

XXXIII Conference of the Local Museums Network. Museums and SOStainability. From the Mission to the Action— Chronicle and Reflections

Laura Costa Mateo. Head of the Local Museum Network Unit

[Laura Costa](#)

11/05/2022

Abstract

On 17 and 18 November 2021 the XXXIII Conference of the Local Museums Network was held at the Francesca Bonnemaison Space of the Barcelona Provincial Council, live broadcasted via Zoom and entitled “Museums and SOStainability. From the Mission to the Action”. During these two days, leading specialists in the field and various professionals in museums and cultural facilities reflected on the role of museums in the face of the climate emergency. They also discussed how to address the fit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the different areas of the museological activity and management while presenting several experiences and actions carried out by different facilities in relation to sustainability, which are a good example of work in favor of a more sustainable, just and egalitarian society.

This article summarizes the contributions made by the different speakers at the conference, as well as a final reflection as a conclusion.



The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic shook the whole world, affecting all spheres of our lives. Everybody had to deal with an unprecedented global crisis at all levels—a health crisis in the first place, but also an economic, social and environmental one—a systemic crisis that highlighted the fragility of our ecosystems and made us reflect on the interrelationship between human beings and nature, and their connections with planetary health. In this context, the 2030 Agenda became more relevant than ever, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is now an objective to meet without any delay by all institutions and organizations. The incorporation of sustainable criteria in all fields (economic, organizational and functional) has become a priority, and museums

are no exception. How can museums, from the vast and diverse knowledge they store, help creating more sustainable and livable environments? How can they contribute with their action to building a more just and egalitarian society?

Given these and many other questions, it was necessary to reflect on the role of museums in the face of this eco-social crisis, and to think how to address the fit of the SDGs within the different areas of museological activity and management. From the Barcelona Provincial Council and the Local Museums Network, we found it appropriate and necessary to offer a space for debate and reflection to professionals in the museum sector to address these issues and to share ideas and strategies followed by different museums in relation to sustainability. Entitled “**Museums and SOStainability. From the Mission to the Action**,” the XXXIII Conference of the Local Museums Network was held on 17 and 18 November 2021, and for the first time in a hybrid format (both in person at the Francesca Bonnemaison Space of the Barcelona Provincial Council and online through the Zoom platform). It was attended by numerous national and international speakers and had more than two hundred registered people.

The inaugural presentation, “**Towards a culture focused on the sustainability of life**,” was conducted by **Yayo Herrero**, anthropologist, researcher and professor in the fields of political ecology, ecofeminism and education for sustainability. With the intention of awakening a critical consciousness, and with a direct, poignant and shocking speech, she warned us of the serious situation of planetary emergency in which we find ourselves—a real “eco-social crisis,” as she defined it, which affects people's relationships with nature as a result of the “collision of the functioning of natural systems with our agro-urban-industrial system.” Consequences are obvious: climate change, biodiversity loss, chemical pollution, inequality at all levels, and so on. These are consequences that lead us to an unprecedented destruction of planetary life.

But how did we get into this situation of planetary crisis? Its causes, according to Herrero, are many: what she calls “ecological illiteracy,” that is, the distancing of human beings from nature, its contemplation from an allegedly superior standpoint, and its instrumentalization; the contradiction between the physical limits of the planet and an expansive economy; and the invisibility of caring relationships at a social level, which is indispensable for sustaining lives. Herrero also related these causes to two basic principles: the ecodependence and the interdependence of human life. We depend on nature to obtain goods that meet our needs, and we also depend socially on others, especially at certain times in our life cycle. In short, we are vulnerable and dependent beings. She also said that the crisis we find ourselves in is also a consequence of having ignored these two principles.



Faced with this finding, the speaker called for the need to build a new social reality based on the principle of sufficiency (learning to live with what is enough), to distribute wealth and obligations, and to place life and care at the heart of public policy. She urged local institutions, organizations and infrastructures—schools, health centers, libraries, and, of course, museums—to reposition the lives and the needs of people at the center of their actions, and to do so from an ecofeminist perspective. She also urged them to promote a relationship with one's territory. Weaving a community, connecting with one's neighborhood or village; being connected through affectivity to counteract individualism; encouraging and celebrating diversity of all kinds and combating discriminatory attitudes; denouncing the current model of development based on unlimited growth; and gathering traditional knowledge, which should lead us to more sustainable behaviors—these are some of the actions she proposed to adopt. And she

pointed at museums, and especially local museums, as proximity centers, and certainly as ideal places to carry out these actions. Not only for their role as transmitters of knowledge but also for their ability to weave these links with their community and territory, she finds museums ideal to educate citizens in these new values and thus contribute to building a new model of society. A fairer, more equitable and sustainable society.

