

The Maré Museum: the New Social Museology from a Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the case study of the *Maré Museum* in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and how the new museology has affected the creation of community museums in the context of new public policies. Furthermore, the article explains how this initiative helps to create processes of citizen inclusion, reconstruction of history, and reconfiguration of limits and boundaries within cities.

KEYWORDS

new museology; social inclusion; favela museums; museum policies; collective curatorship

PRELIMINARY APPROACHES:

FROM THE NEW MUSEOLOGY TO PUBLIC POLICY

In the 20th century, the great challenge for museums was to bring their collections and museological proposals closer to visitors of all origins, age groups, and social segments. This challenge became a goal, especially after the end of the Second World War (1939-1945), when a process of intense questioning began concerning the social function of museums.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of student movements and the counter-culture, especially in France, cultural institutions, including museums, until then considered elitist, inward-looking, and distant from the communities around them and the everyday



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life of individuals and groups in modern societies, were called into question (Santos, 2007, p. 89).

These currents led to the creation of ecomuseums —museums of society—and served as precedents for the consolidation of community museums in Latin American countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil. In general, these movements, which are embraced by the term *new museology*, found a significant source of inspiration in the reflections of Hugues de Varine Bohan¹ and Georges Henri Rivière².

The truth is that the term *new museology* is a kind of “umbrella discourse” that encompasses different positions that nevertheless have in common their opposition to the traditional museum.

Less than a discourse with well-defined disciplinary boundaries, it is primarily a movement that largely affected the training patterns of museum professionals and brought to the table the social role of these institutions in several countries, including Brazil.

According to the theorists of the new museology, museums must assume their eminently social function, go beyond the conception of “culture” restricted to the production and circulation of elite cultural goods, and project themselves as institutions attuned to democratic societies.

The great concern of this movement was the important presence of the public in the museums, which began to be considered the new focus of these institutions, not in terms of quantity but in the desired interaction between the individual and the object in their different contexts.

As a movement, the new museology began to view the museum as a tool that should encourage changes aimed at social development, through an agenda of actions based on the demands of society and not exclusively on its own collections.

¹ Books such as *The Culture of Others* and the article “Ecomuseums” first published in the journal *La Gazette: Association Canadienne des Musées*, vol. 11, issue no. 2, written by Hugues de Varine, inspired the creation and adaptation of museums whose themes focused on including community participation. The first to apply the theory of Varine was the Musée de l’Homme et de l’Industrie: Ecomusée de la Communauté urbaine Le Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines, built between 1972 and 1984, when Varine was at the helm of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

² In his studies on the role of ICOM museums, Georges Henri Rivière first wrote about the relationship of museums with their environment: *Intégration du musée dans l’environnement*, at the Museum-Environment colloquium, held in Paris between 25 and 30 September 1972. In 1973, Rivière devoted part of his research to the publication and questioning of the condition of the concept *ecomuseum* in different texts, of which *Définition et statut de l’écomusée* stands out, taken from the reports of the training course of Regional Natural Parks, carried out between May 7 and 11, 1973, and a definition of the ecomuseum in the text *L’écomusée en général*, dedicated to the explanation of the new planning of the ecomuseum of the community of Creusot-Montceau. That same year he articulated the concept of *ecomuseum* with programs that were undertaken in places such as the Moudjahid National Museum (Algeria), the educational program of the Nasreddine Dinet National Museum (Algeria) and the Cévennes National Park (France).

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In that sense, while the traditional museum acted in the context of a building based on a collection aimed at a target audience, the new museology impacts on a territory with a heritage oriented to the interests of the surrounding community.

It must be pointed out that, although these new experiences and proposals linked to the new museology movement occurred in different contexts, there has never been an intention to abandon existing collections in traditional museums.

This work concurs with Cândido Duarte when he emphasizes that “The re-evaluation of the object of study of museology and of the focus of action of museums, when it moves away from the collections and tries to concentrate on the relations of man with his heritage” (Duarte, 2002, p. 67), is an essential theme of the new museology that also “contaminated” the work of traditionally conceived museums.

Another interesting point is the influence of the paradigms of the 1972 Santiago de Chile Round Table, especially with the introduction of the concepts of *museum* and *comprehensive heritage*, which ended up approaching the Brazilian museological reality.

In Brazil, which had experienced a difficult moment in its political history at the height of the military dictatorship, the recommendations of this roundtable had such a strong impact that from the 1990s onwards stories of victims, urban development plans that affected underprivileged communities, and cultural activity that had been censored, were recovered. It is even possible to consider that many of these principles are present in the projects that various Brazilian professionals are currently putting into practice due to the relevance of the arguments of comprehensive heritage and the situation that Latin American countries are experiencing concerning their heritage circumstances.

