions (around cultural heritage), the everyday work in the institutions and the visit/use of them.

The representatives of the diverse institutions confirmed their interest and also their efforts to continue and develop their commitment underlining the enriching effect for both the participating people and the establishments. They all pointed out in unison that suitable long-term framework conditions must be created for these extended tasks by the institutions themselves and by the responsible politicians.

The exchange during the workshop was a great enrichment and encouragement for the participants in their actions, but as with many events and publications dealing with the topic of participation, this meeting did not succeed in developing the discussion from the specific, practical level to more general considerations. Nevertheless, the following elements could be identified as general fundamental prerequisites for a successful involvement: open-mindedness/transparency, respect/appreciation, liability and sustainability. What follows is an open-ended process without guarantee. Successful concepts cannot be copied one-to-one, consequently the institutions need a flexible framework for and courage to try them out – even unsuccessful development must be absolutely possible and not be seen as failures.

## “Daring Participation! – Daring Partnership?”

Following this exchange, we went a step further, moving from the discussion of types of activities to the question of the relationships that museums could and should build, including their interactions and networking. Partnership might be a desirable and suitable type of relationship, since the term refers to a (temporary or long term) voluntary union of parties seeking for a common goal, which is characterised through togetherness, communality and reciprocity.

This way of imagining, the museum’s embeddedness seems to gain increasing general awareness and validity. With special focus on the museum-public relationship, it entered the ICOM proposal for a new museum definition, which is still under discussion. The statement, which is here of great interest, is that “[the museums] are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities.”<sup>5</sup>

For our team – that focused on the engagement and dealing with the cultural heritages held in institutions – it was therefore a very historic moment for our analyses and discussions. The idea of working “in active partnership”<sup>6</sup> goes a few steps further than that of “being open to the public”<sup>7</sup> as well as “redesigning access” and “wider participation.”<sup>8</sup> It implies a new kind of relationship with a greater extent of exchange and communication – in particular with regard to decision-making processes.

However, especially in the case of big institutions, it is sometimes doubted that relational structures in museums can be equal and balanced. Because of their perception as places with authority, strict rules and their particular ways of thinking, treating and communicating, museums are often seen as little accessible institutions that remain unfamiliar. But, at the same time they are also associated with stability and objectivity. It may be precisely with the help of transparency as well as participatory and collaborative interactions that museums can counter the prejudice of alienation and open themselves up to a larger

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<sup>5</sup> As the current discussion is very relevant, the draft definition will be quoted here in full: “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” (ICOM, *Creating a new museum definition – the backbone of ICOM*, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [accessed: 20.02.2020]).

For comparison, it is worth recalling the current museum definition based on the ICOM statutes of 2007: “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” (ICOM, *ICOM Statutes*, 2007, <http://archives.icom.museum/statutes.html> [accessed: 20.02.2020]).

<sup>6</sup> ICOM, *Creating a new museum definition – the backbone of ICOM*, 2019, <https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [accessed: 20.02.2020].

<sup>7</sup> ICOM, *ICOM Statutes*, 2007, <http://archives.icom.museum/statutes.html> [accessed: 20.02.2020].

<sup>8</sup> REACH, *REACH project*, 2017, <https://www.reach-culture.eu/> [accessed: 10.01.2020].

audience beyond the respective professional world. Furthermore, it is even possible that the museum environment with its aura and its regulations is even strengthening the social significance of and attribution of meaning to exchange, engagement, contribution and collaboration, since museums are after all regarded as one of the central institutions of societies.

Additionally, the ICOM proposed definition or vision of a museum also points out the recognition of the plurality of (potential) partners, and thus confirms the increasing complexity of museum work, above all since this concerns each core task of museums, which, therefore, has to be reflected and performed in a cross-disciplinary, multi-local and/or multi-media way.

While the formulation in the ICOM draft is primarily aimed at visitors and users, the idea of partnership needs to be extended considering additionally both internally – the own employees – and externally – politicians and their staffs –, as well as (maybe even unexpected) partners in cultural, social, health, entrepreneurial and other sectors. This clarifies the diverse and multi-layered network in which museums are embedded and the need to develop it further.

