

■ The city museum and its international role¹

Željka Kolveshi

Museum adviser, Muzej grada Zagreba, Croatia
Coordinator, ICMAH Working Group on City Museums

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PUBLIC

Résumé

Le rôle du musée de ville au sein de la société contemporaine est à la fois de constituer un lieu qui permet la découverte des objets authentiques et de répondre aux attentes du public. Celui-ci, qui vient des quatre coins du monde, possède des profils et des connaissances diverses. Les relations entre le musée de ville et l'environnement urbain revêtent de nombreux aspects. Dans les expositions, les présentations et les interprétations prennent en compte les individus qui constituent la ville dans un paysage urbain en mutation, lequel reflète les évolutions de la société. Présentant un intérêt universel, la ville détermine le comportement et le mode de vie de la collectivité, les besoins et les habitudes du citoyen ; et on note parfois des similarités entre les villes, là où il existe par ailleurs des différences radicales. Naturellement, ces différences sont conditionnées par les spécificités du cadre naturel, les circonstances historiques, ainsi que le développement économique, culturel et social dû à l'essor ou le déclin de la ville. Le musée doit être capable de faire comprendre son message à des individus issus de cultures différentes. Tel a peut-être été le pari le plus difficile à relever pour les musées de ville aux cours des dernières décennies.

Is it really possible that all city museums are basically similar to each other, in line with a traditional model of presenting and interpreting the urban environment, or is it actually necessary to innovate and challenge public expectations? The exhibition itself is the basic form of museum communication with the public, deriving from all the phases of museum work. Its success comes indubitably from the general orientation of the museum that is contained in the museum mission statement, which synthesises the tasks of every museum and determines the criteria for the constitution of collections; the mission statement dictates the museological treatment of objects, the formation of collections and the research into individual themes that result in an exhibition.

THE IDENTITY OF A CITY

Urban identity is most often presented through pictorial views of the city. If there are crammed rooms in the museum with various pictorial presentations of the city's growth, which is generally the case, the criterion for their selection is usually chronological development. The conception, if there is one, tends to be uncreative and uncritical. And if they are also arranged in a sequence, as often happens, we will not be much helped by the captions if we decide to read them. The first error in the approach to a picture is to behave like the classical art historian: to foreground the name of the artist, then to list a number of pertinent technical details that will perhaps interest only the connoisseur. Rather, one can stress how the iconography of the city in paintings and photographs abounds in information

concerning historical change as well as geopolitical data.

Historians, art historians, archaeologists and other experts develop complementary qualities that have to be present in the expert who works in a city museum. Museum work makes its own particular demands, different from those made on scholarly and professional researchers and authors in other establishments such as institutes. Their contribution is of great importance; in fact, good museum projects grow out of interdisciplinary research and teamwork with experts of various profiles.

In 1997 a book was published with the intriguing title of *Who is Zagreb* (and not *What...*), by the sociologist Ivan Rogić, analysing the city of Zagreb from the viewpoint of urban sociology. From the position of a nation not numerically large, in which middle class society has not yet been established in such a way as to assume responsibility for its development, the question "*Who then assumes the role of creator of urban identity?*" is fundamental. Rogić defines four basic figures in the personality of the city: the local, the big city, the capital, and the peripheral or suburban. In some cities, the figures of the personality of the city and their relationships are different, and the city's identity is different too. City museums that do not see the challenge in this kind of approach and are not intrigued by this kind of analysis of the personality of the city will continue to resemble each other however much they speak of differing cities. Without a clearly defined programmatic strategy, a policy of purposeful acquisition and due attention paid to changes in society, museums can go into peaceful hibernation - undisturbed, of course, by visitors.

A visit to a museum is a unique experience, one that primarily involves contact with original, authentic objects that are witnesses to socio-historical changes. Thus presentation as a form of communication is important, aiming as it does to explain reality and further understanding on the part of the visitors. To succeed in this has perhaps been the greatest challenge to museums in the last few decades, irrespective of the material wealth of the objects they possess. Through the eyes of most people, it is the imaginative richness of objects, and the memories and stories linked to them, which characterise the city. A group of classic non-visitors will find it difficult to recognise the opportunity which the museum offers of a higher quality of life, even when the exhibitions abound in attractive materials, unless the curators accept the viewpoint that they have to go half way to meet their expectations.

