Giusy PAPPALARDO

Babel Tower – Museum People in Dialogue: An overview

Introduction

This brief article presents some reflections related with the web series *Babel Tower: Museum people in dialogue*, as part of a joint research project conducted between the Service of Museology – Research Unit of Art, Archaeology and Heritage (University of Liège), and the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture (University of Catania), developed in the framework of an EU funded program (European Social Fund, Italian PON AIM - Attraction and International Mobility of Researchers). The PON AIM's scope is fostering networking activities at the international level between researchers and their institutions. Specifically, it targets researchers based in European Regions where local development is lagging behind.

Being engaged in a long-term action research process in Sicily (South Italy) – that is currently evolving toward an Ecomuseum along the Simeto River (PAPPALARDO 2020) – my mission at ULiège has been to explore a variety of cases of insurgent museologies (DUARTE CÂNDIDO *et al.* 2019) in order to inform and inspire the ongoing action research process in Sicily.

The idea of the *Babel Tower* has been related with the opportunity of exploring different languages, areas and jargons related with the field of museums and other experimental devices (such as ecomuseums), their relations with communities, citizenship, territories, heritage, landscape and local development.

The aim is to dig into intersections between disciplines building up trans-disciplinary connections (JAHN *et al.* 2012): Specifically, between museologies and ecological planning. Beyond trans-disciplinarity, we have also opened the discussion up toward various trans-national exchanges. The broad question behind this empirical research has been to identify how people relate with the tangible and intangible signs of their past, in order to plan a more just and inclusive future, in times of ecological transition and societal changes.

During the webinars, we have tried to explore which different forms of museologies emerge from spontaneous initiatives as well as in innovative institutional settings, and how do they interact with the broad question we have posed. After 10 webinars, we have discussed our preliminary reflections with the President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), Alberto Garlandini, and the Chair of the ICOM International Committee for Museology

(ICOFOM), Bruno Brulon, who is also currently the Co-chair of the Standing Committee for the Museum Definition (ICOM Define).

The aim of this brief text is to summarize and share these reflections for opening up a future dialogue in the broad and diverse international community that is questioning how various expressions of museologies are changing in relation with current societal and ecological pressing issues. Before presenting and discussing the findings, a paragraph is dedicated to clarify the methods and tools adopted in the *Babel Tower* research activity, as well as some quantitative data related with the overall involvement of the trans-national community.

1. Who has been engaged in the *Babel Tower* and how?

In three months of work, the *Babel Tower* has involved 35 invited speakers and 225 participants from 26 different countries. Undergraduate, master, and doctoral students took part to the webinars (10 of them have been actively involved in the organizing committee). We surveyed all the participants through a questionnaire that we have been circulated before and during the months of development of the series in order to enroll and take a census. The questionnaire has been spread among various networks, including the Italian network of ecomuseums (*Rete degli Ecomusei Italiani – EMI*), the Brazilian network of ecomuseums and community museums (*Associação Brasileira de Ecomuseus e Museus Comunitários – Abremc*), the University of Catania, and the Service of Museology of the University of Liège: As a matter of fact, the most numerous groups of participants were from Italy (59), Brazil (55), and Belgium (40). However, all the different participants were not attending each webinar simultaneously, and many of them took part to one or two webinars in total. On average, 20 up to 30 people attended each webinar, with a peak of more than 70 people attending the presentation of the Italian version of recent Hugues de Varine's book, L'*écomusée singulier et pluriel*, co-organized with EMI.

The language of the webinars has been English and French, although we are aware of the importance of keeping diversity in the selection of idioms as a means for inclusion and cultural decolonization. As a matter of fact, unfortunately we had to limit to: a) English as widely spoken by presenters, and b) French as the official language of the courses at the University of Liège. Aware of the limits related with the choice of language, we have tried to: a) provide always bilingual versions of the presentations, including the subsequent insertion of subtitles in the videorecording of the webinar, stored and available online on YouTube; b) be respectful if any expressed the necessity of speaking additional languages, trying to provide translations at our best.

