

MUŽA

Rethinking National Art Museums and the Values of Community Curation

Sandro Debono
Senior Curator and MUŽA Project Lead
Heritage Malta

Abstract: This commentary concerns the guiding principles of the MUŽA Project, the new national art museum project for Malta. It presents a broad overview of the project's guiding vision and the process, known as community curation, by which this is being implemented and consolidated. The commentary also refers to the in-built education-friendly characteristics of the project and its non-formal education potential. The project is still evolving and this commentary is intended to be read as a stock-take of a process that will become more and more articulated over time as it continues to evolve and develop.

Project and Vision

MUŽA is the new National Museum of Art in Malta and one of the flagship projects for Valletta's capital city of culture title in 2018. The chosen name is indicative of where this project is heading and the key values which it enshrines. MUZA is an acronym which stands for Muzew Nazzjonali tal-Arti (English translation – National Museum of Art). It also refers to the muses; the mythological figures from classical antiquity inspiring creativity and, in effect, the etymological source of the word museum. MUŽA is also the Maltese word for inspiration.

All three stand for an interlocking triad of values. The project has its physical context and historic past in the current National Museum of Fine Arts, founded in 1925 as a section within a bigger Malta museum. The choice of acronym itself suggests that MUŽA has a history and a past that cannot remain unacknowledged within the remit of the new museum project. The

Corresponding author: alexander.debono@gov.mt

values that have guided collection development policies, the deliberate and accidental curatorial choices that have shaped the collection, correspond to a historiography that has to be given its due recognition. The reference to the muses as the etymological source of the word museum suggests a necessary process of review and rethinking. Indeed, MUŽA shall strive to rethink itself through constant questioning and self-assessment concerning the relevance of museums today and their role within contemporary societies, how these engage with their publics and the ensuing interface which guides collections development policies, activities and events. The reference to MUZA as the Maltese word for inspiration concerns the rethinking of the collection in terms of a resource, a means to an end, rather than being a mere collection of valuable commodities.

The MUŽA physical experience, as inspired by the chosen MUŽA philosophy and guiding triad of values, concerns a tetralogical narrative of themes and related objects with a focus on the Mediterranean, Europe, Empire and the artist. The first three serve the purpose of a context and conceptual backdrop to the fourth. All three are grounded within the recognised narrative of Maltese society with a direct reference to the geographic context of the Maltese islands and the influences coming from different areas within the Mediterranean, the strong connection with Europe, particularly Italy, and the legacy of a world system which was Empire. The fourth story shall refer to the modern artist with a focus on his search for independence and creativity. Chronology is implied throughout but only as a broad backdrop through which to weave connections between the four chosen narratives. Constant comparatives between artworks from different periods and styles shall help present the themes and topics in a broad manner and making them relevant to the present and contemporary.

A Community-led National Museum

An overriding value of this new museum typology is its audience basis, the very definition of which the project seeks to challenge. The definition of museums promoted by the International Committee of Museums describes the museum institution as a 'non-profit institution at the service of society'. This is a general requirement for museums but rather than being a static and un-reflexive upholder of a tightly bound culture as described by Bourdieu, MUZA aims to build on the potential synergies and constant interface with the community. This is nonetheless a complex relationship to develop, let alone sustain, and implies a sustained rethinking process. Indeed the project rethinks the terms 'nation' and 'audience' and their significance to museum studies today. It opts to substitute them with the terms 'community' and 'participants', the latter being active agents within the museum space which by time also become recognized as 'inhabitants'. Both shifts carry implications

that have a direct and decisive impact on display narratives, interpretation and communication strategies, as well as the role and definition of the curatorial expertise working at MUŽA.

