

A PROPOSED NEW DISTRIBUTED MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MILANO-BICOCCA. LEVERAGING DIGITAL CONTENT¹

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Abstract

This article describes steps being taken at Milano-Bicocca University to set up a distributed university museum accessible to teachers, students, and the wider community. Traditional university museums are places and collections that over the centuries have enriched the educational offering of their institutions and served as a resource for research and scientific inquiry. In recent decades, the emphasis has been on sharing and increasing participation in these cultural heritage sites by opening them up to the community, thereby extending the university's educational outreach. In the project at Milano-Bicocca, a young and interdisciplinary university that has just celebrated the 20th anniversary of its founding, the first step in the process has been to inventorize the objects currently held by each department, with a view to assessing the existing range of potential exhibits and deciding how best to exploit them. Initially these cultural objects will be on display in a digital environment, designed to make them known to larger audiences and stimulate new research ideas. In preparation for this step, the university and its fledgling distributed museum took part in the online event Milano MuseoCity, held from March 2 to March 7, 2021, with a focus on the theme of secret museums. For its debut at this event, the University of Milano-Bicocca presented three main cultural objects, thus keeping the university "top of mind" – despite the ongoing public health emergency – as a place of education and research, but also as a space of encounter and dynamic cultural growth.

Keywords: Museum, education, community, cultural objects.

1 UNIVERSITY, NEIGHBOURHOOD, CITY, MUSEUM

The University of Milano-Bicocca was founded in 1998. Its main campus is located in the Bicocca district on the northern periphery of the city of Milan, a former industrial zone that benefited from the most radical urban renewal project implemented in Milan over the last quarter of a century.

In the course of its twenty-year history, the University has engaged in teaching and research across a broad spectrum of scientific fields through the work of its departments and schools. In parallel, it has built up a network of international and local relationships, seeking synergic partners with whom to spearhead innovation.

In the context of the local community, the university has become an extremely active organizer of events and projects at a variety of scales: namely, those of the university campus in the Bicocca district, the Town Hall for District 9, and the city of Milan and its greater urban area. These actions are part of the university's third mission and are overseen by dedicated departments/offices. The main aims of this university mission are:

- to foster growth via innovation and the dissemination of knowledge;
- to become a strategic actor in local economic, social, and cultural development, thus contributing to the needs of society.

Against this backdrop, the university decided to design a museum of its own, with a view to showcasing existing heritage assets and providing a service to the wider community.

More specifically, this decision rested on the importance of the relationship between museums and their local areas, as well as on the need for an organic perspective on local cultural heritage as the distributed museum model paradigm suggests. This is in keeping with a strong and growing tendency within Italian museology to take the local area setting into account when designing the new National System Museum [1] and, in the city of Milan itself, when designing the project "A city, twenty museums, four districts", [2], a first step towards creating a diffused museum for the city.

¹ It should be noted that this paper is the result of a shared work. While the abstract was written collectively, 1st section was written by Giampaolo Nuvolati, 2nd and the conclusions by Franca Zuccoli, the 3rd by Rita Capurro.

2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF “A DISTRIBUTED MUSEUM IN BICOCCA”

A diffused museum was thought to be especially appropriate for the Bicocca district, given its history of architectural transformation, which modified and stratified the neighbourhood's buildings and their functions, giving rise to the coexistence of multiple dimensions [3], and for an open campus, such as that of Milano-Bicocca University [4]. Notably, the concept of the diffused museum dates back to the work Fredi Drugman [5], who in the 1970s already aspired to leveraging the close relationship between an area and its heritage. No longer a museum that fulfils all its functions and completes all its projects inside its own walls, but rather heritage that is situated in a given area, is in dialogue with this area, cultivates a relationship with it, and constructs pathways for the public to use and participate in it. "According to this new meaning, "museums" become - for their local communities - sites of public ownership of the artistic patrimony produced by the community itself, and of the community's own peculiar history; they are an instrument for helping people to become more aware of their origins and to transmit the past to future generations; it offers a service to users by disseminating distributed knowledge concerning the area and its culture, including typically local aspects." [6]

In light of this proposal, beginning in the 1970s, growing consensus formed around the idea of bringing to light the value of landscapes, whether natural or urban, by seeking out heritage assets distributed around them, that were recognizable and accessible: "The concept of the distributed museum is underpinned by that of the local area, understood as the repository of traces of the past, which need to be identified, deciphered, and viewed in relation to the heritage assets held in museums, thus acting as a notional external extension of museums and a symbolic place for reconstructing their identity and link with the history and culture generated by the works they conserve." [7]

Each local area has a valuable story to tell that is made up of objects, materials, buildings, nature, people and much more. This narrative should not be confined to closed spaces, but rather be nourished by spatial and temporal relationships and contaminations [8].

