

The role of museums in preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage for addressing societal issues: A matter of time

Costas Boletsis

Jan Håvard Skjetne

Erik Gøsta Nilsson

SINTEF Digital, Forskningsveien 1, 0373 Oslo, Norway

{konstantinos.boletsis, jan.h.skjetne, erik.g.nilsson}@sintef.no

Ane Høyem

Jarl Holstad

Museum Nord, Postboks 104, 8459 Melbu, Norway

{ane.hoyem, jarl.holstad}@museumnord.no

Abstract.

To foster the new understanding of bringing tangible and intangible cultural heritage together, the notion of time – i.e. past, present, and future – should be examined in order to make as-informed-as-possible projections about the relationship's future effect on sustainable development strategies and cultural heritage preservation. In this paper, we argue that the curation of museums' physical and digital assets in combination with advanced digitization of external knowledge, will provide a more efficient and more informative method to comprehend the past, include the present, and predict the future, thus increasing awareness of societal issues and contributing to more sustainable practices.

Keywords: cultural heritage, museum, preservation

1. Preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage

Preservation of cultural heritage is first and foremost organized to maintain and enhance cultural values, though numbers of studies have demonstrated positive economic benefits of cultural heritage preservation. Preservation of cultural heritage enhances import substitution, revival of city centers, heritage tourism, influences increase in property values. Historic properties stimulate small business incubation and are compatible with modernization and evolving needs of modern society (Grazuleviciute, 2006). Regrettably, the potential of cultural heritage preservation is usually disregarded striving for fast economic benefits. Due to such imprudent behavior vast territories are developed inefficiently or are slowly decaying, energy is wasted, residential territories are losing their identity, transport efficiency is diminished and life quality is worsened. In order to implement

sustainable development strategies and to improve quality of life, it is essential to use the potential of cultural heritage (Grazuleviciute, 2006).

UNESCO's "Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" (UNESCO, 2001) has already had a significant impact by drawing the attention of governments and civil societies to the need to safeguard this heritage. A particularly important aspect to highlight is the relationship between *intangible* and *tangible* cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is not only the objects used or the singular events that are recognized, but also their historical evolution and the agency of those who create, perform or display them. Therefore, it is acknowledged that all human achievement stems from intangible cultural heritage, for it is ideas, desires, experiences, and interests that drive people to create tangible or performative heritage (Arizpe, 2004).

To foster this new understanding of bringing tangible and intangible cultural heritage together, the notion of time – i.e. past, present, and future – should be examined in order to make as-informed-as-possible projections about the relationship's future effect on sustainable development strategies and cultural heritage preservation (Arizpe, 2004). Moreover, the digitization of cultural heritage can make this relationship and its effects more visible, especially when cultural heritage institutions and curators facilitate this technological transition. A key debate in the field has been around how the human dimensions of past experiences can be visualized in digital environments so that they inform the future. UNESCO's cultural heritage charter recognizes that a responsibility of heritage management is to reflect and represent not only the material culture of the past, but also intangible heritage as expressed through cultural activity and social practices pertaining to myths, oral traditions and ceremony (Flynn, 2008).

2. The role of museums

At the end of the 20th century, museums' practices and approaches began to shift emphasis, and from "museums of the objects" were becoming the "the museums of the subjects", or else, as it is positioned by "*turning into museums of ideas, community stories, and narratives*" (Alivizatou, 2016). This way, the concept of the "new museum" comes closer to the public, fulfilling one of its fundamental social goals (Adams, 2019).

In the field of museology, it has been widely researched and accepted (Alivizatou, 2016; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Munjeri, 2004; Phillips, 2016; Smith and Akagawa, 2008) that the oral traditions with the direct participation of the wider social fabric associated with these traditions and other forms of oral transmission of knowledge (customs, rituals, art, craftsmanship, etc.), should be an integral part of modern museum directions. However, today, museums struggle with two interrelated challenges: *i*) managing their ever-growing collections of

physical and digital assets and *ii*) collecting intangible information that do not come in digital form.

In this paper, we argue that the curation of museums' physical and digital assets in combination with advanced digitization of external knowledge, will provide a more efficient and more informative method to comprehend the past, include the present, and predict the future. A combination of existing and new content in museums, new methods and support tools for curators, tools for refining and distilling content and external information sources, as well as new tools and arenas for presenting the content to citizens may increase the awareness of societal issues and contribute to more sustainable practices.

Museums are not just about preserving the past, they have agency in the community, and they have the potential to affect the future and facilitate societal change, given they are equipped with the right tools, methods and expertise, such as:

- Museums taking action in their local communities, testing new, outgoing ways of disseminating and collecting information, while involving citizens as “prosumers” (both consumers and producers) of cultural heritage.
- Museums enacting a more democratic model of curation, i.e. documenting past and present from multiple sources from the public and challenging traditional curatorial practices where curators are considered the voices of authority.
- Museums utilizing the latest technologies to collect, preserve, and display or visualize cultural assets.
- Museum evolving their practices through the establishment of transnational exchanges between cultural institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and researchers, with a view to mitigate common societal issues, while looking to the future.

3. The GaiaPlan case

The GaiaPlan initiative, which is developed by Museum Nord and SINTEF among others, is one example of how museums can play an active role in the community and facilitate societal change through the preservation of cultural heritage. GaiaPlan is a citizen-driven environmental and history project, which aims at working together with citizens and professionals from local communities in order to raise awareness and take action against climate changes, thus contributing to more sustainable practices for society. GaiaPlan participants, i.e. educational institutions, small businesses, travel operators, policy makers, and various cultural organizations, will also be its contributors by adding to the documentation of intangible heritage. The dimension of time is crucial for GaiaPlan since the targeted behavioral change and environmental awareness will be achieved by allowing participants to experience the past – that is the preserved tangible and intangible

cultural heritage – and virtually “manipulate” and simulate the future, through the latest projection and immersive technologies.

We strongly believe that the GaiaPlan initiative and its activities will demonstrate how museums can support the preservation of and utilize the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and how they can work together with the community in order to present potential future scenarios and raise awareness on significant issues. Thus, developing a form of museum that puts not only the past and the present on display, but the future as well.

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