The visitors' book may well be a good indicator of the reactions of the public to the museum. For this reason, with due respect to the impressions registered, I would like to quote the comments of a few foreign visitors to the Zagreb City Museum during the summer of this year. The selection criterion is place of residence, with the assumption that "the further off, the less previous knowledge about Zagreb". Since we had our first ever, and to date our only, visitor from Mexico, his impression comes first: "*Your Zagreb City Museum gives a very interesting perspective and story of the beautiful city of Zagreb. I was able to learn a lot. Muchas Gracias*" - Andreas Weber, Mexico (the visitor found in the museum an educational opportunity). Then there is A. Ploth of New York: "*Thank you for a beautiful and eye-opening experience. This museum is a fine work of art in itself, beautifully laid out and enjoyable*" (an artistic opportunity, opportunity for enjoyment). Van Stoker, USA, Team Captain, Wrestling: "*This museum is a big highlight of my visit to Zagreb with the Military World Games. Excellent*" (an unexpected opportunity). Kate and Tim Maxwell, Australia: "*Simply one of the best museums we have ever visited. Creative, interactive + interesting. Thank you for the English + musical demonstration. Bravo*" (extra language opportunity). Unreadable name: "*So good it works well even without English translations of all exhibits*" (communication opportunity). Robert and Susana Dolata, London: "*The measured and researched, subtle presentation at this museum surpasses any I have seen*" (opportunity for professional evaluation). We are

not intending to blow our own trumpet; these reactions are quoted because they support the idea that in the presentation and interpretation of a city by a museum, the condition that people of diverse cultures can understand the message has to be satisfied. This is so that the audience can take up the museum's challenge and recognise some of the implied aims in the presentation of the identity of a city.

Here I would like to refer to the opinion of the distinguished expert, the late Kenneth Hudson, whose basis is many years of experience, and whose method is observation and personal experience acquired during visits to more than a thousand museums: the basic orientation of museums, and the main change that has occurred in the last 50 years, marking the end of the 20th century, is the museum's orientation with respect to its audience.² This change essentially distinguishes the role and importance of museums across the centuries, centuries that have tended to preserve the museum's aura of exclusiveness. The spirit of openness and democracy, freedom and universality, especially today in the era of globalisation, poses questions to museums, to which the conceptual outline of exhibitions should be a response. For example, conceptual outlines such as: "Proposed dialogue between a historical museum and society", "The dialogue of the historical museum with society" or "The challenge of communication between the historical museum and the public".