In the next presentation, “**Local Museums and SDGs. Our Common Project for a Better Future,**” **Henry McGhie**, a consultant and member of the ICOM Working Group on Sustainability, took theory into practice. In a clear and pragmatic speech, he presented us with a series of resources aimed at connecting the museum’s action with the goals of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. He also built on this context of crisis, of a world full of imbalances and inequalities, to define the concept of “sustainable development,” which is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. That is why the balance between the economic, the social and the natural dimensions of the planet must be restored. “We are all part of the same ecosystem,” he said, connecting with Yayo Herrero’s idea of dependence and interdependence.

“Transforming our world.” This was the motto under which the 2030 Agenda was defined, the main current program in support of sustainable development, agreed unanimously by the United Nations in 2015. McGhie gave us a clear overview of the contents of this roadmap, including its seventeen SDGs, based on the principles of protection and promotion of human and environmental rights without leaving anyone behind. The following are the principles that he summed up in five key ideas, which he called the 5 P’s: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. The ultimate goal is to restore the balance between the three dimensions of sustainability—social, economic and environmental. And this is a big challenge, given that we are less than a decade from the date set by the 2030 Agenda.

And to help museums with this task, McGhie outlined the tools and resources that he has designed—a seven-activity guide and a complementary program, including an action planner, with precise guidelines for aligning museum work with the achievement of the SDGs and for evaluating its results. Protecting and safeguarding cultural and natural heritage; developing educational actions that promote sustainable development; promoting the cultural participation of the whole community; supporting local economic development through sustainable tourism; contributing to research, especially related to biodiversity conservation; achieving strong internal leadership and focusing on improving our action; as well as external leadership that encourages collaboration with other sectors and agents. These are the main ideas included in this guide.



Finally, McGhie stressed that the SDGs are not just a milestone for governments, but an invitation to all sectors of society to collaborate and participate in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. He also highlighted the social role of museums, emphasizing once again the quality of these facilities as proximity centers capable of being close to people and connected to their immediate environment.

Finally, and closing this first part of the program, **Michel Lazinger**, from his experience leading the Science Museum of Trento, presented the talk “**The responsibility of museums in building sustainable communities.**” He connected the theoretical reflections of the two previous speakers with the action carried out by the museum he manages. Lazinger presented his concept of an “extensive museum.” According to him, the action of an extensive

museum goes beyond disciplines and collections per se—its priority is its territory. He focused on the concept of “cultural landscape” understood as the living space in which communities develop and where their identity and a sense of belonging are represented. What is culture but the way a community relates to its territory—and to nature—and the way in which it perceives this relationship? With this, Lazinger reconnected with the idea of the binomial culture-nature understood as a set of indissoluble and necessary interrelationships that are the basis of the social construction of a community, an idea that was expressed by the two previous speakers too.

Lazinger stated that one of the values of museums is helping to read and interpret their territory, and to collect the stories of the people who inhabit it. A museum must be a meeting place for and with the community, a space that reinforces its sense of belonging as well as a space in which the visitor can live experiences. In this sense, museums become important agents for the development of their territory and its sustainable tourism, as they are able to explain this landscape to visitors from a perspective based on empathy. The educational role of museums therefore goes beyond didactics. Under these assumptions, the Science Museum of Trento, dedicated to alpine culture, develops projects and activities for its immediate territory, the Dolomites, including networking with other centers as well as participating within the community.



According to Lazinger, we are facing a paradigm shift in which museums are moving from being a space for conservation and interpretation of the past to being “activist museums,” spaces where communities meet and rethink culture itself. “Museums are expanding their public services rather than their collections—they must become true cultural hubs shared by the public, and they must be relevant to the public, with whom they must have a close and meaningful relationship.”

