

EDITED BY SALVATORE ZINGALE

DESIGN

CASE STUDIES, PROJECT
EXPERIENCES, COMMUNICATION
CRITICISM

MEETS ALTERITY

ESSAYS BY

ANNA ANZANI

GIOVANNI BAULE

VALERIA BUCCHETTI

DANIELA CALABI

ELENA CARATTI

FRANCESCA CASNATI

GABRIELE COLOMBO

TOMMASO ELLI

SILVIA D. FERRARIS

VALENTINA FERRERI

LAURA GALLUZZO

BEATRICE GOBBO

VALENTINA MANCHIA

FRANCESCA MATTIOLI

MICHELA ROSSI

MASSIMO SCHINCO

VIRGINIA TASSINARI

RAFFAELLA TROCCHIANESI

FRANCESCO VERGANI

CRISTINA VOTO

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Edited by Salvatore Zingale

Design Meets Alterity

Case Studies, Project Experiences, Communication Criticism

FrancoAngeli 

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Otherness Museums

Designing New Cultural Experiences beyond Thematic and Cultural Borders

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to give a reading and a critical interpretation of the ways design-driven projects (in terms of approach and language instruments) stage themes and contents linked to the field of museography and exhibition design.

Here you will find the description of three case studies on cultural and context differences (*Storie Plurali – Plural Stories*, Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli – Ozzano Taro), on social fragility and discrimination (*Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* – Mexico City), and on differences connected to physical and mental health (*Museo Laboratorio della mente* – Roma), in which strengths and weaknesses are highlighted in order to investigate in what terms design becomes responsible, bearer and interpreter of paradigms and jargons designed to “represent” such a complex and articulated issue. The key assumption is that a museum is a place where inside and outside do not exist as there is only a *through*; museums experience the same contradictions of the world they represent.

2. Otherness Museums

Any piece of heritage – be it ancient or contemporary, tangible or intangible – is handed down, told, given back, as an expression of a way of preserving, interpreting and communicating; it shows the difference among the many “worlds of meaning” and focuses on the dialogue process of representation, which takes shape in an active comparison of that which is handed down.

In the cultural experience of an exhibited “object” – or the content presented inside the museum – three different levels of meaning can be found. First, there are ideas, values, the purposes of the cultures from which the object comes. Second, there is the curator’s interpretation. Finally, there

are the viewers' points of view with their personal legacy, knowledge and experiences. This complex stratification of meanings is added to the necessary abstraction that the object undergoes when it is decontextualized in order to be inserted in a museum space; this "distance" determines its *alterity*. The latter concept refers to the theory according to which the founding element of every piece of knowledge is the knowledge of the *difference* arising from the relationship that the subject establishes with the surrounding world (Lusini 2004). We should not forget that exhibiting any type of content in a museum means carrying out a decontextualization action; even more so when museums are about cultural identity, which is often stratified, complex and marked by migrations. In this type of museums, the "place" is the content that needs exhibiting. Here, by "place" we do not mean a definite space but rather, we are hinting the meaning given by Tuan (1977): a place is an entity built and rebuilt by the social representations of human beings, an entity communicating the social and relational life of the people that live – in various ways – in it. From this perspective, it is important to recognise that there is a dialectical relation between the concept of "place" and "space" (Relph 1976), just as dialectical and dialogic is the model of museum we tend to with the idea not only of showing the multifaceted identity of a culture but also of making people understand it through the interaction with the contents: triggering curiosity and questions, giving the possibility of expressing concepts and putting people in touch.

In this essay, the topic of alterity in museums takes two shapes: on the one hand, the problem of representation – representing migrant objects and stories in a strongly characterised territorial context, representing mental illness and the imagery connected to it, representing the identity of the culture of a people with all its migrations and multicultural stratifications –; on the other hand, offering an open and dialogic experience to museum-goers belonging to cultures which are different from the one narrated in the museum itself. In both cases, the aim is to translate and "stage" complexity. Exhibition design – together with the curator's project – takes responsibility for the activity of selection, translation and interpretation of messages that are proposed on different levels of museological and museographic narration. Which narrative structures? Which cultural experience models? Which language registers?

3. Plural Stories

Cultural Alterity – Temporal Alterity. “Migrant” Objects and Stories

Material culture is often represented by *identity objects*, i.e., particularly significant objects coming from the culture of a people which are capable of becoming intermediaries of traditions, rituals, symbology specific to a certain community. In this case, the curatorial and design project takes responsibility for the communication at different levels of meaning, accompanying “foreign” users into a world that is far from theirs, their culture and their social, historical, political experience.