2. What has been discussed so far in the *Babel Tower*?

After a brief introduction of Prof. Duarte on the overall aim of the Series, the first webinar hosted Giuseppe Reina, PhD in Geography and one of the promoters of the Sicilian Regional Law on ecomuseums, approved in 2014. He has introduced the concept of ecomusems as territorial living and evolving laboratories. Not only they are aimed to inventorying, documenting and preserving heritage and the landscape, but also at sharing and creatively enhancing local development, projected towards experimentation, exchange and innovation through the continuous redefinition of actions and relations between individual, collective subjects and institutions. The same day, I gave the example of what we are trying to foster in the Simeto River Valley as an action research project that is generating an Ecomuseum. Guido Carrubba offered his final perspective as a young person that sees some windows of opportunities in the ecomuseal processes for distressed contexts like the Simeto area. During the debate, the importance of pushing practices like ecomuseums in challenging contexts has emerged.

In the second webinar, we moved from Italy to Spain and Kenya, in order to discuss the concept of insurgent museologies through practical examples, that are context-based and plural. The *Babel Tower* hosted Óscar Navajas Corral, PhD in History and Museology, Lecturer and Deputy Director of the Department of History and Philosophy at the University of Alcalá. He offered a brief tour of Spanish geography, where it is possible to find enriching initiatives that have contributed to communal and democratic practices in the appropriation of heritage, both through ecomuseums and museums. Navajas Corral recalled various pioneering experiences in community participation that have produced a raise of awareness, social cohesion, community education, identity building, as well as social, cultural and economic development. He talked about the cultural park of Maestrazgo in Aragón, the ecomuseum of Rio Gaisena in Andalusia, the ecomuseum of Valls d'Àneu, and other emerging ones, such as La Ponte Ecomuseu in the north, the Centro Social Rey Heredia in the south, in the urban center of Madrid, being the latter a neighborhood museum. All these experiences can be positioned as initiatives of social museology, based on a strong militant and democratic character.

The same day, Édouard Nzoyihera – doctoral student in museology at the University of Cork – presented his analysis of the current situation of the system of museums in East Africa on decolonization from western culture on such system. He focused on political and social function of community museums in Kenya, that is in the process of restructuring and reappropriating colonial heritage. Community museums participate in the process of decolonization. However, there are still some critical aspects to consider, such as the risk of propaganda, as it has emerged during the debate. Nzoyihera concluded pointing out that,

despite some limitations, community museums play a key social and political function in the search for unity and pacification.

In the third webinar, two very diverse yet complementary presentations took place. On one side, the *Babel Tower* hosted Mike Robinson, Full Professor of Cultural Heritage at the University of Birmingham and Director of the Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage, the Europe's largest independent museum. He gave a provocative presentation titled "Breaking out the museum: Radically rethinking value". Through an overview of very diverse contexts around the world, Robinson showed how museums change depending on what societies value. He argued that sometimes it takes time for an object to become appreciated. For example, at Ironbridge, today there is a sense of pride on being the birthplace of the industrial revolution and the first mass production of iron, but of course 300 years ago it was different, and now people are pride to be the custodians of a sort of a "national slag collection". He concluded with a reflection: the necessity of a recalibration of how societies actually engage and use museums, particularly in the face of very rapid social and cultural change and economic pressures. The question he left with is: how these changes affect what societies actually value in the world? How to create not just physical space, but also intellectual areas of reflections for the new things that societies value?

Then, the same day, the *Babel Tower* hosted Orla Breslin for a second round of reflections about ecomuseums. Specifically, Breslin shared her experience as Local Operations Coordinator for the LIVE Project aimed at the creation of Ireland's first Ecomuseum in rural South Kerry. She gave some details on the genesis and the characteristics of this process that started five years ago and it is aimed at fostering long term environmental and educational tourism. The core of the approach is the co-production of knowledge and projects. The challenges of co-production emerged, especially in times of social distancing.