The first major shift which MUŽA advocates concerns the term 'nation'. The project concerns first and foremost a new national museum spearheaded by the Maltese National Agency for Cultural Heritage (Heritage Malta). The trappings of a nation-state cultural institution are undoubtedly implied but for a country the size of Malta, with a population close to 400,000, the nation-state paradigm can be neither an imagined community nor a neatly stratified society to be in line with the 1987 ICOM definition of a museum. Malta can be recognised as a community albeit a complex and surprisingly multicultural one. The term community also implies shared values which a social unit chooses to collectively recognise and engage with. These may be guided by belief or intent amongst those conditions which affect the degree of cohesiveness amongst the varied identities that structure the community and may also include ethnicity, socio-economic status and geographical location amongst others. Regardless of the criteria that a community may share, relationships and identities are fluid and unstable (Watson, 2007; Fouseki, 2010) and subject to constant shifts. This makes communities an ever-changing multi-stratified group with corresponding shifting values.

The second major shift concerns audiences. Indeed, museums, particularly those recognized as having a national or community remit, unequivocally recognise the notion of common good, oftentimes implied within their chosen mission statements and *raison d'etre*. Studies strive to identify and quantify the number of visitors, their preferences, choices and tastes, in a clear attempt at defining the visitor profile to a site, museum or art gallery. What generally gets much less attention are the ways and means how audiences participate in the museum experience. Indeed, the term audience implies a passive reaction to a happening usually associated with an informal code of ethics regulating how one is expected to behave and react in response to the object in sight. With the ever-increasing move to relocate audiences to the centre of the museum experience, it is perhaps pertinent to rethink what the term implies and substitute it with a two-tier classification including 'participants' which successively may become 'inhabitants' in response to the notion of collective ownership.

For MUŽA, the term 'participants' implies a more active share in the museum experience which rethinks their role as passive viewers into active agents. MUZA's vibrant and active habitat would in turn empower increasing levels of participation which would transform once-participants into inhabitants. This may still be an oversimplified classification of community users and subdivisions and categories may be applicable. These may include categories which contribute, collaborate, co-create and host (Simon, 2010). MUZA's culture habitat shall continue to evolve over time as heritage and community

values remain in constant flux. This would imply creating an institutional setup which concerns the way groups define and regulate interpersonal relationships and the values that bond them together; indeed the requirements of a democratic society which requires dissent and challenge in order to empower critical thinking. The use of such terms as 'community', 'participants' and 'audiences' also project MUZA as a platform for debate which, in the case of political institutions the likes of museums and art galleries, is unusual given their traditional intolerance to dissent and challenge (Karp & Wilson in Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne, 1996, 251-268). Defining this new habitat and the values for which it stands is the role and objective of community curation.

The Rudiments of Community Curation - A preliminary outline

Community curation is, in essence, a process of community empowerment and builds on the ever-growing body of literature that has explored the ways and means how to democratise museums (Peers & Brown, 2003; Crooke 2008; Lynch 2011a; 2011b). MUZA shall seek to go beyond implementing community empowerment solely through educational programmes in response to non-formal education parameters. Indeed, for MUZA, the process of community empowerment shall concern first and foremost the narrative of display itself and the philosophy guiding the interpretation methodology. True to the MUZA vision, the interpretation process concerns inspiration, as the chosen name of the new museum project clearly implies, and this is being developed with the community through a purposely developed interface process.

Community curation concerns, first and foremost, the ways and means how the MUZA collection and narrative of display continues to evolve over time. It has been standard practice for museums, particularly art galleries, to institutionalise their narrative by entrusting it exclusively to culture elites and academics. Although recognised expertise is certainly a necessary adjunct to museum projects, it may nonetheless present limitations verging on contradictions when aligned with the community's very own narrative. Much depends on the chosen yardstick of art history as, more often than not, international yardsticks declassify the regional and local, denigrating copies and versions after originals to oblivion. In general, such narratives would be guided by selective processes aligning artists and artworks with the culture elite's chosen yardstick of art history. Instead, the MUZA project advocates a negotiating process to determine the yardstick and corresponding values which the community embraces. The end objective of community curation would be the constant review of the narrative scripted by and jointly with the community in the first place, through constant a constant negotiated interface with the that same community. This process would empower debate and

review to such an extent as to deter the development of a dominant narrative. By consequence, the community would be empowered to rethink and propose new narratives through the narrative of themes and related objects on display. In theory MUŽA would be owned by the community with the majority being the inhabitants of this culture habitat but ownership will also entail maintaining a constant interface through focus groups and relevant discussion forums broadened to include as wide a participation as possible.

