Museums and Community Development

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Allel Kusen Ethnic Toy Museum

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Introduction:

This conversation about museums and community development is based on the experience of a group of museums in the city of Neuquén Capital, located in Patagonia, in southern Argentina, the city where I live and where I founded the EthnicTtoy Museum. The city is located in an industrial area wealth in the oil and natural gas sector, which gives the city a multi-ethnic and multicultural character due to the diversity of companies in the sector that are based in the area, whose employees are of different nationalities.

This cultural richness is complemented by the region's past, which, being crossed by two large mountain rivers, gave rise at the end of the 19th century to the creation of the Upper Valley of the Negro and Neuquén rivers, producing horticultural fruit for export, created by the European migratory currents between the wars that occupied the territory that the national government, financed by the British crown, took from the native peoples of the region.

The city was built as large cities are built: cordons of marginalized population towards the outside of it and away from the residential area of its founders and the administrative, commercial and cultural center. That is, it is structured (Delgado, 1999) based on the social relations that facilitate or limit access to certain areas of the city to be inhabited by some groups, as is the case of the gated communities that emerged in the city during the first decade of this century.

For Perrén, following this central space outwards, "a transition zone emerged that housed affordable housing options, uncompetitive businesses and ventures related to the 'bad life'. Next, came neighborhoods of workers and, above all, immigrants who escaped the deterioration of the ghettos of the first settlement" (2005, p. 7).

In this cosmopolitan urban connection, provincial and municipal museums emerged, which for years were far from the feelings of the population. These institutions operated as centers of knowledge and power, presenting their collections in ways that only scholars in the field could understand.

All located in the administrative sector of the city that also distanced the peripheral population from their knowledge through an invisible barrier of separation not only intellectual but also of social classes. This situation was accompanied by the National University of Comahue, which despite being free, kept the indigenous and poor population away from its classrooms due to the actions of the teaching staff and society as a whole, made up of the social classes of the European migrants who structured the first settlements of the city that call *themselves NYC born and raised* in contrast to all the national and foreign migration that they call the *VYQ come and stay*.

In this sociocultural framework, new ways of constructing reality emerged, thus, far from the center, on the periphery of the big city, in a sector that a large part of society considers dangerous neighborhoods, the Allel Kuzen Ethnic Toy Museum was born, breaking with the traditional structure of locating museums in the central area of the city.

¿What do we understand by community development from museums?

It is a different way of doing museology and research on local, regional or national culture.

It is a way of managing institutions that differs from tradition. Open, that is, together with the general population. It is an inclusive and more democratic proposal that leaves aside elitist centrality management to open up to society in general whose museum action is no longer limited to the mere building and its collections but opens up to the territory and promotes community participation in heritage management, thus welcoming new audiences and management proposals.

This new modality has been called Eco museum in North America and Europe while in Central and South America it is called Comprehensive Community Museum.

So thinking about the community development that emerges from changes in the organization and management of museums is thinking about a museum from three pillars: Material and intangible heritage, territory and community contribution.

Thus, for example, in the research carried out, the neighbors who are interviewed to recover local memory, bearers of ancestral knowledge of their culture, are no longer considered *informants* but rather *co-authors* of published texts and exhibitions. From being the anonymous ones that did not cloud the centrality of the researcher, they became part not only of the process but also became visible.

This new museological approach gives vitality to marginalized and excluded communities from the management of their heritage assets, contemplating both vestiges of a past society and elements of current culture and its continuous development (Emmanuel, 2016).

In this way, museums encourage the search and reaffirmation of local, regional, etc. identity. and the population begins to recognize itself as a support for the museum, thus emerging a new economic development around the museum.

In this way, museums are no longer centers for the exhibition of works of art, pieces or other static objects of value to be revalued from a new anthropological perspective; the social.

Emerging proposals:

Cultural:

Transform the visitor's passive attitude into an active one, participating in the exhibition in different ways, for example; through explanatory workshops on an archaeological piece, a painting, traditional games, etc.

Example "tell me about the art piece" proposal that brings the visitor closer to the socio-historical context in which the work was created.

The same proposal adapted to students of different educational levels.

Invite local artists to exhibit their works and carry out the same activities with them as with paintings by painters from other periods or not local ones.