From the mission to the action—practical examples of sustainable work in museums

And from the mission to be accomplished by museums and the reflections around sustainability exposed on the first day of the conference we moved on to action with the presentation of specific work proposals throughout the second day. Several museums took the floor to explain the work they do to align with the SDGs in their different areas of action—their events, their education programs, their relationship with the territory and the community, or the sustainability of their buildings or the management of their human resources.



The first intervention, “**Culture, rurality and sustainability. The case of the Museum of Rural Life**,” by **Gemma Carbó**, director of this facility located in L’Espluga de Francolí, took up the concept of “cultural landscape” to contextualize the museum in this rural, Mediterranean and sparsely populated environment that is La Conca de Barberà. She explored the meaning of being a museum of rural life in the 21st century.

Conceived as a “living museum” linked to life and the earth, this museum plays an important role in the recovery of traditional knowledge and professions—ecological exploitation systems, professions such as basketry or carpentry, knowledge linked to traditional production processes, and so on. This recovery of knowledge and trades, which is carried out in collaboration with the community, also contributes to generating jobs and economic activity in the territory, which is more sustainable and respectful to the environment. “There is nothing more sustainable than rural life,” said Carbó. She claimed the important role of the museum not only in the recovery of cultural and natural heritage, but also as an important agent for local development, a true “activist museum” as Lazinger would define it.

On the other hand, Gemma Carbó showed how this knowledge related to local production and the exploitation of natural resources have a very clear link with such current issues as the use of alternative energy, circular economy, the use of natural resources, sorority, and so on—concepts closely linked to the 2030 Agenda. Exhibitions like “Plastic” or “Playing with Fire” are a clear example of working for awareness and education. These exhibitions mix artistic language with scientific and ethnological language in an exercise for connecting heritage, nature and memory to the challenges and concerns of the contemporary society.

This highlights the important educational and awareness-raising task at hand for the museum’s sustainability, without forgetting its important role as a meeting space to collaborate with the community. “Culture is a fundamental right, and from cultural facilities we must guarantee not only access to culture, but the right to participate so that people can contribute with ‘their own view’ to build society,” concluded Carbó.

The following interventions—“**The Commitment for the Tourist Sustainability Destination Barcelona Biosphere project**,” by **Xavier Font**, head of the Technical Office of Tourism of the Barcelona Provincial Council, and “**The implementation of the Biosphere certification at the Art Museum of Cerdanyola. Strategies and challenges for sustainability in local museums**,” by **Txema Romero** as a representative of this museum—were aimed at showing the work underway by the Barcelona Provincial Council to align the work of agents in the tourism sector (through the example of a museum) with the SDGs, thus working for a more sustainable tourism.

The project “Commitment for the Tourist Sustainability Destination Barcelona Biosphere project” is a tool for agents in the tourism sector of the counties in the Barcelona Province (travel agencies, shops, cultural centers, and museums) based on three axes: training and information, a manual for good practice, and group workshops. It is a work methodology which includes an improvement plan aimed at achieving certain sustainability goals set in order to obtain this tourism certification. Its ultimate goal is to recognize those entities that are committed to environmentally culturally, socially and economically friendly management.

Txema Romero explained the process followed at the Art Museum of Cerdanyola for obtaining this certification, a

task that connected with the social vocation of the museum and the work that it does to ensure the accessibility and inclusion of all social groups (the elderly, women, groups with disabilities, LGTBI, and so on). This process not only helped them to “put things in order” and to introduce improvements to the building following sustainability criteria, but also to generate alliances and complicities with other agents in the territory (e.g. wine producers) with the aim of disseminating the cultural legacy that is common to all of them.

He stressed that this work has allowed them to connect the three dimensions of sustainability—environmental, economic, and social. He emphasized the latter, stating that social sustainability means caring for people too, an idea that Yayo Herrero also expressed: taking care of those who visit us at the museum, but also of those who work there. Romero made a strong condemn of the precarious situation suffered by some professional sectors of museums, such as those dedicated to educational services, as well as the inefficiency of internal management processes. “Sustainability means watching over working teams and the proper functioning of museums too,” he said. The challenges currently faced by museums are working to become sustainable facilities and also—and specially—becoming spaces that are committed to people, where everyone feels represented and included.