Historically, with regard to the understanding of the social role of museums, it is possible to observe that this conception underwent changes and alterations from different political and institutional projects.

A principle that became a constant concern for museum professionals was to win over those parts of the public that were distant from such institutions.

The new perspective to be borne in mind by these professionals was that the institution would only be an important reference for low-income populations or those entirely outside the museum universe if there were an initiative from the inside out. Thus, museums—and museum professionals—that are genuinely committed to a museology of a social nature should assume a position of open-

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ness that will transform actions that lead to new social demands in their field of action. One of these effective actions, which has gained momentum in recent years, relates to the paradigm of social inclusion.

This discussion encompassed several segments, initiatives, and institutions; it even became a part of public policy platforms that claim to defend this inclusion in their different forms of action.

In terms of public policies in Brazil, it is worth highlighting the enormous positive leap forward made during the Lula period (2003-2010): from that moment on, new conceptual and practical frameworks were established for the *Ministério da Cultura* (Minc), under the management of Minister Gilberto Gil, in addition to the development of a public policy implementation plan without precedent in the history of contemporary Brazil. One of the results of this unprecedented action was the launch, on 16 May 2003, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, of the National Museum Policy. The primary purposes of this policy were to establish and consolidate public policies for the fields of cultural heritage, social memory, and museums. The policy intended to democratize access to cultural goods and, especially, to recognize and guarantee the rights of organized communities to take into their own hands the discussion and implementation of community museums of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and the inhabitants of the favelas of this Portuguese-speaking country.

It took almost five years for the policies to materialize in meetings and dialogue places between the government and the inhabitants of favelas in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It was only in 2008 that the first proposal for a favela museum was consolidated. This initiative coincided with the implementation of the Culture Points,³ the main source for the encouragement of culture in the favelas, and a cohesive axis to make visible the production of its inhabitants in this area. Therefore, with the support of museologist and poet Mario Chagas, then technical advisor to the Museum of the Republic and director of the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* (IPHAN), the members of the *Centro de Estudos*

³ Term coined by Célio Turino, implemented since 2008 by the former Brazilian Ministry of Culture. The Culture Point was the priority action of the Living Culture Program, inaugurated during the Lula da Silva period, when Gilberto Gil was Minister of Culture. To become a Culture Point, a community with scarce resources must propose an initiative. The ministry designates resources for activities to develop where the community lives in order to improve the visibility of local initiatives and include them within the indicators of the ministry. The common characteristic is the connection between culture and management shared by both the government and the community, to formulate new public policies that favor neighborhoods without accessibility or tourist infrastructure, such as favelas.

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e *Ações Solidárias da Maré* (CEASM) designed a space that tells the story of this region, conceived in conjunction with its inhabitants.

THINKING OF A “FAVELA MUSEUM” AS AN EXERCISE IN HISTORICAL REVISION

In order to contextualize the conflicts that Rio de Janeiro has experienced in its urban development and the role that the Maré has played, as well as to evaluate the importance of the inclusion of a community museum in a favela, it is worth summarizing very briefly the history of this complex of squatters' neighborhoods that today amounts to fifteen geographically constituted favelas.

La Maré is a community located on Timbau hill, which borders Guanabara Bay northwest of Rio. For a good part of the 19th century, the area belonged to landowners from the most powerful families in the country. The community was established during the great internal migrations of people mostly from the north of the country, who settled in Rio de Janeiro, when it was the capital, in search of a better way of life.

In order to understand the case of the Maré, it is necessary to understand the birth of the favelas, which since 1950 have become the stereotype of the vulnerable groups of the city, excluded and marginalized by all public sectors of society. Favelas emerged between 1950 and 1970 as an effect of the renovation projects of the city in what is now known as the South Zone. Many people who did not have the money to adapt to the urban reforms were displaced and, as a consequence, began to inhabit the hills that border the most famous beaches in the world, such as Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon. With the passing of time and the demographic explosion, favelas became places for people with few resources who had found in Rio a way, despite the scarce opportunities, to build their homes. Consequently, renovation projects spread throughout the city, such as the construction of Avenida Brasil, which connects the airport to the South Zone, forcing many families to relocate.