In this study, the museum curatorial and design project aims at putting the historical object at the service of social inclusion. This is a double effort: bringing back to life the function of long-forgotten objects from a past time, and bringing its meaning beyond the country’s borders.

The dizzying collection of objects from the 1900s rural and everyday culture floods the simple architecture of the *Museo del Quotidiano* – Museum of Everyday Objects – *Ettore Guatelli* (Ozzano Taro, Parma). Guatelli was interested in objects as a testament of the history of humankind, but he, was above all, fascinated by the infinite stories that each object preserves at a social, individual and territorial level.

This awareness and the willingness of this territorial museum to work on the leverage of intercultural integration have led to conceive the project “Plural Stories. The Museo Guatelli, oggetti e storie di vita” – objects and stories of life, developed within the European project *Map for ID* – Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue.¹ The project starts off from the objects hosted in the museum, from their identity and the narrative potential of each one of them, with the aim of building renewed stories through theatre workshops involving performers, writers, locals and immigrants. One of the rationales underlying the narration has its roots in the gestural memory around the object, which highlights both its material and immaterial value. Performance and narration intertwine in an interesting combination of past traditions and reinterpretations of the present. From a spatial point

¹ In 2008-2009, Museo Ettore Guatelli took part in *Map for ID – Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue*, within which it realised the itinerary/laboratory “Plural Stories. Il Museo Guatelli, oggetti e storie di vita”. The initiative arose from the collaboration between Associazione Clío ‘92 and the Board of Directors of the *Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli*.

of view, each surface (walls, tables, stands) in the architectural space is densely occupied by the object landscape of the collector, so much so that it renders the geography of an era through detailed compositions (mostly by typology and shape), almost three-dimensional tattoos that erase the need of any possible additional set-up artefact and enable the visitor to plunge into a decorative chiasm where the ornament is simply a way for the multitude of objects to seize the space. If material features are implicitly narrated in this type of exhibition, the immaterial value of the objects comes to life starting with their dramatised narration, it becomes voice, gesture, performance, story, and – by enhancing the local identity – it goes beyond the geographical perimeter toward intercultural communication, generating migrant stories from the object to the territory.

The project is aimed at both methodological-strategic and operational implemental objectives:

- Activating intercultural dynamics in a difficult territorial context through literacy policies and by opening the museum to a “non-customary” public.
- Teaching adult migrants with no formal education to learn, interpret and conceptualise material and immaterial elements which take heritage value both with reference to the culture of origin and that of the place of residence.
- Encouraging the recipients (native and migrant women) to be aware of their and other people’s cultural identity in an inclusive perspective and to consequently adopt a responsible behaviour in the civic context towards other individuals and the local heritage.
- Teaching the recipients to act in their workplaces as mediators for the museum heritage in an intercultural perspective.

The meetings focus on the recovery of the expertise and knowledge connected to the household and work dimension, and the identification of the objects and stories that come back from them, and which have represented the core of the workshop through a theatre experience. The narration project is based on the recovery of traditional stories that are then reinterpreted by the ten women involved (two Italians, eight foreigners) giving life to new stories linked with their places of origin. The theatre

paradigm – which historically comes from the act playing games – enabled a strong interaction among the people involved, as it is based on the sharing of gestures and performances triggered by stimuli and influences inspired by the objects exhibited in the museum itself.

The project ended with a theatre show curated by FestinaLente Teatro, “Plural Stories: from hand to hand”, in which the women performed their stories through a verbal and gestural language aimed at engaging the public.² The positive outcomes of the project can be summarised in three levels of intervention which focus on the museum as the “new” place of cultural mediation:

- *Open culture museum*: the encounter among people from different cultural contexts generating a new opening to the territorial context of reference.
- *Social Network Museum*: the activation of the relationship between subjects and realities until then unfamiliar to the life of the museum (local administrations, cultural associations, theatres...) with the aim of starting collaborations for future projects.
- “*Relay*” *museum*: the idea is to create a virtuous cycle where the women involved can, in their turn, become guardians of new knowledge and start new initiatives as cultural mediators; for instance, they could guide tours with an intercultural taste addressed to local communities (not only for people of foreign origin but also for locals).

4. Museo Memoria y Tolerancia

Social Alterity. Difference, Memory and Inclusion

Social responsibility should be one of the main objectives of a museum. In an era – such as the contemporary one – where we put the focus on human connections and social ties, it is no longer sufficient to guarantee the preservation and exhibition of collections, but it is all the more urgent to make relationships easier and trigger discussion and participation.