At the same time it underlines that the changing tasks cannot be fulfilled just by the institutions, rather it is the responsibility of all stakeholders inside and outside the museum. For this extension of the traditional core tasks, the institutions require suitable framework conditions provided by the politics and qualified and engaged performers. But above all, they need the acceptance as an interlocutor and partner by the communities. Mutual recognition, accessibility and awareness form the basis for joint exchange and discussions, which must include reflections on all parties involved addressing their visions, approaches, procedures, mechanisms, structures. This will continue to shape the development of (museum) communities and their future actions. In doing so, museums might become democratic places and, therefore, remain central institutions of the communities and society, which would even exceed the current vision of the ICOM.

## **Museum – meeting points**

Thinking of the museum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century leads to reveries and visions, which are exemplified by the current discussion on the new ICOM museum definition, too.

Understanding this draft as a vision of a possible development, it is worthwhile to see how the current situation in museums is and what direction their management and staffs want and can take. That is why the implementation of pilots, activities with practitioners, was an important pillar of REACH considering diverse spots: minorities, rural communities, small towns (Fig. 3) and institutions.

Our team dedicated its work to institutions holding cultural heritages. Because of the particular expertise of the Institut für Museumsforschung/Institute for Museum Research we focused on museums in Germany. We could just consider a small selection of three museums.<sup>9</sup> Even though our choice had to be very limited, it was possible to cover a wide variety in terms of organisational frameworks, target groups and funding. With

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<sup>9</sup> More comprehensive information on the museums and initiatives, that took part in this study, as well as our analyses you can find in the final report (F. Berlekamp, *D5.3 Institutional heritage pilot*



regard to their initiatives, they also differ with regard to the fields of action, formats, intensity and scope of engagement and objectives.<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 3.** REACH – Pilot: small towns’ heritage (Telč, Vysočina region, Czech Republik, listed in UNESCO World Heritage List since 1992). Photo J. Ira, © Jaroslav Ira

The visited projects were carried out in diverse museum sectors, like documentation, maintainance and technical services, collection care, exhibition, education, and visitor services. They embrace activities like joint exploration of the contents of collections, contribution of eye-witness reports, co-creation of learning materials and exhibitions, conduction of (dialogical) guided tours and other formats of exchange with divers societal groups. In addition, involving initiatives through state programmes – as the Federal Voluntary Service (Bundesfreiwilligendienst) and Volunteering (Ehrenamt) were also considered.

Our pilot explicitly showed that engaging activities have complex influence on all parties directly and even indirectly involved beyond the projects and the museum premises providing multidimensional impact – on social, emotional and intellectual levels.

Thanks to the initiatives, the participants not only have the opportunity to meet and share their experiences and memories. This is not just a matter of making a contribution,

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*results*, 2020, <https://www.reach-culture.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/REACH-D5.3-Institutional-heritage-pilot-results-revised.pdf> [accessed: 18.03.2021]).

<sup>10</sup> It is clear that digital media have a significant effect on communication and interaction possibilities, habits and expectations. They are considered here as helpful, useful and supportive and, sometimes, innovative instruments for building and maintaining relationships between institutions and the (potential) stakeholders. Notwithstanding, our study was focused on the direct personal contact and exchange.

which can be considered as a very low or pre-form of participation. Rather, the persons engaged enter already into an exchange and also relate themselves, their ideas and experiences to a wider, supra-personal context. In addition, in this situation they can experience an appreciation of their life's achievements, their knowledge and skills (in new, up to then unknown settings). This recognition becomes even more evident when the participants can see how their expertise contributes to the museum and how it is incorporated into



**Fig. 4.** REACH – Pilot: institutions (Bilderschau, Industrie- und Filmmuseum Wolfen).  
Photo F. Berlekamp, © Friederike Berlekamp

the museum's repository/presentation and preserved for future generations (Fig. 4). Beyond this, the involvement can sometimes provide also an even more substantial value as the initiatives can give the participants a routine, social support in a team and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, it helps them to improve their abilities and knowledge, and to extend their own network.

As far as the institutions are concerned, civic engagement is also of great value to them. It strongly supports the institutions in fulfilling and enriching their work through polyphonic perspectives and broader agendas, which can hardly be covered by the museum staffs due to the natural limits of knowledge and experience, and often because of a lack of resources.