The city council and other regulatory bodies tried to destroy the favelas without any success; there was even a saying that for every house they destroyed, two more emerged. Thus the association with the *favela* plants (a type of deciduous bush), known to have been used as protection by the fighters during the War of Canudos,⁴ which since then have given rise to the recognition of the

⁴ Confrontation between the Brazilian Army and the members of a popular and religiously inspired movement led by Antonio Conselheiro, which occurred between 1896 and 1897 in the interior of the state of Bahia.

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Providence hill as the Favela hill. This example served as a starting point to recognize the unauthorized occupation of the wooded areas of the city as favelas.

The noun favela has its origins in the toponym Alto de la Favela, an elevation located south of the town of Belo Monte, scene of the War of Canudos. Favela is the popular name of a plant, common in the Bahian sertão, the scene of the combat. The species described by Euclides da Cunha, in *Os Sertões*, must be the *Cnínodoscolus quercifolius*. These interpretations served to replace the name of the Carioca hill, from Providence to Favela (Pereira de Queiroz, 2011, p. 33).

The region known today as the Maré (a word that means tide), connected by the recently built Brasil Avenue, began to be populated in the 1940s by migrants who had been expelled from other neighborhoods on the shores of the port of Guanabara, and who built stilt houses on the banks of the aforementioned avenue in order not to trespass and not to have land tenure problems with the regulatory bodies of the region. Thus, the inhabitants practically lived on the water. In this way, they began to gain ground and to extend toward the sea. “From its inauguration in 1946, Avenida Brasil became an inseparable part of the landscape of the region, facilitating migration, the access of the inhabitants to their workplaces, the arrival of the necessary material for the adaptation of the land, and for the construction of houses” (Rose, 2007, p. 19).

In 1979 the Rio Project was born, promoted by the Ministry of the Interior and implemented by the Banco Nacional de la Habitação (BNH), which had the objective of “cleaning up the banks of Guanabara Bay” (Rose, 2007, p. 19).

Initially, the idea was to destroy the stilt houses and give the inhabitants social housing to replace the illegal constructions that had taken over the coast, accompanied by a plan of urban organization for the Timbau hill designed by the architect Oscar Niemeyer (Jones, 2017). However, all the buildings around the bay were to be cleaned up and fitted into the governmental plan, which was to provide housing for 1.2 million people.

Many inhabitants were displaced, and their buildings destroyed. These actions caused delays in the reconstruction process and the discontent of those who had already created several population dynamics in the sector. This caused protests and public demonstrations to complain that the government of General Juan Bautista Figueiredo had poorly implemented the project in the areas that

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were to be demolished since the plan did not cover all the people in the region, which had more than 2,000,000 inhabitants.

Despite not having a land title, the houses represented a lifetime of investment and bore no resemblance to the squalid hovels the governments claimed they were. The national government housing complexes, as well as the local one, represented a backward step for many inhabitants of the Maré (Jones, 2017).

The Maré was in the sights of the national media, and the government did not manage to hide—along with the unlawful evictions—the population growth problems that the region was experiencing, so it was forced to stop the bay sanitation project and try to implement it in other sectors, which also resulted in failure. The population was united and concerned about how the government was intervening in the area. It was not until 1994 that the mayor, César Maia, through law 2119 of January 19, 1994 (Rose, 2007, p. 22), declared this complex an official neighborhood of the Prefecture of Rio de Janeiro.

The Maré, until then considered a favela, was treated by the public authorities as an urbanized area, a condition that made the creation of the neighborhood possible. However, since its origin, the existence of the Maré neighborhood was not recognized by most of the inhabitants, who preferred to identify with the surrounding neighborhoods of the region: Bonsucesso, Manguinhos, Ramos, or Penha (Rose, 2007, p. 22).

While this political transition was taking place, the consolidation of the church, the celebrations, and the carnival were other elements of the identity of its inhabitants, so in the early nineties, the Maré was created with funds from the San José church, located on the Timbau hill. Thus, the inhabitants began to portray what was happening in the favelas. The carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Maré, and hundreds of stories from the inhabitants, such as the constructions in the neighborhoods, problems with the police and other stories, became the first “objects” in the archive of the museum.

This initiative served to bring together a small group, composed of Luiz de Oliveira, Carlos Pinto, and Claudia Rose, to create the CEASM in 1997, another initiative whose purpose was “to invent the community, having as its guiding principles the appreciation of the

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place and its history: the memories of the inhabitants and the relevance of the social agents themselves. The study is based on the analysis of oral sources and on the documentary and bibliographical investigation” (Rose, 2007, p. 30). Said initiative also had the objective of supporting and training the students of the neighborhood schools so that they could obtain a good score in the State examinations and have the opportunity to enter public universities.