One of the leading aims of distributed museums is to offer the local community, first-time and return visitors, the opportunity to hear the many stories deposited over time and to contribute their own, thereby shedding light on what has remained the same and what has changed.

This might be defined as a path towards defining and discovering one's own identity and that of others, where identity is shaped by distributed heritage and the presence of others.

In some cases, these initiatives can lead to the birth of true cultural districts, via networks of works, exhibitions, simple traces, places of interdisciplinary interest (history, art, sciences, anthropology, sociology). Bicocca, as a district of Milan, is well suited to this quest for signs of the past and phenomena that persist over time, because in the course of its history it has often been almost completely cancelled out. A farming community that had survived for many decades, at the edges of a city that was expanding, was almost completely annihilated by the industrialization of the district, which drew thousands of workers like a magnet from nearby areas and further afield. Later, when the factories were closed, further change came, in terms of advanced services industries, the university campus (interspersed among residential buildings) and new companies [9]. Again, the neighbourhood took on an entirely new face. The distributed museum helps to uncover the historical elements present in the area, recomposing and bring to light stories and the past, giving the people themselves voice, but at the same time, also proposing a possible future, the stories of the university students, artworks and scientific exhibits held by the university's various departments [10].

3 FIRST STEPS

Plans for the Diffused Museum in Bicocca included a key digitisation component as is the norm for all twenty-first century museums.

The leading objective of the digital program is the cataloguing of the various collections, with a view to make the university's cultural heritage known and facilitating readings of it at multiple levels, and thus developing the basic frame on which to weave an overall interpretative system for the museum. Indeed, the museum was conceptualized from the start as a flexible instrument, with the potential to generate multiple narratives of its collections, by availing of digital technologies.

But digital technology will also play a crucial part in developing and implementing the museum's communications program, in fulfilment of its mission to connect with the local area as a museum that is intended to be participatory [11] and inclusive. In relation to museum audiences and goals of digital

communications, it is useful to reflect on the construct of museum relevance, because according to Nina Simon [12]: “There are two kinds of people in the world of relevance: outsiders and insiders.

Insiders are in the room. They know it, love it, protect it.

Outsiders don't know your doors exist. They are uninterested, unsure, unwelcome.

If you want new people to come inside, you need to open new doors – doors that speak to outsiders – and welcome them in.”

This perspective informed the very first communications project of the Diffused Museum in Bicocca, which was implemented in the context an event that sees the annual participation of many Milanese museums: Museum City [13]. The 2021 edition of Museo City took place, exclusively online, on 5/6/7 March, on the theme “Museums care for the city”. The Bicocca Diffused Museum took part via a video presentation of three cultural objects that were chosen because they clearly represented the multidisciplinary, international, or participatory values of the university.

3.1 The objects in the collection

The selected objects narrated the university from multiple points of view, including travel, internalisation, research, relations with the business sector and wider community, medical and scientific care, listening, relations with ordinary citizens, and the pre-eminence of the students. The first object was the Patachitra-Bicocca, a large painting measuring 5.65 m (height) by 0.60 m (width), on a support of strips of paper and fabric made by Indian Chitrakar women in the village of Naya, in West Bengal. Like all patachitra or scrolls, it tells a story, divided into squares, with the different scenes separated from one another by intricate patterns of flowers. Patachitra-Bicocca is the outcome of an exchange and research project that culminated in a winter school, *India, formazione, solidarietà, luoghi lontani* [India, education, solidarity, far-away places], attended by over one hundred students of the university [14]. The narrative depicted on the squares of the scroll begins in 2011 and represents the journey of a group of Chitrakar women to Milan, their meeting with students at the university, and, finally, the trip to India of a group of students. The work still speaks to us of the cultural exchange of knowledge and languages, of an open and enriching dialogue.

The second object identified as representative is the Installation 'In the open' by Antonio Pauciolo, originally created for the Maire Tecnimont Group. It is a suspended cube / multi-panelled polyptych, made up of eight canvases, painted using oil and egg tempera techniques. The Neapolitan artist (Vico Equense, 1969) was asked to depict the places and people of the corporation that commissioned the work as they went about their daily work in the company's offices around the world. The work plays on the concepts of interior and exterior, art and industry, work and research, separation and unity, thinking and planning, which are conceived of internally but only take concrete form externally, in the material world. It makes abundant use of Bicocca University's distinctive colours, thus contributing to the dialogue between the inside and outside of the university buildings. The university's students have the opportunity to contemplate this work when they stop for a break, study, talk, eat, or debate, in a lowered garden space that is “underground” but brightly lit, and connects four campus buildings.