The museum’s social commitment was also the central idea of the following conference: “**Sustainability in the practice of a local museum. The Ter Museum’s experience**,” by the museum’s director **Carles Garcia**. This museum, which has a clear territorial vocation and a well-established tradition of working in the field of sustainability and commitment to the environment, puts participation, accessibility, education and inclusion at the center of its action, as well as the democratization of memory. It has two lines of work—first, science and technology (it is an industrial museum), and second, the environment and natural sciences (including the Center for the Study of Mediterranean Rivers as an environmental area), which are compatible with other lines linked to retrieval of history, society and memory.

Regarding its program, Carles Garcia explained some of the research, education and awareness-raising actions that they carried out linked to environmental sustainability, like activities to discover biodiversity or to produce renewable energy with turbines. But he also presented other activities related to social sustainability: the recovery of the invisible history of female factory workers, the memory of the Can Garcia apartments built in the 1960s to accommodate a wave of migration from the south of the Peninsula, or the Magnet project of educational partnership aimed at reducing school segregation. These initiatives allowed the museum to forge emotional ties with its community and territory, and so the museum became a space for the recognition and representation of underrepresented groups. Garcia also emphasized the relevant social and educational role of museums, noting that they are platforms with expertise in dissemination and awareness: “We know how to do things that others do not know how to do”. He also stated that museum are solid scientific institutions too, which gives them credibility and rigor in this world dominated by fake news and misinformation. He concluded that museums must work having their community in mind and must serve society.

The next speaker, **Ana Andrés**, head of the education department of the Cerezales Antonino and Cinia Foundation, put the focus once again on the recovery of tradition, the work with the community and the need to revitalize the territory—ideas already expressed by Gemma Carbó—with her talk “**Stockade, bean, bull. The ecology of the community knowledge**.” She explained that these three words (stockade, bean, bull, or *sebe, alubia, buey* in Spanish) capture the essence and mission of the institution. Located in a building built with sustainable and energy-efficient criteria in a mountainous area in the north of the province of León, the Cerezales Foundation is dedicated to the recovery of traditional knowledge related to the land, the transfer of knowledge and ethnoeducation, and the sustainable development of the territory and the community. It works through two lines of action: research and the production and dissemination of activities for the promotion and creation of contemporary art. All workshops and activities are linked to thematic cycles related to the cycles of nature and agricultural work (Herbarium, Fungi, Nubla, Farming), which connect the recovery of tradition with science, art and contemporary creation, vindicating interdisciplinary work.

Ana Andrés also underlined the importance of alliances, emphasizing that her center is not only a cultural center, but it is also an institution integrated into a community that advises them and participates in joint projects. “It is important to be in touch with our neighbors”, she said, “and to abandon paternalistic attitudes of any kind.” The foundation becomes a space designed to re-evaluate the past, to rethink the present, and to build the future. Circling back to the talk by Yayo Herrero, Andrés concluded: “In these complex times of eco-social crisis, the so-called

peripheries can become the new center. A center that cares for, researches and values the work of our neighbors, who treasure knowledge that is essential for sustaining our lives.”

The sixth experience, “**Criteria for sustainability in museums. Maritime Museum of Mallorca,**” was presented by **Albert Forés**, director of this facility. Like Carles Garcia, he conceives the museum as a “territory museum,” a space for connection and union between the different sectors that work in relation to the sea. A space for awareness, public opinion and dialogue. Forés stated that sustainability should be understood as a cross-cutting task that goes beyond environmental sustainability and includes other areas of action. Social sustainability is basic and fundamental and consists of putting people at the center of action, including museum workers. It is necessary to ensure working rights and conditions for all museum personnel, which is a claim expressed by Txema Romero too. Social sustainability therefore begins with caring for staffed teams.