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PRESENT

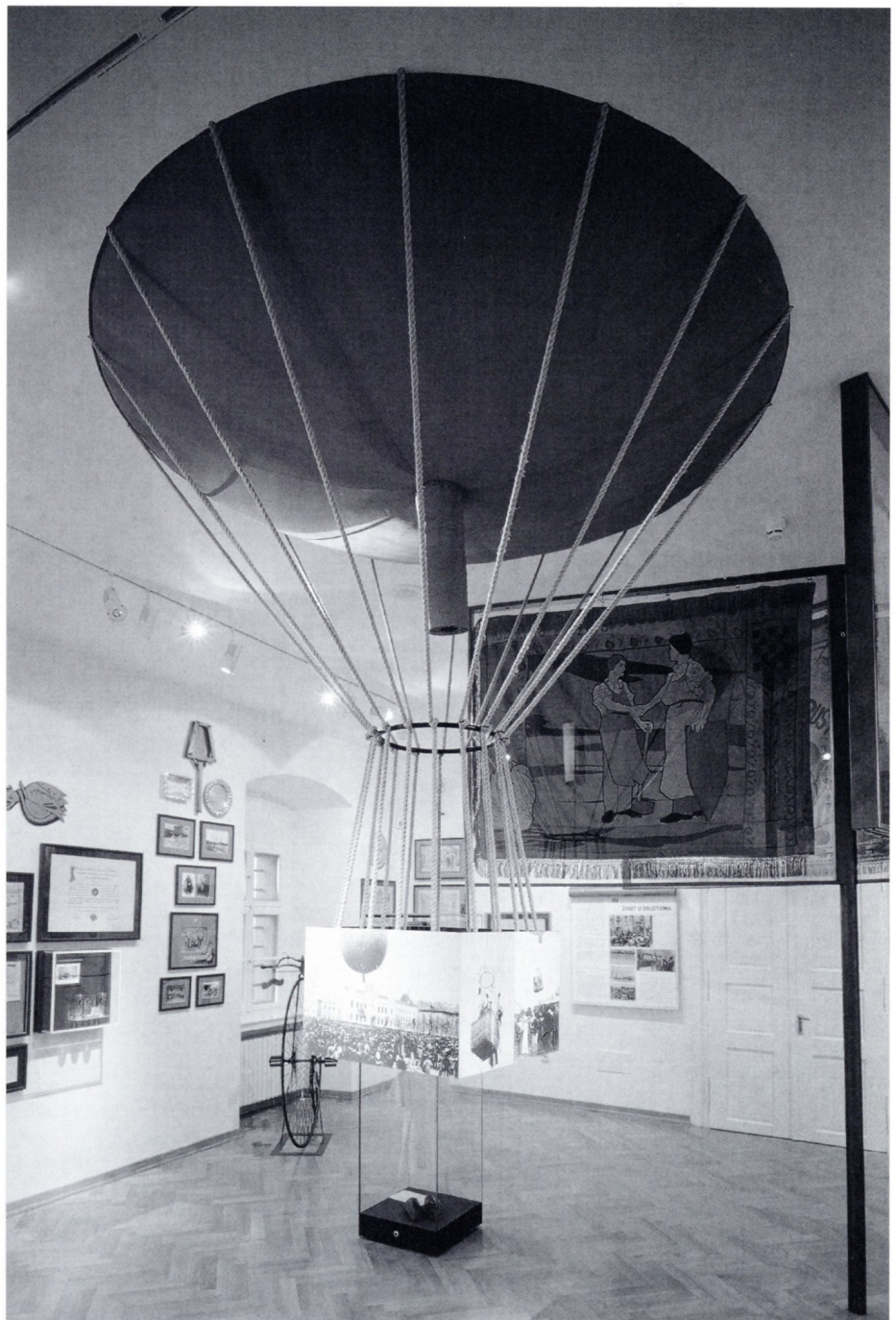
Small countries, especially young States like Croatia, today in the midst of a transition process, are inadequately represented in reviews of cultural history, and their contribution can hardly be adequately evaluated, let alone brought into the mainstream. They have had neither the power nor the strength, the financial resources nor the authority to represent themselves adequately. Essentially, though, it is an issue of language, since the Croatian works of scholarship that do exist have not been published in the major languages. For this reason they remain unknown and neglected, with no chance of figuring in the collective awareness concerning cultural heritage. Many gaps still need to be filled. The role of the historical museum is to transmit cultural knowledge at an international level, in order to fill these lacunae.

It is therefore of great importance for museums to take part in international projects that offer chances of broadening local or national cultural horizons so that museums can take on the task of completing the

mosaic of universal development and progress. In the last dozen years, a number of international collaborative exhibitions have been held, that had the city as their focus. Of the many associates on these projects, most were from municipal museums, as were the exhibits themselves. These exhibitions had the task of directing attention towards the similarities and differences that - sometimes in parallel and sometimes dissonantly, rapidly or slowly - expanded the borders of civilisation and of general wellbeing. The exhibits, particularly the plans

of cities, quarters and buildings with particular functions which were never executed, thus remaining an imaginary vision of the city, bore testimony to the state of mind and soul of the individual within the climate of the overall culture. Unfortunately, Croatian contributions were largely omitted from these exhibitions, even though Croatia could have provided significant examples.

For, in the last twenty years of the 19th century, Zagreb underwent its first planned urbanisation, which transformed it into a modern city. The second great town



Symbolically, the Turul Baloon has burst through the roof of the Museum and landed in the exhibition room. In this installation, the designer has highlighted the sensational spectacle which drew most of Zagreb on April 2, 1905
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planning period in the 1930s, reflecting the needs of the new age, followed in the footsteps of the German functionalist school, whose influence was brought back by Croatian students who had studied in Germany. Socialist planning, with its heroic pretensions, which is almost identical throughout the countries of Eastern Europe due to its ideological basis, should have had a place in the analysis of the city in Europe. The same goes for those artists who produced locally but drew on their experience of the European schools and academies of art, thus capturing both the *genus loci* and the universality of the European spirit and vision. The criterion of artistic evaluation, of both artists and their works on show, situated these artists within a national art history, while only a few were considered within the broader European artistic context. This is the sorry fact of the “forgotten”, for which they are themselves to blame, however, because of restricted contacts and in particular the limited opportunities for the presentation of their cultural values. Contemporary artists work outside this “rule”, as it might almost be called. Completely new forms of artistic expression have emerged and the technological feasibility of rapid and simple communication has softened borders and made competition possible in the domain of art.

