

MHST501 – Essay

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Approaches to Indigenous Museum-scapes

Ecomuseums as a sustainable model of engagement

The interrelationship between museum institutions and indigenous people has seen a legacy of suppression through objectification. Indigenous knowledge has been not only pushed aside in museum theory and practice, but aggressively silenced, and traditions of the West and Enlightenment ideals embraced. A new ‘paradigm’ towards indigenous museology is allowing for cultural centres, museums and archives to reconsider these problems and transform the idea of collective memory into ways that better serve their respective communities. At the core of indigenous cultural centres is the community which, in turn, fosters a decentralising of hierarchical collection management. Community collaboration and ecomuseology are increasing access to knowledge, which practice forms of resistance and look towards independence. In this essay I will be exploring how the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), Tjibaou Cultural Centre and the Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys Ecomuseum each adopt and apply museum theory to practice and observe the discourse around each of these spaces or museum-scapes.

The museum is an ‘inventive, globally and locally translated form, no longer anchored to its modern origins in Europe.’¹ Understanding museums as a site of conscience holds them to a standard of fostering critical and democratic conversations about their role in educating the public and within civic engagement. Contemporary museology hopes to stand as a beacon against colonial systems by exercising organisational techniques that reflect the geographical importance and perspectives of their respective communities. The NMAI as a national museum for the ‘public’ and implicated with the Smithsonian and the Tjibaou Cultural Centre with the French government, sit in a complex place because of this. While smaller, local museums such as the VCC and the Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys Ecomuseum are

concerned with authenticity on an intimate scale, their daily practice is inherently interwoven with and meets the needs of their community. This makes for an enhancement of the possibilities for local, social justice and universal human rights for museums that embody collaborative participation rather than surface-level co-curation.

It is important to observe indigenous museological practice on all scales to gain a comprehensive understanding of this multifaceted environment. Much of this shift toward the 'integral' museum was generated by the 'identity crisis' of museum professionals during the 1970s spurred on by social activism and resistance against Western museums.² From this came a growing awareness of the responsibility and accountability of museum staff to dictate and curate the participatory experience within museums which in turn contributed to the process of deaccessioning by museums with substantial collections, and a burgeoning of indigenous museums outside the mainstream sector. Since this time, there has been a substantial rise in the use of terms 'decolonisation' and 'indigenisation' within memory institutions. However the term 'indigenous museums' too must be treated with caution and nuance so as to respect the specific and distinctive paradigms within each community and culture. For the purposes of this essay, I will use these terms as hermeneutic forms of interpretation rather than specification.

Within museum-scapes, principles of tradition, external recognition and cultural renewal are fundamental when approaching engagement. One particular research project explored community collaboration focussed on the Pacific and explored the potential that indigenous cultural centres hold when working within cultural frameworks and practises in Oceania.³ De Villiers provides a relevant explanation of the changes in museum convention, namely the shift in control as being key to understanding how an indigenous cultural centre operates. This research found that participants were actively engaging with each archive in the ways aforementioned, with the purpose of either 'accessing or presenting' cultural knowledge or to 'regain cultural knowledge' and thus allowing each organisation to further 'community outreach and accessibility' through digitisation and exposure of archives in the future.⁴

Kreps praises the contributions that non-Western or indigenous museums have made to the museum sector despite previously being slept-on? and dismissed. Indigenous methods of conserving and preserving, Kreps states, are comprehensive in that they protect and uphold the values of an object or memory.⁵ The Women's Culture Project (WCP) at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre extends the scope of the museum into rural communities, empowering female indigenous knowledge to be channelled into the database, while keeping focus within their

local environment. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre was established in 1955 and in 1991 the WCP was founded by a group of women seeking their contributions to society and ‘kastom’ to be recognised both locally and internationally.⁶ Kastom can be understood as indigenous knowledge systems, and WCP’s consistent fieldwork programme has further explored female kastom in Vanuatu. This has seen advancements for rural communities whereby the ‘rhythms of life’ are recorded and processed, forming a channel of information that enables kastom to be actively engaged with. Moreover, the WCP has ignited change for women’s rights and involvement in political issues as well as introducing kastom into Vanuatu’s social education and public conscience. This example proves how the process of normalisation and integration of a bottom-up model is central to community engagement; an externally motivated project with the same intention would have produced worldly different results.