² <<http://www.comune.torino.it/museiscuola/esperienze/migranti/2009-fondazione-museo-et-tore-guatelli-ozzano-taro-.shtml>>.

Obviously, this aspect is now more than present, even in digital museums. This is the case of the blog *The Inluseum* which advances new ways of being a museum through dialogue, community building and collaborative practices related to inclusion in museums; it is also the case of *Museums, Politics and Power*, which aims to promote and disseminate conferences, workshops and roundtables on these topics; and of *Social Justice Alliance of Museums*, developed thanks to the intuition of the National Museums of Liverpool. The Alliance promotes the dissemination of collective equity, encouraging at different levels including through the emancipation and full involvement of local communities (Ciaccheri 2015). It was created out of the growing recognition of the importance of social value of museums and its impact on the public. The aim of this museum network is to find a collective voice and promote social impact of museums, exchange knowledge and work together on joint initiatives.

Museums are questioning themselves on their ethical role by taking up a prospective and complex vision in the attempt of putting themselves at the centre of the current social debate. Offering cultural programs of a certain type means entering the social and cultural debate taking on responsibilities, even of a political nature. Museums – with their collections – offer a form of narration and representation of a certain model of reality albeit through an artist's eyes – in the case of art museums – or through specific technical, historical and critical points of views – in the case of science, technology and anthropological museums. Therefore, questioning oneself on the meaning and effect of these narrations and representations is fundamental, as well as defining the explicit contextualization of the curator's choices.

The *Museo Memoria y Tolerancia* certainly intends to be a place of reflection, discussion, and friction with reference to socially crucial topics. The wing of the museum devoted to *memory* tells the social political story of some of the peoples involved in wars and subjected to genocides and deportation (Armenia, Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Guatemala, Darfur); while the one devoted to *tolerance* tackles current problems connected to many types of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices; the female condition, diversity and inclusion, with a focus on the Mexican people and the civil rights codified in this context. Here the concept of alterity is present in each of these themes, precisely because the value of tolerance is based on the acceptance of diversity.

The goals of the museum involve different strategic levels:

- Inviting new generations to a healthy and balanced coexistence in the context where they live.
- Offering visitors an opportunity for debate in order to invite them to introspection and questioning possible discriminating and pre-conceptual attitudes.
- Raising awareness of the condition of the most fragile categories.
- Promoting the value of respect and tolerance.

In this case, the museum offers a narration implying curatorial and design work carried out in extreme synergy. Indeed, the setting is built mostly with multimedia materials and interactive devices envisaging different types of use: in particular, the users are immersed in collective and personal stories; they are asked to question themselves on issues presuming social friction, to express their position through interactive systems. In cases such as this one, exhibition design is both the mediator of participation processes and that which formalises the set-up devices aimed at giving voice to the curatorial system.

5. Museo Laboratorio della Mente (*Mind Workshop Museum*) Mental Alterity. Experiences and stories on the margin

Its ethical and social role assumes that the museum is a bearer of stories and not a container of collections. When the stories are about life, suffering, mental illness, the narration of the exhibition not only has the task of illustrating a content, but also has that – more difficult – of empathically communicating intangible features. This is the task of narration museums (Cirifino F., Giardina Papa et al. 2011): “staging” the intangible features of a topic, be it historical, social or monographic.

Here below we will describe a particularly significant case: the *Mind Workshop Museum*³ (designed by Studio Azzurro). It is a space especially conceived and realised to be experiential and performance-oriented, with the aim to document the history of mental hospitals and elaborate a constant

³ <<https://www.museodellamente.it/museo-laboratorio-della-mente/>>.

reflection on the health/illness paradigm, alterity, social inclusion, treatment and culture politics and the engagement of communities.

This museum looks back at the history of Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, from its foundation as a hospital for needy foreigners and mentally ill people up to its final closure after about 500 years of activity as a mental hospital. In the scenario of the exhibition itinerary, the visitor's body becomes the privileged and active means for understanding the minor and often forgotten stories, events and transformations of these places intended for treating mental illness, as well as the history and relationships inscribed in them.

The centrality of the body in the interpretation of mental illness is developed through physical places created and built around the physical and psychic conditions of mental illness and the "ways of feeling" of the mentally ill: speaking to the wall, face expressions, the closed posture of the body and some behaviours such as swinging, pointing the elbows on the table, the hands on the ears, the head bent and the eyes lowered and looking inside.