During the fourth and the fifth webinar, the *Babel Tower* hosted Obay Al Bitar and Andrea Delaplace. Al Bitar is an art historian and a museologist. He started recalling the book of Nina Simon (2010), *The Participatory Museum*, and gave the example of the Migration Museum in Brussels. It is a new museum that opened at the end of 2019 created by a non-profit organisation. This museum offers a permanent place for the stories of the first generation of immigrants, with a collection that is constantly renewed, every six or eight months, with a participatory approach.

Then, Delaplace – PhD in Museum studies and heritage – presented her dissertation whose goals is to highlight the representation of immigration in permanent exhibitions, through the analysis of three museums of history dedicated to immigration: the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York, the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris, and the Museum of Immigration in São Paulo, Brazil. She focused on the third one,

pointing out the importance to ask how do spaces of representation stage the history of immigration. It is not only a matter of communities that share their personal story and their personal objects, but also how the objects of memory are presented in these exhibitions alongside with the local, national and international history.

Still remaining in São Paulo, during the fifth webinar the *Babel Tower* hosted Gabriela Aidar, who coordinates the Inclusive Educational Programs at the Education Department of the Pinacoteca de São Paulo. Aidar discussed some challenges and opportunities related with developing socially engaged practices in traditional museums through the experience of the Pinacoteca. She presented the example of the social educational practices that the Education Department has carried out with groups of homeless people, with incarcerated people, with schools, and with fragile people carrying physical and mental disabilities. Aidar pointed out how activating inclusive museological practices in traditional institutions is a challenge due to the rigid organisational structures, logics of operation and power within the more traditional museums, but it is worthwhile to try as a matter of social justice.

The sixth webinar was focused on territory and local development. The *Babel Tower* hosted Tim Schauwecker, professor of landscape architecture in U.S.A. His interest in landscape history has the purpose of generating specifications for habitat restoration and ecological design. In his presentation, Schauwecker highlighted the role and importance of historical maps, historical survey documents and their use in ecological design. This set of information is very useful today for the management and restoration of river basins. As an example, Schauwecker explained a current engaged research project in the Catalpa Basin. Working with local farmers, he is using this set of historical information as a means for generating new restoration project. As such, Schauwecker has shown as this particular type of heritage (historical surveys and maps) can be used for ecological design processes today with the involvement of local actors.

Still from U.S.A., the *Babel Tower* hosted Katherine Lambert-Pennington, Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Memphis and Director of the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy. Lambert-Pennington presented a reflection based on her fieldwork in suburban Sydney, where she lived and conducted ethnographic research in La Perouse. Her presentation proposed to trace the relationship between place and identity and how these connections can give elements for understanding what she defines restorative attachment. The idea of restorative attachment refers to human-eco-solidarity in which identity, place and becoming shape representations of connections using a particular space, the resources of that space, and allows to see the potential in the context of a post-colonial nation like Australia.

Finally, the same webinar hosted Donatella Murtas, an Italian independent researcher that has been long devoted to ecomuseums and local development projects, with a focus on landscape, heritage interpretation and community involvement, at the national and international level. From 1996 to 1999, she was part of the first working team for the Ecomuseum laboratory at the Piedmont Region. She is the developer and coordinator of the *Ecomuseo dei Terrazzamenti e della Vite*, whose experience she has presented. Reflecting on her experience in relation with the topic of cultural heritage, she pointed out the importance of rethinking and reconstructing the meaning of places of life, stressing the importance of concepts like trust and credibility at the base of ecomuseums.

During the debate, Martina Barcelloni Corte – professor at the University of Liège, Research Unit of Art, Archaeology and Heritage – reminded the urgency of acting in response to climate change and ecological fragility, and ecomuseums could be a feasible way toward renewed directions in this respect.