"How this piece was made" or "Toy" workshops.

Workshops to transfer knowledge of techniques from artists (called artisans) to interested people. Ex.: Mapuche silversmithing workshop. Vitrofusion workshop.

Workshops for different ages of construction of archaeological pieces that are exhibited in clay or ceramics. Example: clay animals.

Invite older people to work with children, transmitting their knowledge about different topics: toys, types of fabric

dyeing, leather braiding, etc. This allows us to bring together generations that are currently not in contact through technological-digital life.

Take the museum out of its space, bringing it closer to society with different traveling exhibitions with explanatory and participatory community workshops.

Recover oral tradition stories by creating a space for their recovery and dissemination called Memory Workshops in which people tell traditional stories learned in their childhood.

These activities, in addition to bringing the museum closer to society in general, do so to educational institutions, allowing new generations to get to know the museum as part of their daily lives, which in the future will have them as visitors and participants in its sociocultural evolution.

Invite at the society to reconstruct the history of the place in a collective exhibition by temporarily providing pieces from their family or their own, telling the story, organizing living samples of history, that is, people with their objects - history on a certain day and time are in the museum for those who wish to visit it and learn more about life in the city, town, etc.

Although there are currently places where museums are being transformed into digital museums, the objects continue to be in physical spaces, so giving continuity to their presence in the city as a social and cultural meeting point is important, because human beings need others in presence, not virtually.

Since the museum is a center that encourages the participation of different sociocultural groups, from consultation to the proposal of creative and innovative ideas that allow society to be part of social construction, it is feasible, for example, to propose interventions in the city through painting games in the neighborhood hospital, the train station, the bus station, the subway, the city airport, etc.

Invite visual artists or groups of interested people to create extensions of the museum by intervening in walls and waiting areas for buses, trains, etc.

Propose at the persons to share books they have read and do not wish to keep in their libraries by leaving them at museum receptions or in places where they wait for trains, buses, etc., as a form of exchange.

Bookshops, in collaboration with museums, can provide texts that are not for sale, so that on pre-established days the museums and/or bookstores themselves become a reading environment for those who wish to do so, thus bringing books closer to people who cannot access them for different reasons, among which the economic one stands out.

This museum management method is also a tool that brings the museum closer to the population, and in this way it ceases to be something distant, a place that cannot be visited if one does not know about the subject, to become a friendly and possible place to visit to learn about what it offers: art, history, etc.

In all these proposals, while the possibility of vandalism through graffiti, theft and/or destruction of books, etc., must always be taken into account, it is important to insist on and continue educating the population about a sociocultural change that contributes to the improvement of human coexistence and the generation of various types of employment.

Association Consider the community as a source of input for proposed programs, involving them in the decision-making process.

Welcome independent proposals from community groups. with various local institutions and diverse sociocultural groups whose culture can be included in temporary exhibitions at the museum, covering different themes.

Improve the museum's communication through concrete actions to exchange knowledge with the community.

Employment:

Community development around museums also encompasses changes in local employment, since the enhancement and modification of the management of the cultural heritage that museums possess proves useful as drivers of other projects besides cultural ones, which benefit the local and/or regional economy.

Among other activities, it gives rise to the development of community tourism proposals that differ from traditional tourism. While the latter is mass tourism managed by companies, the former is managed by the community itself in interaction with local institutions, such as museums, so that everyone benefits directly. The cultural offerings allow for the revaluation of all the cultural products of the locality or region, taking care of the local ecology and guaranteeing sustainable proposals, unlike traditional tourism which does not take the environment into account and only benefits companies external to the area with which it is associated.

While both approaches to tourism management fall under the umbrella of cultural tourism, their methods of implementation and development differ.

The relationship between museums and community-based tourism fosters community strengthening through various actions:

Local gastronomy is enriched by the offerings of local restaurants and even by culinary demonstrations in museums.

In this sense, the products used in the culinary offerings will make people feel proud of their natural resources, especially when sharing them with tourists.

Appreciating the area's rich cultural heritage and history by marking historical sites with plaques, and linking these to the presence of artifacts in a local museum, encourages visitors to learn more about its past. It is also important that the museum includes a shop selling replicas created by local artists, as well as a bookstore offering a variety of texts, with the dual purpose of enriching the local culture and fostering socioeconomic development for the community.

