

Museums of the Future

Between Promise and Damnation

Mela Dávila-Freire

»The Museum of the Future is a visionary cultural institution currently under construction in Dubai, UAE. [...]

We will be a showplace for a new era – a center of creativity and hope where you can see, touch and shape our shared future. Combining elements of exhibition, immersive theater and themed attraction, the Museum of the Future invites you to look beyond the present and take your place within possible worlds to come. [...]

Like our home city, the Museum of the Future strives to be a place of tolerance where varied cultural, philosophical, social and spiritual outlooks are welcome. We are dedicated to critically exploring the threats and opportunities of our time and hope that you will join us in conceiving a better future for ourselves and our planet.«¹

The Museum of the Future already exists. »Museum of the Future« is the brand of a new cultural institution planned by the Dubai Future Foundation and roughly intended to focus on cutting edge technology, in particular virtual reality, immersive surroundings, robots – and the ways in which human beings will relate to them all. The project is part of an ambitious network of institutions currently being developed in the United Arab Emirates, which also includes, among other plans, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, housed in a building designed by Jean Nouvel and open to the public since November 2017; the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry, the construction of which is expected to start soon, as announced in 2019; and the Zayed Museum, by Norman Foster, which is forecast to rely heavily on loans from the Middle East collection of the British Museum.²

In the first instance, Abu Dhabi's scheme for such an ambitious museum landscape aims to reinforce the UAE's international image by turning the country into a cultural hub of global relevance, strong enough to attract mass tourism—and the economic revenue that comes with this.

But the scheme has another layer of meaning that runs deeper than the mere reinforcement of the tourist industry and is charged with symbolism. The history of Western museums is closely bound up with nation-building processes, which, in turn, were inextricably linked to the exercise of colonial power and the projection of Western standards as the best framework for steering civilization. So, by involving in its museum plans institutions like the Louvre and the British Museum, the United Arab Emirates is symbolically appropriating the cultural heritage – and, in practical terms, the professional expertise—of such fabulous erstwhile colonial powers as the United Kingdom and France, while sending out the message that it is now their country—the former colony—where the power to establish and define cultural canons resides.

Thus, rather than deconstructing colonial structures, this shift of power from metropolis to colony just gives another turn of the (colonial) screw, substituting one legitimating authority for another and avoiding calling into question the command of museums and other cultural institutions—and, by extension, the authority of governments—when it comes to building up collective memory.

The self-assured, virile tone of the words of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, which follow the introduction to the Museum of the Future quoted above, should therefore come as no surprise: »The future belongs to those who can imagine it, design it, and execute it. It isn't something you await, but rather create.«³

»We urgently need to discuss the very idea of museum, its political sense, the outbreak of its function as assigned by Western modernity as a space for the accumulation of heritage and the construction of an official account of history. This forum, taking as a starting point the sharing of experiences stemming from very different contexts, wants to encourage dialogue around the conception of museum itself, and about the specific and situated practice of

different museums in the present. The museum as a sounding board, as a public forum, as a refuge. The museum decentered and put in check from decolonial and feminist approaches. The museum as a project of artists such as Peruvian Museo del Travesti by beloved Giuseppe Campuzano, which tells us about an ephemeral and precarious institution transported on everyone's bodies. A museum beyond itself, overflowing, capable of harboring rituals, inhabited by improper uses and festive moods [...]«⁴

Symbolically and physically located at the very center of a former colonial nation as well, Museo Reina Sofía, in Madrid, is also very aware of its condition as a mighty cultural device, responsible for the construction of memory and the production of collective imaginaries that expand beyond the borders of the national unit where it is based.

Museo Reina Sofía, however, has chosen to tackle this condition by taking an opposite position to the Dubai institutions. Instead of aiming to underline its own legitimation potential and its subsequent capacity to present »the« history of art as an indisputable succession of demonstrated facts, Museo Reina Sofía continuously attempts to short-circuit its essence as a commanding cultural institution and become, instead, a transparent, porous, self-reflective entity from which not just one, but many different—even contradictory—accounts of history may issue.

This is the aim of the museum's exhibition program, its public activities and also, notably, of its archival policy: Museo Reina Sofía has devoted much effort to exploring tactics which exponentially multiply the circulation, accessibility, and interlegibility of its archival holdings, based on the belief that these features are necessary if the museum is to create a real space for the collective production of knowledge and alternative readings of history.

Indeed, it can be argued that such an attitude of institutional self-questioning is permanently counteracted by the museum's own scale, sanctioning power, and international projection—which are gigantic—and by the bureaucratic complexities of its daily management—equally enormous. This means, in fact, that Museo Reina Sofía is perpetually facing a contradiction in terms. And yet, this contradiction does not diminish the potential of the museum's undertaking, which has already succeeded in opening new paths for exploration in terms of what cultural institutions can do and how they can work in our present time.

In a lecture performance and artist's publication devoted to the background and history of Stefan Zweig's essay »Brasil, país do future« (1941), Carla Zaccagnini comments on how her country is widely perceived to be eternally hopeful for the future—and on the flip side of this, namely the country's inability not only to solve present problems, but even to address them properly: »Brazil continues to be the country of the future, its name still followed by this sentence. Something between a promise and a damnation. As the future is a time that can never be reached, a time always behind the curve. Future is to time what the horizon line is to space. The world turns around and the horizon is still in the horizon.«⁵

Zaccagnini's words resonate with a particular strength when discussing the future of museums and cultural institutions in general. The concept of »the future« for museums is problematic in the same way that, as Zaccagnini points out, the permanent projection of »the future« can be problematic for a nation. Museums cannot, and should not, leave for »the future« choosing which position they want to take in relation to power: to their own power, to the powers – political, economical—they are subjected to, and to the power they can lend to agents and voices outside their walls. Museums are not required to make plans for a future that, as concepts such as public good or common knowledge are seriously threatened, may never arrive; but rather to take positions and develop strategies right now, in the present time, with whatever means they have at hand... not leaving for tomorrow what can be done today.

Notes

- 1 From the website »Museum of the Future,« at: <https://www.museumofthefuture.ae/> in January 2020.
- 2 Cf. Andrew MacClellan: »Museum Expansion in the 21st Century,« in: *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1 (2012), pp. 271-293.
- 3 <https://www.museumofthefuture.ae/>
- 4 Ana Longoni in the announcements on social media of the activity »Encuentro de Musealidades Alternativas« [Meeting on Alternative Musealities], programmed for the end of February 2020 at Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.
- 5 Carla Zaccagnini: *Brasil, país do futuro. Un livro sobre o livro*, Valencia 2016, p. 46. The lecture performance dates back to 2014.