Forés outlined some of the actions taken in different areas in relation to sustainability from this cross-cutting perspective: from social work with the elderly in the neighborhood to the recovery of the memory and maritime tradition, the implementation of measures to improve the physical and cognitive accessibility of the museum (access and furniture, signage, incorporation of sign language, easy reading, magnetic loops, and so on), or the introduction of sustainable criteria in the production of activities and exhibitions (ecodesign). He also presented the decalogue of actions and good practices set in motion by the museum: Blue Week (*Setmana Blava*); conserving maritime heritage; reducing plastic usage; recovering marine vocabulary; caring for the Mediterranean tapeweed; regaining the attention of seafarers, seafaring trades, seafaring women, local fish, and so on. And all this in the same way that the Museum of Rural Life in L’Espluga de Francolí or the Cerezales Foundation use art and artistic creation in their activities to raise awareness about certain topics. Forés thus vindicated the educational and sensitizing power of art and artistic expression: “Art reaches areas that research doesn’t, art excites and awakens feelings,” he concluded.

The last intervention, “**A history of sustainability and creativity,**” was conducted by **Elisa Hernández de Pablo**, head of the environment department of The Burning House or La Casa Encendida in Madrid. She spoke about programmatic and institutional sustainability and underlined two aspects: the “multilayer” concept when addressing issues related to sustainability, that is, that sustainability cross-disciplinarily affects several areas of the museum (waste management, energy consumption, design of furniture and used materials, contracting services, and so on), and the importance of creativity in working and developing sustainable actions. “You have to be creative to be sustainable,” she said. Creativity is necessary to innovate and to be able to continue advancing towards sustainable development. Moreover, we also need strong leadership at the forefront of change, managing it.

All actions at The Burning House revolve around four areas—Culture, Solidarity, Environment, and Education—that work cross-disciplinarily at programming activities to raise awareness, communicate and educate on the environment, linking to current issues that challenge the public and raise discussion on how do we want to inhabit our territory. They program both “macro-” (e.g. international meetings and forums on climate change) and “microactivities,” which are aimed at the local public (exchanges, workshops and courses, outings to nature, the “Orchard and City” cycle, and more). Like the other speakers, Hernández emphasized the importance of becoming a meeting and leading center for the public and highlighted the role of her institution in decoding and reinterpreting scientific topics and making them accessible to everybody: “Although we are a cultural center in the middle of the city, our role is to connect with each other and connect with nature.”



And now what? Towards the construction of a new culture based on sustainability

The different presentations at the conference and the final debate showed that, in this holistic dimension of sustainability, the social action of museums has become of paramount importance. Museums have gone from looking at the past to talking about the present and wondering about the future. And in this paradigm shift they ceased to be a passive actor, dedicated to the preservation of the past—now they play an important role in building the future society.

Regarding the social dimension of museums, speakers emphasized the importance of their role in educating and raising awareness in a generation of a culture based on sustainability—their ability to raise awareness and to generate critical views capable of producing small changes makes these facilities real agents of change and social transformation.

But it was also evident that this social transformation cannot be achieved without the complicity of the community understood not only as the recipient of our actions, which must be inclusive and sustainable in all dimensions, but also as an active actor in the generation of new proposals aimed at building this new social reality. And for this community participation to be possible, it is essential to seek alliances and generate links, as well as shared values. Then, these links, based on solidarity and the pursue of a common benefit, must lead us to a new, more resilient, supportive and sustainable culture.

According to sociologist Eric Klinenberg, “building shared values requires shared spaces,” and museums, and especially local museums, thanks to their closeness to the community, their evocative capacity to build models and strengthen the sense of belonging, to transport us to the past and project ourselves into the future and ultimately to connect with our own emotions, can certainly become ideal spaces to generate and establish these links, not only with the community but also with the territory and nature, with the planet.

Being able to generate these links is, therefore, the main challenge we face in museums, and from the Local Museums Network of the Barcelona Provincial Council we will continue to work on the generation of shared complicities, spaces and projects to weave networks and communities. This is the basis for building a new society that is more sustainable, egalitarian and respectful to the environment and, ultimately, to ourselves.

Links:

All the information of the conference and the videos of the speakers is available at:

<https://www.diba.cat/en/web/opc/-/xxxiii-jornades-museus-locais>

McGhie, HA (2019). *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals*. Curating Tomorrow, UK:

<https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/museums-and-the-sustainable-development-goals-2019.pdf>.

McGhie, HA (2021). *Mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals in Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums*. Curating Tomorrow, UK:

<https://curatingtomorrow236646048.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/mainstreaming-the-sustainable-development-goal-s-in-galleries-libraries-archives-and-museums-curating-tomorrow-2021.pdf>.