This negotiating process concerning museums may not be an entirely new interface in the museum world, although it certainly is much more novel for art museums, and certainly rarely associated with galleries and national art museums (Olsen & Utt, 2007). Since the 1990s the Pratt Museum in Homer (Alaska, U.S.A.) has been running a community-based exhibitions project which is discussed with and decided upon by the community. The museum also involves community representatives who, in collaboration with the museum staff, determine the tone and themes of the exhibition. This forum includes a cross-section of scholars, artists, community leaders and everyday members of the community (<http://www.prattmuseum.org/>). The Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, (Seattle, U.S.A.), engages with communities in exploring issues related to the culture, art and history of its multicultural community and its staff regularly seeks community input in the management and implementation of its public programmes (<http://www.wingluke.org/>). These, however, do not seem to be mainstream projects. A recent study of twelve museums and galleries across the United Kingdom has highlighted numerous examples of groundbreaking and innovative practice in this field but no significant shift towards community-led museums. The study, led by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, claims that the opposite happened instead (Morse, 2012; Lynch, 2011a & b).

The second core value concerns the choice of interpretation tools and corresponding strategies. Irrespective of choice of yardstick, the chosen narrative would require the right interpretation tools which guarantee the widest possible measure of access to the object and its narrative context. Given that the MUŽA project advocates a narrative scripted jointly with the community, the chosen interpretation tools concern how the scripted narrative, as negotiated with the community, will be given the necessary intellectual access ramps. This is one other facet to the project which is being given its due measure of attention. The museum world is more often than not concerned with providing a focused access to definite categories of society recognised as entitled to special needs. Such reasoning has often implied that the rest who fall outside this category can be considered as mainstream requiring one standard interpretation strategy generally including labels, captions and an ever increasing IT interface. The MUŽA project aims to go beyond by recognising special needs as a broad term, corresponding to the needs of each and every individual to access art and culture. The range of

interpretation tools which MUŽA shall seek to develop are exceedingly broad, refer to the five senses but not just, and include the visual and performing arts. MUŽA shall present the 'official' narrative of themes and related objects as scripted jointly with the community but that very same narrative has to remain in constant flux, rethought over time as the community continues to evolve and change. This is, to all intents and purposes, in line with place-based education which empowers students to become creators of knowledge rather than traditional consumers (Smith, 2002, p. 584-594).

Central to the process of change advocated by community curation is the meaning of the artwork and what it stands for. MUZA seeks to go beyond its commodification to reconsider it as a resource bearing values and evidence of the narrative jointly scripted with the community. Indeed, the object becomes a source of inspiration but in the context of a gallery and art museum the stakes are even higher. A post-modernist museum education programme which acknowledges the shifting structure of its corresponding community and continuously address issues associated with these new configurations may be the way forward. Indeed, the main objective of Community Curation is to connect community members amongst themselves with the objects presented in the narrative of display and the world at large. Given the process by which the MUZA narrative of display is scripted, this same narrative would become the natural binder between object and community. This by and large deconstructivist perspective may find its guiding theoretical model in Bell Hooks' analysis of critical pedagogies (Hooks, 1994; Tapia, 2008). Hook suggests that authoritative closure should be replaced by flexibility allowing viewers to express alternative and personal viewpoints empowering the critique of dominant narratives and structures. She also underpins the characteristics of her singular approach which includes the recognition of local narratives beyond the privileged or expert interpretation and advocates a forum-based approach. Other focus areas include the power-knowledge link which examines the privileged status of certain types of knowledge and their eventual deconstruction and the detection of multiple meanings, including simultaneous and contradictory ones (Tapia, 2008).

