

Panel Discussion: The future of technology in museums

Title: Dealing with Difficult history: the ‘Ledra Palace’ project

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Museums and Difficult History

During the last couple of decades, discussions among museum professionals regarding the role of museums and the form these should take in the future have multiplied and taken various directions. One of them focused on the rise of the post-modernist or the re-invented museum, as opposed to the modernist or traditional museum. According to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, a main difference between the modernist and the post-modernist museum is that ‘the great collecting phase of museums is over, and the museum concentrates more on the use of the objects rather than on further accumulation, while it is additionally interested in intangible heritage. Furthermore, rather than focusing on display as the major form of communication, the post-museum chooses the exhibition and events instead which enable it to incorporate many voices and many perspectives’ (2000, p.152). As a result, she argues, ‘where the modernist museum was (and is) imagined as a building, the museum in the future may be imagined as a process or an experience’ (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, π.152).

Although this was written almost twenty years ago and the discussion regarding the future museum has advanced and evolved since then, this stance has influenced museology and contributed to the transition to the post-museum, the museum as an experience. In the last 50 years or so we witnessed a paradigm shift in museum related theory. According to Gail Anderson (2012)¹, the traditional museum is a collection-driven institution, an information provider that constitutes the voice of authority and focuses on the past. It is a stable institution that provides a re-assuring, usually ethnocentric narrative. On the other hand, the reinvented museum is an audience-focused institution that includes multiple viewpoints, facilitates knowledge and strives to be relevant and forward-looking. Recently, Janes and Sandell (2019) talked about museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change. An activist museum is, as they argue, a mindful museum. They underline that museums as social

¹ REINVENTING THE MUSEUM TOOL

This tool is an excerpt from Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift, edited by Gail Anderson of Gail Anderson & Associates, and published by AltaMira Press in 2011. It is a dramatically revised version from the first edition of Reinventing the Museum, originally published in 2004.

institutions have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed as well as to resist and critically re-imagine the status quo (Janes & Sandell, 2019, p.6).

Most museums dealing with difficult heritage adopt a seemingly neutral, authoritarian, and thus more traditional and 'safer' approach. However, more recently, certain museums are increasingly eager to include multiple narratives and voices, acknowledge the social and political construction of knowledge, take a stance towards a difficult subject matter, and thus embrace uncertainty and become 'unsafe' spaces of exploration, critical analysis, and social responsibility (Stylianou-Lambert & Bounia, 20018).

We are interested how the post-modern, re-invented - and now activist - museum can deal with issues of 'difficult history' or 'difficult heritage'. According to literature, 'difficult heritage' is a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity (Macdonald, 2009, p.1). We might say that 'difficult heritage' is another term for dissonant, negative, or contested heritage but, as Joshua Samuel explains, all terms refer more or less to the same thing, namely the challenge of what to do with the material remains of an historical period, site, or event that is today generally perceived as problematic for one reason or another (Samuels, 2015, p.113).

The 'Ledra Palace' project

Having these in mind, the Museum Lab at RISE Centre of Excellence, has embarked on a project that aspires, through the creation of a re-invented – or activist if we dare say- museum, to deal with issues of 'difficult history' in an effective and inclusive way. In this effort, technology could play a vital part. More precisely, the 'Ledra Palace Museum' project deals with the representation of difficult history in museums and investigates ways in which technology can help to overcome any obstacles this entails. It is actually expected to give museums the methodology and the tools to host and promote artwork, exhibits, stories or exhibitions that deal with issues of contested history Especially in countries dealing with social or political conflict, such as Cyprus, it can be very challenging for museums to represent different layers of contested heritage and even help visitors negotiate difficult heritage.

Cyprus, a small island in the Mediterranean was under the suzerainty of several foreign rules until 1960 when it became an independent, sovereign country. This, along with the fact that its population was consisted of 80% Greeks and 20% Turks who were attached to their respective motherlands instead of focusing on creating a unified national identity, make Cyprus a classic example of a country with troubled and contested history. If we could think of one building that best exemplifies the troubled recent history of Cyprus, that would be the Ledra Palace Hotel. Once praised as the jewel of Cypriot modernity in the heart of the capital, now it is a crumbling dwelling located in the buffer zone between the southern and northern parts of the island and partly used by the United Nations Peacekeeping Force.

