

UMAC 's 7th International Conference

Universities in Transition-Responsibilities for Heritage

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First consideration. From positivist epistemology to the modernistic museum.

Everyone is somehow aware that **many museums**, belonging or not to universities, are **even now** in the twenty first century **related** to the **positivist cabinet**, because they see themselves as data banks where knowledge can become more "democratic ". We were kidding ourselves when we thought that **everything** had changed when the **educational** role was introduced to the museum, when it took the spectator by the hand and enabled him to be the cognitive **receptor** of the discourses the museum presented .

It is also worrying that the curator plays such a prestigious role, that his rhetoric endorses values that, as Baudelaire would say , serve "to transform his likes into principles ", placing the visitor ant the end of the whole process of an exhibition

From the beginning, the university museums as well as the "secular" (to give the other ones a name), museums' function has been practically centred on the object. **(1)**.In the modernist museum this object is valuable *per se* , it is collected, preserved, studied, exhibited and now, at least, it is interpreted.

However, in spite of all the questioning over time of the **New Museology**, in practice the twenty first century museum is still based on a **sequel of the modernist** museum model. Just as it did 200 years ago, the approach is to place the visitor in the position of **passive subject**. The emphasis is usually placed on museographic appearance, where the spectator wonder and enjoyment are awakened, revealing the cultural assumptions of the object's inherent value.

Second consideration. Towards the construction of a new paradigm: the post museum.

The drain on the modernist movement and the **increased radicalization** of the assumptions of the New Museology, begin to influence the new paradigm of museum institution at the beginning of this century, this is (as Hooper Hill would say in the 2003) the era of the "**post museum**".

It is here where the objective of this talk that gathers us together today comes up. It is the viability of thinking about, constructing and building a **new museum** in the light of the demands of the third millennium, which may be able to set off the paradigm of the model of the post museum, with all its possibilities.... and **all its uncertainties**.

We are talking about the new **Contemporary Art University Museum** of the UNAM, which will hold the first public collection of Mexican contemporary art, keeping in touch with an international visual context.

(2) This new museum intends to be a reference point for the avant-

garde regarding museums and for the communication of the visual cultural expressions in Mexico.

The building is physically pleasing, and thanks to its transparency, it fits in with the nature that surrounds it, as it is placed within an ecological reserve. It was begun little more than a year ago and covers nearly fourteen thousand square meters (151,000 square feet). It is located in the Cultural Center of the oldest university in the New Continent and the largest of the world, with an unique cultural apparatus: (3) The National Autonomous University of Mexico (that s the UNAM), that was founded in 1551 and its original collections and museums make up some of the richest archaeological, historical and artistic heritage of Mexico .

The new building is expected to be finished by this autumn, (4)but it should be emphasized that even if it took little more than a year to be constructed, the museological conceptualization took more than four years. As it is not the same to set up exhibitions as it is to set up museums, a Seminary made up of an interdisciplinary team had to be set up (5). The configuration of the theoretical platform for the new model had to eco all the institution: collection, curatorial program, public programs and the architectural project, a challenge not often assumed when museums are created.

In general, this theoretical platform considers the construction – and deconstruction – of the rhizomatic **museum reading acts**, as the strongest pillar of the new model of museum, with its *map* of connectible, alterable and modifiable *plateaus*. (6)

The mediation educational and communication program, on the other hand, is strongly oriented by **constructionism**, because it is based not

only on the knowledge built from the personal experience of the user, but also on the social interaction that takes place within the museum space.

Finally, the proposal appeals to **hermeneutic** play, by offering the spectator feedback and when the encounter between his personal experience and the museum object takes place, he is able to derive the realization of an aesthetic experience.

The theoretical planning which we have generally outlined, converges with our museological proposal and makes the new museum into a contemporary- post -museum of our century. As a result, the Contemporary Art University Museum is familiar with the **great themes** of the post museum era **(7)**, such as the reconceptualization of the user and the **metamorphosis** of the museum object, to mention the most important for the purposes of this talk.

The reconceptualization of the user

The first change regards the museological reconceptualization of the relationship between the museum and the public in the post museum, where the person displaces the collection and he is capitalized as the most important element in the museum event. **(8)**

The new university museum hopes to propitiate an endless number of interpretation exercises and readings, whose starting point will be the users experience within the museum space and, as of the inaugural program, semiotic links of different natures will open out, which the user will connect rhisomatically or “read” independently. In this sense, there is NO permanent exhibition and the different curatorial propositions may

be initiated or interrupted at any level, according to the specific interests of each visitor, without this meaning that the experience remains unfinished or is insignificant.

The academic and educational program of the museum tries to avoid not only immutable curatorial truths, but also educational and receptive practices that are clichés in the twenty first century. Like the post museum, it prefers the purposes above the methods and it hopes to strengthen the museum experience to a maximum by getting away from the dogmatic and judging character, which is the way the modernistic museum dialogues with the visitor. It is hoped that the **construction** of knowledge will be produced through **multiple processes**, not with "teaching" but with the users **own experience** and with the social interchange generated by the museum space to reinforce the experience of the **whole** building.

In this way, once the public has reclaimed its rights as active user, the museum will take on the responsibility of unleashing the **hermeneutic** play and of facilitating the process of discovery so that (as Humberto Eco said) "the aesthetic pleasure is derived from the climax of the interpretive process, in which the spectator "executes" again or revives, within the guidelines of his own sensibility, what the artist deposited at the moment of the original work of art"

The metamorphosis of the museum object

The transformations of the binomial museum-artistic object had been announced since the middle of the last century, with the demystification of the "masterpiece" and the author "genius". (**9 y museo virtual**) It is understood that today the museum object has metamorphosized and

it can not only be tangible and intangible ; but also material or virtual; visual, oral, auditory or sensorial; realistic, abstract or conceptual; produced or dematerialized. And, what is worse, original or NOT; unique or reproducible; model or simulated. Its exhibition does not necessarily take place in a natural or real space, it can also take place in an empty or virtual space, just to mention a few possibilities generated by contemporary art ,and precipitated by present day technology.

It is evident that the possibilities mentioned above influence the practices of the post museum , above all, because the purpose, function and polysemy of the new museum object these days, requires that the mediation strategy be completely different to the one the museum used in the past.

Here it is important to mention that the visitor to the post museum has less and less to do with the traditional museum user and that as a member of the information society, he has new expectations regarding his participation in the museum and he feels more stimulated by the interaction with the electronic media. (10)

In spite of the impact of the new technologies on the practice, the post museum proposes to go further , to think of the interaction in **a spatial and dialogical way.(11)**The challenge **for our new** museum will be to be able to design interactive experiences – that may be mechanical or not – but that are capable of motivating the self understanding and free choice of the user in order to have an effect on the creative, cognitive, affective, perceptual and social spheres of the individual and in this way generate meaningful learning and aesthetic experience.

FINAL THOUGHTS. IS THE POST MUSEUM A PARADIGM OR A PARADOX?

We are sure that the modernist museum model is exhausted and screaming for renovation, and that one of the most fertile grounds for the paradigm of the post museum are the universities, with their willingness to permanently explore the conceptual limits of different fields. However, and in spite of all that has been mentioned above, the paradox (12) is that when we talk about the paradigm of the museum of the third millennium, it's impossible not to refer to a term, that by implication is necessarily anchored in the past : that is.... the museum.