Besides the benefits for the parties directly involved, the achievements of such engaging projects are very remarkable in terms of their service for the general public. Hereby, the participants assume an

important role as they also act as a natural connecting link between the museum and the public. They are disseminators and ambassadors of the museum and its message by providing the audiences and also their own surrounding a personal, perhaps more emotional and less academic access to their engagement as well as to the objects, exhibitions, and their narratives and issues. In consequence, a wider public can get particular insights into the institution, its work, attitude and vision. In fact, the more individual/personal access is often acknowledged by the visitors as a very positive and enriching offer.

This extends the communication and interaction to a multi-directional exchange, which can help to create a wider respectful and trustful basis for the building of relationships. Furthermore, it gives the opportunity to address more various topics and include more diverse perspectives in the (joint) discussion conducted by and between the museum staffs, the participants and the audience (and public). In this way, the acceptance of even problematic issues and the willingness to treat and debate them together can be increased. Closing this circle, such more personal and dialogical encounters inside, around

and with the museum affect the perception of the institution by the visitors (and public), in a positive way, mitigating the inhibition threshold concerning museums and dealing with the past. They, thus, can enable new encounters with further, perhaps until then unexpected, addressees and stakeholders. In addition, with the help of their activities, the museums succeed to assemble diverse communities and societal groups in their premises and around their collections. In doing so, they achieve to create inter-sectoral and inter-generational exchange and interaction, which is a highly important contribution to society considering the currently increasing social segregation.

Additionally to these invitations to encounters and exchange in the museum, the involving activities encourage people to start intensive and diverse interactions with and reflections on cultural assets and historical processes. The museums' collections are helpful starting points for this. The complex and ambiguous nature of cultural manifestations allows a range of approaches and interpretations, from which a spectrum of considerations and discussions can emerge. Thus, the cultural heritage can help to find answers to current burning, sometimes difficult issues and to develop new questions. In this way, the museums can support the participants and the audience for further development of thoughts and actions, and can provide very important knowledge and competences for living in increasingly heterogenic societies. Furthermore, by using their collections in current discussion, the museums give important evidences of the significance of cultural heritage and the value of dealing with historico-cultural collections for cultural and political education in the present and for the future (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** MULTAKA, Museum für Islamische Kunst, SMB-PK. Photo M. Schlösser, © Museum für Islamische Kunst (SMB-PK)

Thanks to such multidimensional interaction and exchange with the public, the museum staffs can present themselves as aware and committed partners in the cultural work and the museums as places for encounters, reflections, discussions, entertainment, discoveries, creation and presentation, where people regardless their social and cultural background can feel respected and appreciated, and can make meaningful experiences and contributions.

During our survey, it became evident that involving initiatives need particular and additional framework conditions. The current situation seems (at least in Germany) hardly to be ready for this. Very often there are structural difficulties. Such initiatives clearly go the beyond the traditional core work of museums and museums procedures. They are recognised as valuable initiatives for society, but also for the museum. Nevertheless, the additional requirements are hardly taken into account in budgeting.

Rather, very often these activities are performed as additional offers just by very small teams and in terms of projects. This cannot lead to a strong and lasting commitment, and can hardly meet the needs of the communities, that look for supportive and inspiring partners. Especially the project are strongly determined by pre-set application conditions, that further cut the room of manoeuvre. Moreover, their additionality promotes the separation between “regular” business and community work, which hinders its integration into the museum’s own strategy and understanding of museum work.

In addition, such activities should be understood as cross-sectoral tasks that need a high degree of collaboration inside the institutions and with external partners. Hereby, also more intensive internal communication and interaction is needed in order to create a mutual awareness and joint objectives. In view of new and additional challenges, however, it is often necessary and advantageous to include further knowledge and skills from external agents. This is all the more true, firstly, when the institutions are confronted with different demands and needs from the communities, secondly, when the relationship, that the museum wants to establish with the public, is to go beyond the often academic character, and, thirdly, when the institution wants to extend its own perspectives and approaches.

