

Brůža, Oskar

Proceedings of the conference New Definition of the Museum: Its Pros and Cons : information and considerations

Museologica Brunensia. 2023, vol. 12, iss. 1, pp. 86-89

ISSN 1805-4722 (print); ISSN 2464-5362 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2023-1-7>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78637>

License: [CC BY-SA 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Access Date: 18. 02. 2024

Version: 20231016

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE NEW DEFINITION OF THE MUSEUM: ITS PROS AND CONS – INFORMATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

OSKAR BRŮŽA

<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2023-1-7>

On the cover of the last issue of this journal, we can see the director of the Technical Museum in Brno, Ing. Ivo Štěpánek, opening the conference “New Definition of the Museum: Its Pros and Cons” held on 7 and 8 March 2022. On pages 32–48 of the same issue, a contribution by Mgr. Lucie Jagošová, PhD. and doc. Mgr. Otakar Kirsch, Ph.D. was published, in which they evaluated the results of a questionnaire survey on the museum definition, carried out in spring 2021. Most of the contributions have already been published in both Czech and English versions.¹ On the eve of the ICOM General Conference in Prague, the participants reflected upon whether it makes sense to change the valid definition. Partial questions were also discussed, such as the significance of questionnaire surveys for the creation of a new definition, non-profitability, the issue of tangible and intangible heritage, virtual reality, and also the perhaps still marginal phenomenon of a museum without collections. The employees of the Technical Museum in Brno once again demonstrated their excellent organisational skills

and made the participants’ stay more pleasant by opening an exhibition dedicated to the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, which they took over from their Polish colleagues. The collected volume, edited by Jan Dolák and Josef Večeřa, contains 10 written contributions to which Jan Dolák added a short summarizing introduction. In my text, I inform about all contributions, but in more detail only about those in which the authors managed to get closer to the goal of the conference, which was drawing attention to the pros or cons of the (as of March 2022, only proposed) new museum definition.

The contribution by PhDr. **Petra Mertová**, Ph.D. from the Technical Museum in Brno titled **Experience of the musealisation of the intangible cultural heritage of the Brno wool industry** was a case study from her own practice. She demonstrated the effort to “capture (musealise) this intangible heritage in working in the field and with witnesses” using the example of demolished or empty factory halls without scrapped machines, i.e. potential collection items, and the old age of the last witnesses of production procedures and working conditions.

Mgr. **Jiří Šabek** from the National Museum in Prague describes in his extensive contribution **The museum as a meeting place – inspiration from the German-**

speaking area what provoked the effort to supplement the existing museum definition with current goals. He states that “*the idea of museums without collections, based more on the tradition of kunsthalls, but taking inspiration in the history, for example, of Dresden’s Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, is today generally accepted, and in fact for many this concept represents the future of museums as an institution*”. At the same time, he also refers to the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO),² founded in 1992 and based in Berlin, which, on the contrary, emphasizes on its website that “*Museums safeguard tangible and intangible evidence of the manmade and natural world for current and future generations. Museums collections (highlighted by O. B.) tell a rich variety of stories, interpreting past and present history.*” He concluded with a neutral opinion that the definition “*can never be fully generalisable to all museum institutions, and similarly no museum can ever fully correspond to all the demands which present society places on museums.*”

Historical insight into the issue was provided by Mgr. **Pavel Holman** from the Technical Museum in Brno. In the well-arranged text **Evolution of the definition of a museum**, he describes the journey from the

1 DOLÁK, Jan and Josef VEČEŘA (eds.). *Nová definice muzea aneb její klady a záporny: sborník přednášek ze stejnojmenné konference*. Brno: Technické muzeum v Brně, 2022. ISBN 9787-80-7685-010-1. English version of the collected papers was published as DOLÁK, Jan and Josef VEČEŘA (eds.). *New Definition of the Museum: Its Pros and Cons. Proceedings of the Conference* [online]. Brno: Technical Museum in Brno, 2022 [accessed 2023-05-02]. Available from www: <<https://www.tmbno.cz/produkt/new-definition-of-the-museum-its-pros-and-cons>>.

2 About us. In *NEMO Network of European Museum Organisations* [online]. [accessed 2023-05-02]. Available from www: <<https://www.ne-mo.org/about-us.html>>.

Temple of the Muses to the basis of today's concept formulated by French encyclopaedists. More attention is paid by him to the Czech environment and wordings in the Otto's and Masaryk's academic dictionaries. He cites § 2 of Act No. 54/1959 Coll. on museums and galleries: *"Museums and galleries are institutions which on the basis of investigation, or scientific research, systematically collect, professionally manage and process the collections of tangible documentary material on the evolution of nature and society, on artistic creation or other kinds of human activity using scientific methods, and utilise these collections for cultural and educational outreach purposes."* The creators of entries in all our later encyclopaedias were based on this definition. In the end, the author informs how the personalities of Czech museology (J. F. Svoboda, J. Neustupný, J. Beneš and Z. Z. Stránský) defined the museum and states: *"Despite these attempts by major Czech museologists, none of their definitions gained traction amongst the experts. From the mid-1950s, either the definition within the Act on Museums was used, or later the definition adopted by the international organisation ICOM was used"*.