In 2004, the *Museu da República*, with the help of CEASM, worked to encourage a discussion centered on national history and the construction of the favelas, entitled *From House on Stilts to the Museum*. The exhibition included photographs from archives and elements from the Maré resulting from the remembrance work undertaken by the Memory Center team. Immediately after, motivated by the resources granted in 2005 by the Living Culture Program of the Ministry of Culture, the Maré Museum was created.

The CEASM headquarters served as a meeting point for this project, and a dialog was established with the *Museu da República*, and academics from the *Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro* (Unirio) to think about the possibility of building a museum that would go beyond the usual limits and contrast the beliefs, history, tradition, and archives that it held, supported and mediated by the managers of the neighborhood, who led the CEASM (Figure 1).

FROM MARGINAL TERRITORY TO MUSEUM SPACE CREATED BY ITS INHABITANTS

This whole process led to a museum that created its museological script with the participation of the community, that is, it included the dialog of the inhabitants and the daily discourse that, with time, became part of the official history of Rio de Janeiro that had not been told and that were configured as the materialization of a museological approach that Mario Chagas already practiced in the favelas.

The creation of a participatory model in which museum members decided horizontally was not common in Rio de Janeiro. It was possible to convince the office of the mayor and non-governmental organizations to support the project with the formation of the policy of the Culture Points.

The public policy of the ministry —implemented since 2003— also proposed, as mentioned in the first part of this text, the role of the manager as a crucial element in the promotion of culture in vulnerable sectors:

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FIGURE 1:
Reproduction of
a stilt house as
the centerpiece of
the Maré Museum
(Photograph: David
Suárez, 2017).



The managers of the Culture Points, acting as *brokers*,⁵ will be observed here as important relational subjects between the macro and the micro-political, or between the local and the national. A broker acts between the local and the supralocal levels. This interaction represents the link of shared management and exercises a new model of the State, a social role in public policies (Nunes, 2011, p. 4).

The curatorial script and the exhibition design were devised jointly by the inhabitants of the favela and by experts from different areas, building a model that has a stilt house in the middle of its construction and addressing topics such as migration, the relation-

⁵ The concept of *broker*, worked on by the author, refers to a person who carries out cultural management that helps to generate links between two social actors and change the scenarios of participation promoted by this person.

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ship of the inhabitants with water, everyday things that over time can be musealized, the very particular syncretic beliefs of Brazil, the violence resulting from drug trafficking, and the hope of the inhabitants for the possibility of improving their living conditions.

All this sprang from a museology aimed at promoting new discourses. In one of his texts, Mario Chagas defines this model as a social museology that:

[...] in the perspective presented here, is committed to reducing social injustices and inequalities; to combat prejudice; to improve the quality of collective life; to strengthen dignity and social cohesion; to use the power of memory, heritage, and the museum in favor of the general population, the indigenous peoples and the quilombos, the social movements, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI), the Landless Rural Worker Movement (Spanish: *Movimiento de los Trabajadores Rurales Sin Tierra* [MST]), and others (Chagas & Gouveia, 2014, p. 17).

The construction of this museum and the national recognition by governmental and international entities, such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), opened the way for the museum to be a space for discussion that breaks with the traditional model of a museum, at the service of “the defense of the values of the aristocracy” (Chagas & Gouveia, 2014, p. 17). Thus, a guideline was created to point to a new model of museology to be applied in other favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Over the years, the arguments became more heated. The Maré Museum was consolidated in its place of origin and is now the meeting point for hundreds of local people to reflect on the problems of the area. It not only took up the concept of *ecomuseum*, but transformed it into a space for political discussion, where guests of the stature of Boaventura de Souza have been invited, and which has the active support of the Museum of the Republic in Rio de Janeiro.

Favelas such as Cantagalo e Pavão-Pavãozinho, Manguinhos, Rocinha, and São Bento put their museum models at the service of the community and presented themselves as a bridge to allow access to these places stigmatized by an idea of violence and poverty. In this way, isolated struggles served to understand the social work of the museum as a network, and not an individual enterprise.

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Another key point to consider in the design of this museum is the idea of community participation in the selection and management of collections. The museum is designed from the life of the inhabitants of the neighborhood, not from the objects collected. It is the people who make up the collection and bring it to life. Musealizing life experiences makes the work of the museum be seen as “a movement that, more than a space for disputes, presents general historical frameworks that have been modified over time, according to academic interests, public policies, and local contexts in which it is immersed” (Gohn, 2011, p. 345).

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