The seventh webinar was a special one, as the *Babel Tower* had the honour to present the Italian version of recent Hugues de Varine's book, *L'écomusée singulier et pluriel* (2017). This webinar has been co-organized with the Italian Network of Ecomuseums and the editor of the Italian version, Cooperativa Utopie Concrete. Alberto Garlandini, Raul dal Santo, Maurizio Tondolo and Donatella Murtas introduced with words of acknowledgement for de Varine's work. Then, Giuseppe Reina posed some questions collectively elaborated during a meeting conducted in early March by the Italian Network of Ecomuseums. After a critical reading of the chapter of the book dedicated to Italian ecomuseums, the Network has collectively decided the questions. Main topics were: the relation between Italian regional laws and funding; transversality of ecomuseums as actors of integrated development; relations between the ecomuseums and museums; relation between ecomuseums and landscape planning in the framework of the European Landscape Convention; the role of regional and national networks; ecomuseums and tourism; self-evaluation and self-sustainability of the processes.

Hugues de Varine gave his comments highlighting the importance of economic independence of ecomuseums from regional political assets, specifying the transversal character of ecomuseums even if the administrative offices are organized differently. De Varine pointed out the importance of people inside public offices creating transversality beyond the administrative boundaries. He stressed the main differences between ecomusuems and museums, having the latter ones a collection to manage while the first ones are more centred around a broader concept of territorial heritage. In terms of networking, de Varine recalled the important Italian experience of *Mondi Locali*, and pointed out how importance is to keep a certain degree of informality in the networks. Regarding tourism, it has been discussed how the type of tourism related with ecomuseums

is more a proximity and relational tourism: it is not mass tourism rather, it is a way for creating community ties based on hospitality. In terms of self-evaluation and self-sustainability, he gave the advice that each ecomuseum has to find its way and tools, such as the community maps; the latter could be importance means as they can be used not only as a tool for producing a system of common knowledge, but also as a tool aimed at collectively programming or a at self-evaluation. Then, he had a meaningful conversation with students as agents of change for the future.

In the eighth webinar, the *Babel Tower* had the honour of having Cláudio Torres and Susana Gómez-Martínez, who shared the experience of the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola (CAM). Professor Cláudio Torres lived in political exile between 1961 and 1974 as an opponent of the Salazar regime and the colonial war; in 1978, He created the Campo Arqueológico de Mertola and founded the ten museums of the city of Mertola as well as visitable excavation sites. Susana Gómez-Martínez has been a researcher for the Mértola Archaeological Centre (CAM) since 1992. The project started in order to create a path of development in the poorest, most remote Portuguese region. The project was aimed to let this exceptional site to survive. Today, it is an exceptional example that shows how community-based approach to archaeological excavation has become a real opportunity for local development. After showing several examples, they explained that the idea has always been to make a harmonious management of the heritage while at the same time doing research, the conservation of the vestiges, their enhancement and dissemination. They pointed out how important is the work with the school community in heritage education activities. There is a project that is called *Arqueologia para todos* that in a sense brings the museum where people usually are. For example, remains are located in the banks, hospitals, town halls, etc. in addition to meetings with the community and archaeology workshop for families, etc. This system of initiatives creates a community-based environment that opens up the archaeological discipline to new and creative connections with the present and the future.

In the ninth webinar, the *Babel Tower* has explored several concepts. The first was the *expographic rupture* proposed by Dominique Schoeni, anthropologist, museologist and interpreter. Schoeni chose four aspects to represent the museology of rupture: a) it is a traditional museology rethought; b) it is the need to overcome the impasse of the ethnographic exhibition traditionally associated with the collections and their classifications; c) it is making free use of the scenography and available objects to build a theoretical reflection or a story; d) the visitors leave the exhibition with some doubts about their knowledge, beliefs and judgments.