The itinerary is organised as a sensory narrative in which the content (tangible and intangible) and its setting appear as a single entity. The narrative starts with the section "Entering Outside, Exiting Inside", a sort of oxymoron which immediately puts visitors before the tragedy experienced by the patients committed because of their way of looking and their actions. A set of eyes observe those who come in: it is a slow and relentless series of photos of patients whose visual horizon is a further threshold beyond the physical one, is a personal, private threshold. The feeling of being scrutinised by the eyes of the patients reverses the relation between the object and the subject of the narrative, thus generating a comparison that is repeatedly undermined throughout the itinerary. Here we have a sort of "mirrored perception" of diversity. The paradigm of the threshold continues with a plexiglass wall along the entire space which opens on the various rooms suggesting the theme of the interior and the exterior, defining a limit, a division and isolation. A wall, an invisible and unbreakable surface, receives the heaviness of the bodies (video projected figures) which bang on it with strength and desperation, making the visitor aware of the vibration of this violence. The second section "*Ways of Feeling*" is devoted to the sensations, the different emotivity of the patients. Here the theme of perception is tackled from two different angles: perception as altered by cultural schemes that

persist in time and perception as induced by a shared sense bordering the absurd, which is made explicit in three connected rooms. There is also an Ames room, (named after the 18th-century ophthalmologist), which offers a distorted vision obtained through an optical trick. This visual experience proves the importance and the danger of stereotypes (a central element in the design of the experience of alterity). The *Ways of Feeling* are interpreted in three ways:

- *Talking*: here the stereotype of “talking loudly” is staged through a trick with microphones (before which visitors are invited to express themselves) and out-of-synch video projections which makes it difficult to watch and listen at the same time, producing a sort of dissociation representing a torment that also comes back elsewhere in the itinerary.
- *Seeing*: the installation is a mirror which cuts the visitors’ face into two parts. The left half is really mirrored, while the right half is the projection of a time-delayed video that makes it different from how it actually is. The possibility of looking in the mirror is therefore denied, but also those who observe it perceive a coexistent diversity, a being here and elsewhere, which, according to a shared opinion, is one of the features of mental illness.
- *Listening*: the third room features a series of funnels suspended on the heads of the visitors. The funnel on the head is a recurring image in the representation of mental illness, the very Hieronymus Bosch in one of his famous paintings introduces this element both to depict madness and to represent those who treat it. As the visitor passes under these electronical funnels, almost wearing them as hats, voices are activated by sensors, among which the visitor can easily to recognise their own as recorded in the previous *Talking* room: meaningless sentences uttered to activate the narrating mouth. A mixture of fragmented and repeated voices, which crowd, like in a nightmare, over the heads of the visitors.

In the *Portrays* section, the common sense that looks at the “outsider” is no longer present and it is replaced, on the one hand, by the expert and loving glance of a wise doctor and, on the other hand, by the mechanic and hostile eye of a camera through which one can observe and meditate on the illness of others. The wise doctor is Romolo Righetti, who observed his patients at

Santa Maria della Pietà with an eye that was outside the logics of science or the Lombrosian classification; in 1930s, he made 25 portraits depicting his patients. In contrast with this is the merciless eye of the camera, an historical device, by which the visitor can be portrayed after having written their name on a small board behind a chair, as in 1900s mug shots. The image is stored in a digital medical record and will be transformed into a pathological version, together with the images of other visitors or those retrieved from the patient archive.

The narration continues by focusing on the body of the visitor. In the section *Dwellings of the Body* the visitor is called on to take certain postures and make certain movements to convey the power of meaning: swaying, the elbows resting on a table, the hands on the ears, bending the head, the eyes looking down; all these attitudes communicate inner distress.

From the body to the mind: in the section *Inventors of Worlds*, we enter the imagery of two patients who – although inside a restrictive facility – manage to find their universe, which is shown in a highly poetical and sometimes even prophetic vision.

In the section *Closed Institution* we go from imaginary worlds to the harsh reality of institutions: the visit ends with three rooms in a row which one can see through a glass. They are reconstructions that tell us about the cruelty and harsh reality of reclusion. Here, observing real elements and spaces, re-elaborated and set up through minimal interpretations, transforms these rooms into sites of the memory: the wardrobe, the doctor's office, the restraint chamber, the pharmacy... places reverberating the stories experiences in the itinerary, which finally become clear to the visitor.

The museum narration ends with a change, a subversion of things, objects, furniture... This is the change introduced by Law 180, which ordered the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the regulation of commitment and forced treatment: a crucial transformation at both the medical and the social level. What makes the case of this museum emblematic is the synergy between a museological and museographic project. The intention of setting up an experience and the responsibility of conveying to visitors – even physically – the outcome of a type of content where the perception of alterity is fundamental, are at the core of the process of understanding the whole narration.