The exhibition *Kaxlaya Gvilas: The Ones Who Uphold the Laws of Our Ancestors*, at the NMAI in 2000 displayed the arts of Heiltsuk people. The process of collaboration in this exhibition was successful, and canonised through the concept of the post-museum.⁷ This was in many ways a response to prior critique of the museum’s treatment of its collection, dubbed an ‘attic’ of the nation and closely affiliated with the Smithsonian, known for its Eurocentric origins.⁸ The co-management between museums and source communities regarding curation, design and installation guided a ‘realignment of power’ attained through a ‘redistribution of power’—both of which are key to collaboration within museum-scapes. Another turning point in this process is the intention behind collaboration and community involvement; the shift from postmodernism to human rights, one shaped by an understanding of knowledge as property holds great influence over process and practice.

Collaborative exhibits demand mutual responsibility to educate and erase the tendency to prioritise written knowledge over legitimate, oral histories, intangible cultural heritage and alternate forms of information sharing. The lesson here is to narrow the hierarchical gap before it begins, when approaching collaborative projects, to reach a communal understanding of what is being shared.⁹

Collection management runs the risk of categorisation and defining boundaries. It often distances the collection from its community, creating a cyclical dichotomy of gatekeeping. The understanding of archive and collections by society and vice versa vary greatly from person to person, culture to culture. Understanding the museum as a ‘site of conscience’ holds museums to a standard of fostering critical and democratic conversations about their role in educating the public and within ‘civic engagement’. One way to consider this shift is

through the framework archive-concepts; these are person, country, ceremony and record.¹⁰ Sully provides an extensive list of conservation guidelines around the world that have adapted to restorative practice, namely a shift to appreciating the integrity of an object and the community that surrounds it, rather than the desire to preserve it as an inanimate entity. ‘With minimal intervention, authenticity and reversibility’, Sully argues, ‘the concept of “object integrity” provides a framework for conservation decision making. This refers to maintaining the “physical,” “contextual,” and “conceptual” integrity of objects within heritage collections.’¹¹ A relevant, locally-specific approach to conservation such as these increases community engagement and the longevity of access and dissemination of knowledge associated with material culture.

Rosoff explores ways in which Native American knowledge has been implemented into the NMAI. The museum collections of human remains lacked an accurate inventory due to a generally dismissive attitude, one in favour of artefacts collected at the same time. In May of 1995, NMAI staff undertook a survey which would later identify 524 human remains, a significant number of which were returned to their source communities.¹² NMAI has left the identification or categorisation of ‘sacred’ objects to Native people through repatriation and continued access to treat and care for sacred objects at their will. This relationship between tribal delegations and museum staff makes for increased transparency, access and cultural integrity through a ‘merging’ of conservatory and traditional care. The risk posed by conservation work is stripping an object bare of its meaning and story in order to understand it in its prototypical state. In doing so, the nature of the object changes—it becomes devoid of the qualities of its meaning-making process. Equally when objects are physically shifted, digitised, loaned and handled their status can alter. While there will always be a need to archive an object in some capacity, this *can* be done in ways that honour the respective cultural practice by consultation and collaboration with its audience. Caution must be taken in people-based conservation not to rank objects in order of importance, but rather to find a balance between educating a community and practising like that community to avoid gate-keeping knowledge and to foster a reciprocal relationship, for an object to serve its multifaceted purpose of being kept in a museum.

Diane Losche examines how the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia, on a completely different scale in Oceania, navigates ways in which the museum is a reminder of trauma, violence and settler colonialism. Losche questions whether elements of Western museum convention are suitable, if at all, in the Pacific. Whilst the centre stands as a symbol for Kanak culture, and a reclamation of both tangible and intangible heritage connected to its

community, it is tied up with the sentiment of national sovereign identity, funded by the French government and therefore holding violent implications.¹³ Displays at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, like the NMAI, are funded by irrefutably fraught stakeholders. This in many ways affects display and collection management; the participatory experience and object integrity are ultimately altered. Both archive concepts and object integrity could be used in these museum-scapes to, rather than pause, strive to continue community access and involvement with the meaning making of collective memory. These processes of object integrity move away from stasis collection management and towards change, a form of facilitation rather than designation.