The final object, or rather set of objects, is a bag of scientific instruments, dated 1950, and held at the Department of Medicine and Surgery. This midwife's kit speaks of the birth of many children, when midwives attended expectant mothers in their homes and needed to be fully equipped in order to ensure a safe delivery. The midwife was a recognized and respected figure, who played a key role in society then as now. She, the doctor and the teacher were pillars of their local communities. Among the instruments contained in this bag, one of particular interest is Pinard's stethoscope, invented in 1895 for auscultating the fetal heartbeat, which still today, after more than a century, is still viewed as effective in fulfilling its function.

3.2 The video, the event

The making of a short video about the objects in the collection offered the perfect opportunity to experiment with possible connections between collections / universities / audiences. The organizers of the Museo City invited exhibitors to present a six-minute video with their interpretation of that year's theme. The team that worked to develop the Bicocca video included members of faculty who had expert knowledge of the exhibits, communications experts, video-recording experts, and experts in storytelling through the medium of video.

The resulting short film was organized around a set of key aspects, with a view to communicating the characteristics of the distributed museum:

- 1 The choice of locations - The objects are located in different buildings: indeed, the midwife's kit is even held at the university's medical school in Monza. The others are in different buildings on the Bicocca campus, in spaces characterized by a constant flow of students: the patachitra can be seen in its entirety from the escalators, while the work by Pauculo is located in an area that connects several different campus buildings. Even the introduction to the video was filmed in a different space again, namely in the campus' main outdoor square, in front of Arnaldo Pomodoro's work, The Pietrarubbia Group. These diverse locations communicate one of the key characteristics of the Bicocca Distributed Museum: the fact that it is not identified with a specific set of museum rooms.
- 2 Art and science - The objects represent the variety of the collection but also the ability of its different elements to represent a plurality of meanings. The narrative presents the objects but suggests links and relationships within the University itself and between the University and the community.
- 3 The missions of the university - The story of the three objects highlights fundamental aspects of university life: teaching, internationalization, research, contributing to innovation, relations with the local area/community.

Furthermore, the dissemination of the video in the context of a city-wide event highlights the museum's will to speak to the wider community.

The three very different objects allowed us to present a brief overview of what the heritage assets held at the University of Milan Bicocca will offer us, when the cataloguing process has been completed. They underpinned narratives that were a form of direct witness, making tangible the connection between present and past, and enhancing the spectators' knowledge base. The Bicocca campus buildings contain a thousand stories present in these buildings that are encountered every day by the students who frequent them, and which can become a heritage asset to be shared with the local area that is rich in further signs and stories, and a field of knowledge, study and research to which the university intends to devote its attention.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we outlined initial steps taken towards setting up a distributed university museum. The example of Milan-Bicocca University is that of a contemporary university that does not have deposits of ancient and large collections established over the centuries, but which is more oriented towards a positive relationship with the local area/community by acquiring contemporary art works and drawing out the full value of the small collections held by individual departments. The leading focus in this project will thus be its users: students, researchers, university staff, and the general public. The goal is to become a sounding board for the voices of the people who have lived in these places, as they relate to the heritage assets making up the museum. Thus, for example, a collection of photographs of women workers, held at the Department of Sociology, will become an opportunity to reflect, thanks to the contribution of various disciplines, on the role of women and the various transformations in this role that have taken place over the centuries. Old medical equipment allows us to look at medicine, even today, from a different perspective. Historical photographs of the Bicocca district placed along the corridors of the University will become a point of encounter between the students of today and the workers who experienced this place in a completely different way in the past. Stories and people intersect and places become the cornerstone and the lifeblood of this museum that is being born. The same paths of inquiry pursued on campus, which span numerous disciplines from the humanities, education, social and natural sciences, law and economics, will be key to interpreting the objects and heritages in the museum, thus once again underpinning the university's outreach to the wider community. Throughout the initial part of the process, digital technologies were a structural feature, used firstly to begin recording the collections scattered around the various departments, and secondly to make at least a part of these "objects" accessible via various initiatives, such as the above described Museo City event, which took place during the COVID-19 health emergency. Going forward, a virtual museum that is distributed across the university campus and is constant accessible to all, will remain a well-defined, constitutive element of this museum project, alongside small exhibitions and enhancements of the heritage assets in the physical/material dimension. The distributed museum project will thus incorporate both remote and in-person dimensions, via the alternation of complementary actions which are all designed to foster true dialogue with the wider community outside the university [15].

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