The 70-year old hotel has fallen into despair and reminds nothing of its glorious past. Inspired and founded in 1949 by three wealthy men who owned the Cyprus Hotel company and designed by the German-Jewish architect Benjamin Gunsberg, the Ledra Palace Hotel soon became the pride of Nicosia, the first choice for esteemed visitors, journalists, official meetings, general assemblies, balls and social events, art exhibitions, concerts, etc. Through its short-lived history as a hotel, the Ledra Palace witnessed and inevitably became part and parcel of the island's turbulent history – from the beginning of the 1950s until the tragic events of 1974. What is more, it continued having this role even after the division of the island, although not as an operating hotel but as a meeting place, as it accommodated the most significant political meetings taken place in Cyprus for the potential solution of the Cyprus problem: from the bicomunal meetings between Clerides and Denktash at the end of 1960s

until the most recent meetings between President Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Acinci a couple of years ago. It is considered a place which can be seen from multiple perspectives: for many it symbolizes conflict and division, while for others, peace and reconciliation. It is a place that had always been oscillating between contradictory notions: militarization and opulence, darkness and virility, meeting point for nationalist demonstrators and meeting point for peace activists and many more (Demetriou, 2015; Demetriou, 2012). All these, inevitably render the Ledra Palace Hotel a part of the island's difficult history.

Collaborative and participatory approaches

Today, despite its decadence, Ledra Palace remains a beautiful and interesting place with a history worth to be told. Our aim is, through an extensive archival research, as well as a layered collection of testimonials, to 'revive' the history of the Ledra Palace in a more multivocal and multilayered way. Since this cannot be done on the actual site of the hotel, we will try to create a museum 'in the wild' with the use of interactive media and new technologies. This project will therefore become an example of a museum becoming an imaginary place where, without the practical and political restrictions of a physical museum, we can re-imagine the future of museums that deal with difficult heritage.

In their majority, museums and cultural heritage sites established in Cyprus, with their practices and main narratives, usually reinforce either Greek Cypriot or Turkish Cypriot ethnonational identities (Stylianou-Lambert & Bounia, 2016). Therefore, they perpetuate the building up of cultural boundaries instead of facilitating peace building, in an island which is divided for more than 40 years despite its small size and its limited natural and financial resources. We will try to distance this project from this notion and adopt a different, and more integrated stand. This project is mostly based on the notion that museums dealing with difficult heritage can use technology to facilitate participatory and collaborative approaches, and actively engage different groups and communities (especially excluded, marginalized or silenced ones) in order to tell contested histories. We are interested in the co-creation of content and narratives that influence collection and archiving practices. This is where deep mapping could help. In general terms, deep mapping is a 'collection of interconnected and intertwined context and location dependant data that can help us build a narrative, specific to a place'(Roberts et al, 2016, p.3). It may integrate stories, photographs, images, maps, and memories so as to create a 'deep' and multilayered narrative of a place or space. In the Ledra Palace Museum project we focus on how technology can enhance the process of deep mapping and the collection and display of information (textual, audio and visual) from archival sources as well as from participants from different social strata and ethnic backgrounds. Crowdsourcing, interviews and testimonials are therefore essential to the project. We aim to project not merely the official history of the place, but untold stories of people who experienced the Ledra Palace Hotel in one way or another: as guests, as audience in a wedding, concert or show, as participants in conferences, business or work meetings, or as employees. These stories are usually neglected for the sake of the political, diplomatic or military history of the place. These voices need to be heard and since this is not possible through the traditional way, we will try to achieve with the use of emerging technologies.

Our Museum

It is important though to admit from the beginning that in our project, the museum does not claim to have the right answers, does not adopt an authoritative voice and recognizes that the socio-political environment of an institution influences its narratives. However, as, Janes and Sandell argue, museums are civil society organisations (distinct from state, family and market) and both generate and contribute to the norms, networks and shared values and trust that constitute social capital (2019, p.5). It is in this sense that the Ledra Palace Museum distances itself from traditional museum tactics and chooses to adopt bottom-up collaborative

approaches in gathering the information needed, so there is enough space for different stories to be told and various emotions and memories to be shared. It is led by an openness – an essential ingredient of museum activism (Janes & Sandell, p.9) - , for it aims to foster mutual cultural understanding between the different communities in the island and between different groups of the population. It could also be said that this project can be seen as part of a new effort to ‘decolonise’ museums as a way of decolonising society’ (Das, 2019). Our aim is to create, with the help of technology, an alternative museum aspiring to contribute towards overcoming the difficulties of presenting contested history, and through that give voice to unheard stories and contribute towards social cohesion in the island.

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