Critical comments on the proposals for the new definition were presented by Mgr. **Tomáš Drobny** and Mgr. **Pavla Vykoupilová** from the Moravian Museum in their contribution **The educational function of museum culture and its reflection in the definition of a museum**. They consider the official proposals to be misleading: *"Producing a definition of a museum under these circumstances as a vision of the institute in future would also mean that we are convinced that all museums have, or should have, the same programme. These observations suggest that the tendency towards an activist approach to formulating a new definition of a museum is not appropriate."* Support in museum

collections is essential for museum education. A collection is a feature that can be used to distinguish museums from *"educational or entertainment projects being set up which use exhibitions or virtual media products to connect with the general public, and which make use of the name 'museum' or 'gallery' for their presentation."* In the end, they plead for a *"definition minimum for museums and museum culture in general which is fundamentally unchanging, because it captures the method by which the human need to collect is grasped, something that has been part of our culture since the period of Greek thinking to the present day."*

The same conclusion regarding the museum collections was also reached by PhDr. RNDr. **Richard R. Senček**, PhD. from the Slovak Mining Museum in Banská Štiavnica in the contribution **f – Múzeum**. The "f" here stands for either a futuristic true (real) museum or a fictitious (pseudo) museum. The author bases himself on the concept of museality by Z. Z. Stránský and, using the knowledge of C. Lévi-Strauss and U. Eco and the argumentation of W. Gluziński and J. Dolák, he analyses the question of truth, legitimisation of knowledge both in the form of storage in collections and, conversely, in the form of reference to collections. He also investigated the possibilities of cooperation between a "classical" museum and the virtual environment and came to the conclusion that the support in collections is essential for professional outputs in a digital form. *"A museum without authentic exhibits (musealia) is a museum without truth. It is like metallurgy without metal, a library without words in books. A museum without collections is not a museum!"* And the author "hit the nail on the head" in another way as well. He explained why some facilities refer

to themselves as museums. *"This is because a museum has a number of forms and approaches to activities and a **lucrative trademark**."* (highlighted by O. B.).

An opposing opinion was expressed by Mgr. **Jakub Jareš**, Ph.D. and Bc. **Karolína Bukovská** from the MUSEum+ organisation in Ostrava. In the contribution **Museum without collections?! Museums' new role and discussion of their definition**, they refer to the questionnaire survey mentioned in the introduction. Its results, according to them, *"showed that emphasis on a collection as the core defining hallmark of museums is not a homogeneous position in the Czech Republic. In terms of frequency, the term 'heritage' was in top place, a term encompassing collections, but which is more universal and emphasises a relationship to that which is handed down from generation to generation. The Czech terms vzdělávání and edukace, both referring to education, were in second and third place, while collections were only in fourth place"*. However, the use of the word "only" is somewhat manipulative. Of the 499 responses obtained, "heritage" was in first place (411 = 83%), "learning" was second (394 = 7%), "education" was third (354 = 71%) and "collections" were "only" in fourth place (353 = 71%). There is no difference between the third and the fourth place. The result rather shows that the collection-based foundations are accepted by the majority of museum workers as essential. Their organisation is somewhat different: *"The museum which we work for – the new state-subsidised organisation MUSEum+ – does not yet have any collection either. While the museum will gradually create one, it is **not meant to be one of its primary activities**. The principal emphasis will be placed on presentation, education and participation as activities which form the **essence of the museum, just***

as a collection does.” (highlighted by O. B.) On the website, they cite museums (sic!) as their inspiration, such as the Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Berlin’s Futurium, the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro or the Zollverein complex in Essen. They refer to them as museums, although only one facility out of the four named has this designation in its name, and only the last of them would be suitable for this designation as a technical monument. This contribution deserves attention because it concerns the use or misuse of the name “museum” as a brand. Not everyone does, e.g. VIDA! – although the amusement science park in Brno competes with the Technical Museum in a certain sense, the name does not lie. There is no doubt about the usefulness of these facilities, but their efforts should be focused on enhancing their own prestige and promoting their own grant programmes, not on diluting the world of museums.

The author of the text **New Museum Definition 2022. What do Slovak museologists think**, Mgr. **Františka Marcinová** from the Association of Slovak Museums, states the following about their questionnaire survey: *“The result indicated that Slovak museologists are rather conservative and do not really feel the need for a new definition.”* How did the Slovak colleagues respond? The basic question asked whether or not the current definition should be changed. The result was 21.9% yes, 40.6% no, the rest was not interested. Even the non-profitability is not necessary in the definition according to the majority of Slovak museum workers (68.8%). They are also clear about the issue of collections. *“Museums cannot exist without collections.”* And the final summarization: *“The consensus of all museologists in our environment is that a museum*

without collections is not a museum. We are open to the not-for-profit concept, for we all agree that profit should not be the main reason for establishing and operating museums. Museologists in Slovakia see museums as permanent scientific and educational institutions and organizations which not only acquire, preserve, manage, and present, but above all protect their collections.”