Then, Mario Moutinho – Rector of the Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies – and Judite Primo – UNESCO Chair Education, citizenship and cultural diversity since 2017

– talked about Sociomuseology, intended as a school of thought and an ongoing process. They organized their speech in five points: 1) the roots of sociomuseology: Museology and education, with reference to the work of Paulo Freire; 2) what is sociomuseology? They gave a definition stating that sociolomuseology reflects a considerable part of the effort to adapt museum structures to the constraints of contemporary society. Sociomuseology is constituted, as a disciplinary field of teaching, research and performance that favors the articulation of museology, with the social sciences and humanities; 3) an example of ongoing work: from aggression to insurrection (contribution to a decolonial pedagogy); 4) coloniality as one of the aspects of modernity and which is at the center of the activity of sociomuseology; 5) lines of action for sociomuseology. During the debate, Moutinho adviced some essential bibliography, such as *Introdução à Sociomuseologia* (MOUTINHO & PRIMO 2020)

Armando Perla – independent curator, part of the founding teams of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and the Swedish Museum of Migration and Democracy – presented an intervention called Museology of human rights (*droits de la personne*): from theory to practice. Questioning the current definitions, he proposed his own definition in terms of "a type of museology from below, a set of museum practices and a corresponding body of theory that aim to further human rights through the prioritization and participation of historically excluded people in all museum processes that directly affect them", offering some examples between Canada and Mexico.

Last Friday, the *Babel Tower* has been focused on museums' experiences in Belgium: a) in the Brussel area, thanks to the intervention of Gladys Vercammen-Grandjean, the coordinator of Brussels Museums' project Open Museum, through which she aims at fostering social inclusion, exploring how museums can become safer spaces where everyone feels welcome, regardless of gender, skin colour, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, level of education, age, etc.; b) in the Flanders, thanks to Olga Van Oost, the Director at FARO, the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage (Vlaams Steunpunt voor Cultureel Erfgoed) that co-hosts the Flemish Museum Network (Vlaams Museumoverleg); Van Oost discussed the social responsibility of museums and introduced the concept of agonist museums recalling Mouffe (2005), arguing that the purpose of an 'agonist museum' is democracy by the creation of a public space that allows people to develop their critical skills; in Wallonia, thank to Kim Cappart, who has presented examples of participatory exhibitions as means for raising public awareness about contemporary issues. With them, we discussed concept of participation, polyphonic narrations, and power structures.

In addition, on March 26th, there was a session attended only by museology students from the University of Liège and the University of Québec in Montréal (UQÀM). This session was

led by Professor Yves Bergeron of UQÀM, holder of the Chair on the Governance of museums and the right to culture. On the occasion, students from the two universities freely exchanged on the process of public consultation and construction of the new ICOM definition of museums. The students reflected on commonalities and differences in their ways of understanding museums and were encouraged to participate in the process by responding to the various public consultations. This session was not on the program, but has complemented the *journey* up to the *Babel Tower* for the involved students.

3. Open questions and further reflections

In the closing session, the *Babel Tower* discussed preliminary reflections and posed some questions both to Alberto Garlandini, and Bruno Brulon Soares. They have been invited to share their thoughts regarding a possible *fil rouge* of the *Babel Tower*, in relation with the debate that is emerging inside ICOM and ICOFOM. How can the issues discussed during the webinars contribute to the broad debate related with a post-pandemic world? What's the role of the types of museums and practices presented during the series – such as ecomuseums – in this historical phase? What important pieces are missing, but should be incorporated in order to enrich the picture presented in the *Babel Tower*?

In addition, still in the closing session two complementary experiences have been presented in order to share the perspective of other museum people and to react to the open questions. On one side, the "Museum of the representation" of the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture at the University of Catania, Sicily (IT), discussed how the students' engagement into the daily life of the museum is helping with improving the sense of belonging toward the institution. On the other side, the Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Agreement (eastern Sicily, South Italy) presented its current work aimed at fostering an ecomuseal process, discussing how community engagement is allowing to improve the social-ecological relations in a distressed context.