One particular theory that defies categorisation whilst simultaneously embracing, absorbing and sustaining community collaboration and archival methods is that of the ecomuseum. Ecomuseums are concerned with their specific place dimension, with a spatial time scape rather than the enclosing of nature. This turn in museology developed with the rise of Western environmentalism, namely the interrelationship of ourselves with the natural world and history—fundamental indigenous concepts that had been previously dismissed. The Ecomuseum was established in 1984, at which time there was an increased attempt at defining the ‘boundary of territory’ of the museum reinforcing that the museum must be steered by the community, within the environment, which resulted in the MACDAB checklist.¹⁴ This ecomuseum checklist, Davis argues, is open to interpretation, without the limitations of built structure; the museum can be utilised for contextualisation rather than ‘musealisation’ of the transmission of objects from one space to another.¹⁵

In the West we consider the environment as separate to ourselves, as a result, structural museums exist and are defined as a space (not part of us or the environment) on the outside. The purpose of the centre is to surround and permeate its community rather than being placed at the top. It must be noted however, that the terminology of the ecomuseum is deeply Eurocentric, and the framework leaves little room for non-translatable indigenous concepts. Ecomuseums intertwine a sense of connectedness to the land, as without categorisation or theoretical barriers, this model of museum opens up a world of interpretation, intangible heritage and ‘experiential’ perspectives. Ecomuseums can ebb and flow with the times and spatial worlds, their primary function is that of ‘collective’ or ‘national’ memory, one that submits the past to the present and vice versa.¹⁶ Davis stresses the importance of local specificity in this project, to avoid the danger of hindering authenticity in the sense that a broader gap can develop between top and bottom structures.

Canada has seen a flurry of activity around environmental museology, ensuring museums operate as they wish. The Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys Ecomuseum in British Columbia is an apt example of this model. During the 1980s, Heritage Canada Foundation and British Columbia Heritage Trust collaborated on a project that would honour the ‘forest legacy’ to raise awareness around the condition of the land—roaming exhibitions, signs, routes and panels. This museum has increased public contribution concerning collective heritage and has resulted in a ‘renewed sense of local pride’ through boat-making workshops, oral-history projects and regeneration.¹⁷ The Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys project engaged the community at an early stage and ensured there was a comprehensive understanding of the ecomuseum before decisions were made, the project subtitle reading, “It’s you, me and where we live.”¹⁸ The collaboration with existing programmes such as the Heritage Regions Programme in Canada and the newly formed initiatives has increased both scope and support, and also fostered a sense of hope for the longevity and success of the ecomuseum.¹⁹

It could be argued that the Women’s Culture Project at the VCC is in many ways an ecomuseum, collecting kastom by those who practice it without institutional intervention. The interdisciplinary model has worked well in these instances due to a process that covered all bases of engagement, entrusting community members to make informed calls on the activities of the museum. Because each ecomuseum is defined by and through its community and environment, its definition is open-ended, it is a space for cultural heritage, collective memory and regeneration to be shared. An ecomuseum functions as a museum without the limitation of walls or physical structure, it replaces ‘expert staff’ with ‘population’, creating a transferral of power over to the collective rather than being dictated by governance.²⁰ This model is useful in instances where ‘intangible cultural heritage’ is unsuited to live in a museum. Instead, these practices can be archived through collective memory and be adopted into a broader structure that allows them to both respond to and be received by their surrounding community.

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Cowichan and Chemainus Valleys Ecomuseum have been able to flourish due to their tight-knit knowledge networks and sustained comprehensive outreach programmes. Community engagement with collections and management at museums informs display conventions, this decentralises structures in place that are remnants of Western museum protocol and increases access to those who share ancestral connection with them. The notion of translation and object integrity within engagement at the NMAI and Tjibaou Cultural Centre is useful in understanding how the

hybridisation of the role of curators, the role of the community, and the role of cultural heritage can become or restrict a meaningful enriching form of museum practice. The definition of ‘community’ must be lucid and flexible in order for cohesive collaboration to take place. A restrictive definition can be limiting in instances where the community is inaccessible; whether this be in the form of language barriers, intergenerational trauma, displacement or marginalisation.

In conclusion, I have argued that the utilitarian nature of conventional museum collection management is exhausted because it lacked consultation with its audiences. The existence of source community-led museum-scapes reviewed in this essay exemplifies the potential and promise for ecomuseums to thrive, if not override a national cultural centre, through sustained resilience and a distributed network and wealth of knowledge. Due to the undulating nature of ecomuseums, there is no concrete definition other than integration or new museology, and it counteracts the possibility for Western and externally-motivated museums to be suffocating. This model allows for a broader sense of self, both collectively and individually, through democratic, identity, social and cultural prioritisation. I would also argue that the presence of colonial institutions within indigenous museum-scapes requires a process of ‘decolonisation’ rather than ‘indigenisation’—while the ecomuseum, in its assignment of authority to the community, allows an empowering and distinctive method of cultural revitalisation and assertion within the wider understanding of artefacts as being purely material objects and of indigenous communities being attributed to an object, by merely a label.

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- ⁴ De Villiers, *Archives of Indigenous Cultural Centres of the Oceanic Region*, 202.
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