The contribution by Mgr. **Václav Rutar** from the National Technical Museum in Prague **Why do we need a new museum definition, after all?** is also based on the results of the questionnaire survey carried out in the Czech Republic. The author is not one of those who consider the method of composing a definition from the statistically most frequent words to be unproductive. *“The methodology selecting the right terms appears to be the right one – we need, however, to remember that a definition isn’t just a set of selected words, but rather words put together and, according to a number of practitioners I agree with, also a clear and succinct definition allowing for an understandable translation.”* This method was also chosen for the preparation of draft definitions for the 26th ICOM General Conference in Prague in August 2022. The author recalls the nearly fifty-year validity of the existing definition and describes the broader context of terminological works within ICOM. He also points to the activities of the documentation committee (CIDOC) and the publication of the dictionary *Dictionarium museologicum*, in the creation of which I, together with Zbyněk Z. Stránský, participated in 1985–1986, and describes how the work on the new definition has progressed in recent years. However, the question of whether we need a new definition of the museum must be answered by the readers themselves.

The topic of the conference was treated in full detail by PhDr. **František Šebek** from the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Pardubice. In the text **Where is the museum world heading in the midst of early 21st century changes?**, he states: *“In terms of logic, we need to observe certain rules in defining a term. [...] It is particularly important to enshrine the vital role of museums in creating museum collections within the definition.”* He justifies the importance of differentiating museums from other facilities with an exhibition and education programme, because *“... it appears that those voices which claim that the core essence of a museum is not creating collections, that some ‘museums’ need not be institutions with collections and it is enough when just ‘some museum functions’ are fulfilled are growing stronger. I think this is a grave error...”* He critically evaluated the proposals for a new definition: *“There are a large number of ambiguous expressions, often close or identical in meaning. The primary attributes of the formulated meaning of the term are hard to find, and they do not create a coherent whole. From a formal perspective, it is not the definition of a term, but rather a proclamation on the recommended focus of museum activities, almost with the characteristics of an ideological political manifesto.”* In the text and several times in the discussion, he proved that the way how the proposals for the new definition of the museum were created is not the right one. Mostly, however, in the absence of those who should listen to his words above all. And the words that the author incorporated into the text are almost prophetic: *“If museums are not acknowledged this irreplaceable (crucial) role in the definition of the term, the museum world will begin to crumble and collapse. The word ‘museum’ will only carry on as a marketing tool...”*

A single contribution also offered an alternative proposal for the definition of a museum. It was presented under the title **Moving on the definition of a museum – without philosophy or poetics** by doc. PhDr. **Jan Dolák**, Ph.D. from the Comenius University in Bratislava. First, he distinguished two basic approaches – the philosophical-museological and the practical one, where the aim of the latter is to create “*a simple, apt, concise definition which is also understandable and substantive, and certainly strictly apolitical*”. He recommended that “*the Kyoto wording remain in the history books of the discipline and that something else be focused on*” with the remark that “*it is better to leave the current definition as it is than to adopt a worse definition.*” He also thought about why other memory professions do not bother with redefinition, why librarians or archivists, for example, are not engaged in this issue for years. The reasons may be different, but the most likely seems to him that “*the museum world has succumbed (and not for the first time) to the endless desire for gnoseological manifestations and self-definitions*

which do not result in much of any use.” Regarding the method of creating the definition, he remarked that before the meeting in Kyoto, the proposal was drawn up by experts, which is in principle correct. He does not see failure in the method, but in the execution. In four points, he elaborated on what everyone who intends to deal with terminology and the creation of definitions not amateurishly or emotionally, but in a qualified manner should know. He considers the work based on a questionnaire survey to be useful for investigating how museum workers perceive their field, but not for drawing up a definition. From the previous, he inferred that “*the final wording could comprise three parts:*

- a) *A preamble – a descriptive discussion of museums, in which some terms from the ICOM questionnaire, or from the ICOM Code of Ethics could be used – this part is not essential,*
- b) *the actual definition,*
- c) *comments, explanations.”*

After further elaboration of his reasoning, he offered a new definition as a working version:

“*A museum is a permanent organisation which communicates its collections. A museum is open to the public and generally does not make profit.*”

What to say in conclusion? The conference had the ambitious goal of “*summarizing the results and, through the Museological Commission of the Czech Association of Museums and Galleries, handing them over to the ICOM Czech National Committee, which can use them as a basis for further negotiations and work.*” The participants actually attempted the impossible, and the speakers mostly did not even aim for agreement, but rather presented their opinions in parallel, or some tried to get support for them. However, the meeting was useful in its diversity. In the end, a document was created that our museology does not need to be ashamed of.

OSKAR BRŮŽA
freelance museologist, Brno,
Czech Republic
Bruza.Oskar@seznam.cz