Alberto Garlandini pointed out some key-concepts that are at the core of the debate, from his perspective. He started with the word *change*. As the world is changing, museums and museology are relevantly changing as well as part of the global transformations. This changing process has started even before the Covid-19 crisis: Garlandini recalled the Resolutions adopted by ICOM's 31st general assembly, in 2016 (Milan, Italy), that clearly states how museums' core functions have expanded, with a responsibility toward the tangible and intangible heritage conserved not only inside but also outside their walls, as well as toward the landscapes. At Kyoto, in 2019, ICOM discussed how museums play a crucial role in implementing the UN 2030 Agenda in shaping a just sustainable world. On Earth Day 2021, ICOM joined the Global Coalition United for Biodiversity. Climate change is an urgent challenge alongside with social justice, and there is no more time to waste

rather it is necessary to act. Museums can play their part, as they are places able to foster critical thoughts and pluralistic views. Moreover, in 2017, in the context of the International Museum days, it has been discussed how museums can contribute in the debate concerned with contested history: ICOM highlighted how museums can help communities discussing and reconciling the memory of the past related with colonialism, slavery, civil wars, segregation, genocides, etc. *Babel Tower* has presented some examples in this respect.

According with Garlandini, a second fil rouge is *diversity*: the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation on the social role of museums – as the result of a partnership between ICOM and UNESCO – significantly pointed out the necessity of valuing diversity. UNESCO has recently estimated that there are 104,000 museums all over the world: Despite the great number, it is reasonable to say that it is impossible to find two identical museums. This diversity is a treasure to preserve and promote. *Babel Tower* has presented very diverse museums in terms of contexts, dimensions, collections, etc.

Finally, Garlandini pointed out how diversity is strictly connected with *dialogue*, a keyword that is emphasized in the title of the *Babel Tower* as well. After the hard times of pandemic, now more than ever the importance of dialogue, networks, cooperation and co-production of knowledge arise, in order to transform challenges and difficulties in drivers of innovation. This leads also to the idea of *participation*, another keyword of the *Babel Tower*. The 1972 UNESCO ICOM Round Table at Santiago de Chile has been a cornerstone in the history of museology: since then, ecomuseums and community museums have highlighted the crucial role of such an approach, providing new interpretation of heritage for the process aimed at democratization of societies. Participation means providing access to culture, heritage, and museums to all citizens with no discrimination, as a human right and an indicator of equity and wellbeing. Participation is also a matter of enhancing local development, as learned thanks to the groundbreaking lessons of Hugues de Varine.

Bruno Brulon proposed some critical reflections questioning the common ground of the *Babel Tower* in relation with his work in ICOFOM, where the diversity that Garlandini has discussed emerges clearly, not only in terms of diverse museums, but also in terms of diverse social and political issues. In the light of this, the central questions – that lies behind the *Babel Tower* and it is also at the core of the ICOFOM debate – is concerned with the possibility of defining a single disciplinary field or branch of knowledge – museology – despite this diversity.

Brulon stressed the concept of museum marginality: Not all the museums have the same resources, centrality, and not all of them are equally recognized by international organizations. With this awareness, ICOFOM is developing a project called "Museums, community action and decolonization", which has a lot to do with the goals and topic of the

Babel Tower. The central core is decolonization, the agency of marginalized actors, and social justice. However, there is not a single understanding or type of decolonization, neither a single approach to that. Decolonization cannot be universalized as an instrumental process, rather there are context-based cases and practices of decolonization.

Having detected several contact points between ICOFOM reflexive work and the *Babel Tower*, Brulon pointed out that this is a crucial moment for museology, 50 years after the groundbreaking events of the 70s, including the round table of Santiago de Chile. It is now important to go beyond the labels that have emerged during the *Babel Tower* and to explore more the common ground that associates the diverse experiences recalled during the series, and more.

Concepts such as ecomuseums no longer belong only to the experts in the field, but they belong to the people, they are continuously operationalized and transformed by diverse local communities. This is an epistemological and methodological turn that museologists need to face today, and it is a matter of redistributing power restarting from the experiences of the people, especially the marginalized groups whose voices have to be heard again.

Babel Tower is ready to continue its trans-national and trans-disciplinary journey toward this end.

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Biographical note

Giusy Pappalardo is a researcher in spatial planning at the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture of the University of Catania with area of specialization in Cultural Heritage. She has contributed for several years to an action-research process in the Simeto River Valley in Sicily (IT), which has currently generated an Ecomuseum.

Contact : giusypappalardo@unict.it