THE CITY MUSEUM AND INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES:
TWO EXAMPLES

The natural and geopolitical environment of Central Europe brings with it a quite specific configuration of situations. As a result of a number of historical circumstances, and above all the statehood of Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Empire up to 1918, this is an area shot through with different national identities. Starting from this premise, certain international cultural projects among cities of similar status were set up or, to put it more precisely, they included cities with a particular identity and which were essential links in the “federal community” of Central Europe. These cities were never capitals, although they largely became ones after the formation of the new States with the fall of the Berlin Wall. These international cultural projects started with the 1990 Trieste exhibition “Abitare la periferia dell’ impero nell’ 800” [“Living at the periphery of the Empire in the late 19th century”] within the Alpe-Adria programme, which involves research into the way of life in Central Europe in the 19th century. The participants included Austria, Yugoslavia (*sic* - actually Croatia and Slovenia), Hungary and Italy. The exhibition aimed to show the potential for new relations based on the

model of cooperation provided by the Alpe-Adria region. The fashion for Oriental interiors, dolls’ houses, the movement of travellers around the great trade shows all marked the period, as did styles in the applied arts and the growth of cities. The main factor linking these phenomena was the privilege of the periphery, understood as life lived far away from the centre of power.

A second example that set me thinking about the international role of the city museum and the advantages of presenting the similarities and differences between cities, comes from my own experience. The Zagreb City Museum took part in setting up a demanding international cultural project, the exhibition “TransLOCAL – 9 cities in a network, 1848-1918”, held in 1996 in the Graz City Museum, Austria. This museum was in charge of the project, and the concept was devised by its director, Gerhard Dienes; the exhibition was mounted to commemorate the 10th centenary of the existence of Austria as a state.

The exhibition was mounted by 9 city museums – from Bratislava, Brno, Graz, Krakow, Ljubljana, Munich, Pest, Trieste and Zagreb. Each city was presented according to a set scheme of similarities and differences. In “Looking for the traces – a network of cities with cross-border similarities”, the history of these nine Central European cities during the crucial period of 1848-1918, which has had a considerable effect on the present day, was displayed for the first time in an exhibition.

Parallels and oppositions, influences and contacts, attraction and aversion vividly illustrated the development of these nine cities, or rather the history of Central Europe. In the last third of the nineteenth century all of these cities experienced simultaneously an intensive development of trade and industry, and fluctuation between periods of war and sudden flowering of the arts.

The key outcome of World War I was the formation of nation states in which these cities took on new characteristics along with a new status. The general characteristic of the cities of this period is the rise of national awareness, manifested in architecture in the monumental construction of city halls, in art through the nationalistic content of painting, and similarly in music. There was exceptional religious tolerance. Up to 1918, the Munich Academy influenced painting throughout the region, the historicist style dominated architecture and city planning, and architects left their mark on works in many different cities. Coexistence functioned perfectly, because of the excellent railway links. A wide range of products were distributed from all the centres, and economic

growth brought about the rise of the working class, with its new requirements and demands for rights. What had been won or experienced in one city served as a model for the others.

Additionally, this exhibition communicated easily with its visitors, since the idea of “living together” was conveyed museologically through grouping the contributions of all the cities under themes, rather than presenting the contributions according to their geographical origin. The two years of work on the exhibition were an exceptional experience, and gave rise to a very wide-ranging, expertly written and useful catalogue (published unfortunately only in German, whereas it should have been printed in six languages). Analysing it from the position of a curator involved in the project, I can say that the conception of the exhibition was a real challenge for the museums, and an opportunity that they knew how to make the most of. The exhibition showed the constant exchange of ideas between the cities and how they thus became increasingly closely linked, despite geographical separation. ■

1. A first version of this text was presented at the ICMAH Annual Meeting of 22-25 September 1999, Mexico City, on the theme “Museums of Archeology and History and the Transmission of Cultural Values at International Level”.

2. Hudson, K, “The museum refuses to stand still” in *Museum International*, No. 197, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1998, UNESCO, Paris pp. 45.