This is a way to preserve and revitalize local history and the bearers and creators of diverse cultural heritage.

Guided tours of the museum and its surroundings present the community as part of the museum, with tours through different neighborhoods.

In this way, museums are integrated into the tourism offerings, modifying the traditional role previously described regarding the place of museums in society.

In this way, the museum becomes a community museum, as it becomes a source of appreciation for local culture, generating the empowerment of the general population, who will begin to take care of the ecosystem and traditional cultural practices that will coexist with the modernity of the 21st century.

This interaction increases the capacity of hotels and other accommodation options for tourism.

Another proposal that contributes to community development in a city is the distribution of museums in different neighborhoods, where various forms of economic activity also emerge, contributing to the socioeconomic development of the population and its cultural enrichment, as well as that of the museum itself, through the contributions of not only researchers and/or museum professional.

Promoting accessibility for people of all abilities, thereby creating employment opportunities for specialists in sign language, writing for the visually impaired, etc.

Creating community-based networks for offering diverse private products and/or services, such as tour guides and museum guides.

This is applicable to all types of settlements, such as site museums and/or rural areas, where good signage is essential in sociocultural spaces. This allows travelers to easily identify nearby institutions that tell the story of the area and encourages them to visit. It also contributes to the development of rural communities through the sale of their products.

Furthermore, this fosters the development of local and regional tourism, generating changes and transformations in the communities involved and empowering them through their active participation in the various aspects of tourism.

As for site museums, some have been replaced by Themed Cultural Parks. These parks, designed to address the risk of mass tourism destroying archaeological sites, offer replicas of the sites in an open-air environment that recreates the microclimate of the period. They present scenes of daily life in an ethnoarchaeological style, accompanied by educational and recreational activities for visitors. The project's relationship with the community is crucial, not only for its economic development but also for heritage preservation and fostering a sense of social belonging.

These innovative 21st-century proposals, supported by technology, not only engage the community in preserving history but also immerse visitors in the life of those times.

This approach is also applicable, in terms of experiential learning, to other areas such as toys and games, fabric dyeing, spinning, and artistic expressions like soap sculpture or painting.

As mentioned earlier, these activities are possible in all museums. Even within museum buildings, a project involving community theater groups can recreate a historical period using a collection of objects and/or works of art.

Importance of the human capital in the relationship between museums and community development:

Everything described above is important for the development of a community through its interaction with museums, but all of this is not possible without taking into account the people who make up the museum staff and the community.

In this process, human capital is fundamental. It is essential to consider people's skills in developing and improving their resources and accessing external resources in order to increase their understanding, identify promising practices, and access data for community development (Ostrom and Ahn, 2003). Human capital addresses leadership's capacity to overcome differences (Emery and Flora, 2006, p. 21), focus on assets, be inclusive and participatory, and act proactively to shape the future of the community or group (in Chicaiza, T. and Chontasi, D., 2021, p. 3).

People are the complement to the cultural capital of every museum, because each person possesses unique human capital that can contribute to the development of the local economy by engaging with museums in various ways, thus transforming the socio-cultural and economic environment into a productive hub for diverse products.

The working method of museum staff who strive for development and community engagement is that of facilitators and communicators of what the museum holds in its displays. These displays, using various formats, including QR codes, will provide visitors with as much information as possible.

In Conclusion:

The current global social landscape demands a change in museum management, bringing them closer to the community as part of the revaluation of local, regional, and other forms of knowledge held by people in the areas where they are located. This will foster the sociocultural and socioeconomic development of the local population in an era marked by globalization and youth unemployment.

Within this framework of community development, cultural tourism is emerging as an important way to travel and learn about other societies and their cultures. In recent years, rural tourism or ecotourism has experienced significant growth. According to Hernández (2019), this type of tourism focuses on the natural wealth of certain areas, along with learning about the towns, their inhabitants, and all their customs. This type of tourism is becoming one of the main drivers of development in disadvantaged areas (p. 23). Expanding the perspective of simply visiting museums to include understanding the gastronomy and cultural diversity of the place, thus contributing to community economic development, but also to the appropriation and care of the heritage it houses.

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