The survey made it clear that the museums want to be active for the public and also with the public. But the involvement of citizens in the museum work needs broad understanding, interest and support – by the museum staffs, the politicians and, especially, by the population. It is a big task which the museums cannot and should not fulfil by themselves.

It is a collective task and learning process, in which the museum must make itself accessible and the population must accept the museum as its place and its interlocutors, that no longer merely presents, but also discusses – together with the people. With the broad address of initiatives and flexibility towards changes, but also by the means of steadily reflections on the mission and vision in long and short term in accordance with the current situation and development, the museums can succeed in positioning themselves visibly and availably within diverse communities. Since such kind of engagement does not concern just the cultural sector, but implies also social, education, health and economic issues, it is necessary to develop effective cross-sectoral partnerships which would be aimed particularly on such additional requirements, recognising the comprehensive benefit for communities and society.

## Conclusion

Meeting points is a simple term which implies complex potential for all those involved, hence, the audience, the institution and its staff, the communities, the society.

It clearly underlines the social dimension since it characterises the museum as a reference point and a starting point for joint venture. Additionally, in particular, our survey revealed that the need of and the desire for social encounter, exchange and collaboration is very high and that the museums not just can offer a place, rather the staff can hereby be valuable interlocutors. Mutual acknowledgement, respect and interest, which help to reduce power asymmetries, are essential for the relationship-building which might become (long-term) partnerships.

The term is quiet open, since the activities can be performed inside and outside the museum, around and not around the collection, with and without the staff. One could accuse it of arbitrariness, or rather confirm playfulness. It should be possible or perhaps desirable since every individual and every community have their particular way and objectives to deal with cultural assets, and to deduct emotional and intellectual value. Furthermore, this term helps to think in the process which starts with the meeting. It is not an aimless action, but the result is not in the foreground. In this context, the current valid ICOM museum definition is inviting. It mentions “education, study and enjoyment” as purposes of a museum visit and use.<sup>11</sup>

The collections are the unique position feature of each museum and should therefore probably come first. For a long time, museum work has been object-oriented, but the people, their ideas and actions, behind the artifacts as well as in the museums, have gained attention. However, the collections are always of great value for the communities. The tangible and intangible assets held in museums serve as bridges from the past to the present and may point to the future. They enable very diverse kind of interactions with them and facilitate at the same time interpersonal exchange around them. These various and multi-layered encounters can lead to diverse perspectives and approaches fostering identification and self-affirmation as well as recognition of ambiguity, difference and complexity, and even frictions and inquiries. In consequence, the cultural institutions holding collections or other kind of stocks are suitable places to address and discuss breaks, gaps and inconsistencies, features, that are common to all communities and societies and that are too often ignored.

The term contains the moment of connectedness and plurality, too. A wide range of expertise and skills are already united in museums. It has to be extended since the museum tasks are transforming in accordance to changing expectations, wishes and requirements, and a shifting awareness of the communities both inside and outside the museum. New cross-disciplinary, multi-local and/or multi-media partnerships will emerge. Within this network, perhaps with even unexpected partners, the institutions can fulfil and develop further their work meeting a wider range of needs and objectives.

Well, two basic prerequisites have to be mentioned. Firstly, the public has to be involved in all these reflections and processes. Without its acceptance, museums and their collections can hardly remain a lively issue of social processes of reflections and

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<sup>11</sup> ICOM, *ICOM Statutes*, 2007, <http://archives.icom.museum/statutes.html> [accessed: 20.02.2020].

negotiation. Secondly, the politics have to recognise the societal importance of cultural (heritages) institutions. They discuss and handle topics, that are of great general interest implying contemplations about the future societies and the future way of life and think. Therefore, the politics have to support the institutions providing suitable and sustainable framework conditions.

In contrast to other designations – like contact zone,<sup>12</sup> engaging museum,<sup>13</sup> participatory museum,<sup>14</sup> agora,<sup>15</sup> network museum,<sup>16</sup> or third place<sup>17</sup> – meeting points seem like a pleasant and appealing term, as it is public-friendly and appears simple, without imposing any commitment at once. With its simplicity it can enrich the discussion greatly since the public, which must and want to be involved in this process, will find it easier and more pleasant to act within this framework, as it is very much related to everyday life.

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