6. Conclusion

The social role of museums increasingly opens up to new forms of use and cultural experience. While the latter case study tells the social history of mental illness in a symmetrical way, other museums temporarily become “bearers of mental treatment”. In 2018, many Canadian, English and Belgian studies in the medical field showed the function of museums a form of therapy that improves the psychological and physical conditions of people and relieve stress. This trend (together with the need of funding) is leading to redesigning multifunctional spaces in museum facilities, in order to have more rooms available for shared activities aimed at creating well-being.

To confirm this, one may quote an experimental project that is in place in two museums in Milan, the *Museum of Natural History* and the *Gallery of Modern Art*. The project is named ASBA (Anxiety, Stress, Brain-friendly museum, Approach), designed and coordinated by The Study Center on the History of Biomedical Thought (CESPEB) of University Milano-Bicocca. It is an interdisciplinary program based on the idea of promoting museum collections and imagining museums as spaces of choice where collective well-being is stimulated through forms of art therapy, Visual Thinking Strategies and Art Up.

Therefore, museums are now also intended as social and emotional spaces where the dialogue between art and science is at the service of the community of “new” users and generates new forms of cultural experience.

The new paradigms of use envisage museums also as rehabilitation facilities or – in the most extreme cases – as shelters. In any case, after preservation and exhibition, the main function of contemporary museums is research, mainly research on social transformation. Indeed, it is on this theme that museums are investing, to understand the challenge in terms of “designing for alterity”: first of all, trying to understand what is meant by *identity*, *alterity*, *diversity* (cultural, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability...) as new forms of representation and interpretation, but first and foremost, how can museums be the mirrors of societal change through research, heritage updating and education?⁴ It is necessary for museums to

⁴ The educational project *Museums and Social Transformations* (September–November 2023) curated by Maria Chiara Ciaccheri, Anna Chiara Cimoli and Nicole Moolhuijsen, in collaboration with Viviana Gravano, aimed at tackling different features of social transformation in three modules: *Decolonizing the vision*; *Fluidi Museums. Interpreting gender diversity and sexuality through the Cultural Heritage*; *Projecting a strategy for Accessibility*.

become bearers of new research and analysis methodologies and to use them to create a network that helps facing the challenges of social change, going beyond the simple display of collection. For sure, overcoming stereotypes and fostering accessibility (at many levels) are crucial issues for which new tools and forms of design are needed.

Finally, this new vocation is well represented by the study cases examined in this paper: these museum models and their cultural experiences show three different approaches to using narration as a tool to “shorten distances” in the understanding of issues that are something “other” from the user’s comfort zone. These narrations use the *dialogical creative dimension* of workshops (“Plural Stories”, *Fondazione Museo Ettore Guatelli*); the *interrogative interactive dimension* triggered by multimedia devices offering “frictions” that help change one’s point of view (*Museo Memoria y Tolerancia*); the *performance dimension* which can provoke in visitors a feeling of displacement, disturbance, identification (*Museum Workshop of the Mind*).

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The **QUESTION OF ALTERITY** has become fundamental to understanding contemporary societies, which are increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and intersectional. That which is **OTHER** poses questions that one is not used to answering, poses itself as a term of contradiction, questioning established certainties and beliefs.

Alterity is a field yet to be explored, especially when one wants to move from theoretical reflection, inevitable and necessary, to transformative praxis.

Reflection on alterity leads to the **ABANDONMENT OF ALL FORMS OF CENTRALISM**. Acceptance of a culture based on the recognition of alterity and mutual responsibility requires overcoming anthropocentrism and androcentrism, but also Eurocentrism and logocentrism, that is, the domination of some forms of communication and signification over all others. Today, it is legitimate to think that the design dimension can also undertake research paths that highlight **THE NEED TO RECOGNISE THE OTHER**: from migratory flows to gender cultures, from social fragility to mental health, from cultural distances to the difficulties of social integration, etc. This is the direction in which the essays in this volume are heading. Design culture has the right tools to promote innovative and open visions of relations between people, peoples, and languages.

SALVATORE ZINGALE

Salvatore Zingale is Associate Professor at the Department of Design of the Politecnico di Milano and teaches Design Semiotics at the School of Design. He is particularly interested in the cognitive and inventive processes of design activity and dialogicity in cultural interactions.

On the relationship between design and alterity, he has edited *Design e alterità. Conoscere l'Altro, pensare il Possibile* (FrancoAngeli, 2022) and the volume *Relazioni dialogiche. Un'indagine sulla comunicazione e la progettualità* (FrancoAngeli, 2023).