The MUŽA Curator - a prime negotiator beyond academia and connoisseurship

Given the major shift which MUŽA advocates in terms of vision and process, the role of curator and corresponding practices require significant review. The curatorial profession undoubtedly corresponds, to a certain extent, with the definition, mission and objective of the museum institution. Museum curators are generally responsible for and expected to promote and actively engage in the acquisition, conservation, research, communication and exhibition of

heritage. Recently, curators have become increasingly involved in fund raising and outreach events. In Malta, particularly, the pool of free-lance qualified curators and those in the employment of public institutions are trained first and foremost as academics with some recently specialising in cultural heritage management. Some are also recognised connoisseurs in their own field, certainly in Malta and also, occasionally, elsewhere. In spite of existing variants to this generic role of curators, a clear relation between the object, its care and interpretation is implied across variants although the word curator also refers to parallel processes, particularly in the case of contemporary art.

The distinction between curator and academic has also been blurred over time and the different roles to which each profile corresponds, frequently confused and swapped. Recognising clear remits for each profession, and the healthy overlap that exists between the two, is certainly a good point of departure but there is more that remains to be clearly defined even though the interface, as it stands today, concerns more often than not a subjective opinion. The curator's primary role as rethought by the needs and requirements of the MUŽA project, is that of a mediator between the institutional version of art history and the one acknowledged by the community. This may be understood by the art historian category as a challenge given Gombrich's recognition of art historians as the ones holding the master baton of the discipline. Museums are however more than physical versions of scripted narratives of art history. Indeed, the art historian may be concerned with scripting a narrative of art history in response to pre-determined yardsticks, or versions of his choice including those which he might develop through grounded methodologies. The curator instead, is mostly concerned with communicating that narrative and empowering its full comprehension following a process of review undertaken jointly with the community and might imply a staggered broadening of community representation as the process moves forward. This process concerns a major alignment between the disciplines of sociology and art history and promotes an ever increasing engagement between object and viewer. MUŽA seeks to recognise this broader process of engagement.

MUŽA curators also require a diverse set of skills than those generally associated with traditional curators given their concern with community curation. These skills build nonetheless on the fundamental importance of academia and connoisseurship but consider negotiation skills, diplomacy and public interface as equally important. Indeed, the MUŽA curatorial class shall be concerned with a new language of curatorship that shall seek to use academia and connoisseurship as platform values on which to negotiate the narrative of themes and related objects with the community. The MUŽA curator shall not impose previously defined art-history yardsticks of sorts. His opinion, as learned and as informed as that may be, will be his guide

throughout the negotiation process with the community. The structure of the community may determine the type and extent of negotiations necessary to define the narrative of themes and related heritage objects. This process is, to all intents and purposes, an exercise in liberal democracy which is not generally associated with art museums and galleries but what it seeks to engage with is the subaltern sectors of society. Indeed subaltern studies is concerned with the condition of revocation from spaces of elitist knowledge production and the argument that dominant narratives of history and its variants, including art history, have systematically represented the interests of colonizers and elites (Dut & Mahuya, 2010, p. 363-386).

Rather than remain concerned solely or exclusively with a collection and its corresponding narrative, the MUŽA curator is first and foremost concerned with curating a public space where narratives are continuously scripted and reviewed. Thanks to this narrative, in continuous review, he seeks to connect objects to narratives and communicate the choices he is empowered to make by the community in a clear and accessible way. This process is twofold in purpose; selecting the object that best stands for the narrative also feeds into the development of a collections development policy and helps structure acquisitions strategies in response to the negotiated storyline.

The rethinking of museums as public spaces is a necessary adjunct to Community Curation. Public space is defined in multiple ways (Grodach, 2010, p. 474-493). It is idealized as a space that facilitates intra-group relations and civic engagement by providing opportunities for open and inclusive participation and interaction. Determining the effect of a public space is a highly subjective process – whereas one individual may consider a public space inviting, safe, and accessible, another may feel out of place, disoriented, or threatened there. Indeed, a public space may differ according to an individual's social identity and background and a variety of other contextual factors including location, design, access, or sanctioned activities associated with the space. MUŽA's public space is physically defined by the choice of building to house the physical project as guided by the vision. The chosen building is a historic early modern Italian-style palazzo with an internal courtyard that will now become a public space inspired by the local village piazza where the community regularly participates in the cycle of yearly events and activities. This is the beating heart of the MUZA project which is, first and foremost, a curated space where the broadest remit of interpretation tools provide the initial access ramps to the community's participants and inhabitants.

Note

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