New museums have become important players on the cultural scene, attracting international tourists, while contributing to economic revival and greater outreach. Architecture, scenery and narratives are combined to express new visions of the world, while retelling the stories of the past from a new point of view. This session explores the contemporary relationship between museums as places for artistic and cultural expression and their diverse audiences. A museum can be considered “new” not only thanks to its architecture or use of technology, but also thanks to its innovative development strategies, the revitalisation of its existing collections or its emergence as a new source of creativity.

Background Note

Globalisation and Museums

In recent decades, museums have recognised the need to operate within the framework of a global society and its constantly changing social and economic realities. This recognition is also reflected in Paragraph 13 of the 2015 Recommendation on Museum, where Member States are called upon to “promote the safeguarding of diversity and identity . . . of museums without diminishing their role in the globalized world”. The days where museums acted as cabinets of curiosity for the rich are over. Museums are no longer defined simply by their buildings and collections, but rather as places where “professional and public performances are scripted and staged”. With increasing developments in tourism, technology and international travel, museums have had to adopt a strong, all-embracing and universal identity in this increasingly globalized world. New technologies have helped museums reach out to new audiences. For instance, the British Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York are two of the most searched-for cultural institutions on the Internet, while the Louvre alone receives more than 4,000 web visitors from Japan alone each day.

2 Paragraph 13 2015 Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museum and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society
Advancements such as these are sparking change and expanding the traditional relationships between museums and their audiences. Indeed, Paragraph 19 of the 2015 Recommendation recognizes the importance of ICTs for the preservation, study, creation and transmission of heritage and related knowledge.

The British Museum and the Louvre were seen as the first “universal” museums and these museums acted as examples for many other European nations to follow. Some new states established museums during the museum boom of the mid-to-late 20th century, and used these institutions to complement and display their national political process, though other states embarked on more modern missions.5 The Fort Apollonia Museum of Nzema Culture and History in Ghana is a site with a complex history embracing important local narratives, colonial exploitation and 20th century Western-led ethnographical research. The museum, opened in 2010, tells the story of the local people, their history and culture through the prism of this shared local, national and international history.6 Ghana is not alone in examining both local and international themes. In Vietnam, the Women’s Museum, a cultural-historic gender museum, illustrates and advocates for women in Vietnam, while also acting as a space where exchanges can take place between women from around the world.7 These examples demonstrate that the ideals envisaged by the 2015 Recommendation are currently being practiced by many institutions and governments.

Bilbao – the First New Museum?

Museums can be much more than learning and collecting institutions, a fact recognised by Paragraphs 14 and 15 of the Recommendation which acknowledges museums activities in relation to the economy and quality of life. This is clearly evident in the so-called “Bilbao effect”, and many cities have attempted to emulate that city’s success in recent years. The Spanish city of Bilbao experienced a severe recession in the 1980s, and prompted local and regional initiatives to redevelop and regenerate decayed urban areas. However, the focal point of this redevelopment effort was the construction of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao8 and the eye-catching building went a long way towards placing the spotlight on Bilbao, establishing it as a centre for modern and contemporary art.9

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While critics once claimed that the Guggenheim was out of step with the traditions and culture of the Basque region, the Museum has since collaborated extensively with local Basque and Spanish artists. The Museum has also conducted numerous outreach efforts and education programmes, reinforcing the cultural and social context of the city. Along with local actors, it has emphasized a vision of change for the city, and played a key role in developing the Basque Tourism Policy, which was almost non-existent in the 1990s. The Guggenheim in Bilbao was not the sole factor in the regeneration and reinvention of the city, but it nonetheless helped to transform Bilbao from an industrial port to a fashionable town with a service economy. The Museum has become a top-tourist attraction, bringing in an average of 1 million visitors a year, and been credited with creating 1,200 jobs in the region. Many post-industrial cities around the world, from the United Kingdom to China, are seeking to follow the success of Bilbao's Guggenheim, developing Guggenheim-type institutions to spark their own revitalization. However, as many museum professionals have acknowledged, Bilbao's experience is not easily replicated. A combination of factors, from government backing, to a favourable economic atmosphere, to local support and world class architects are imperative for creating the “Bilbao Effect”.

**Architecture and its Role in Shaping Landscapes and Narratives**

Most museums occupy buildings built for a different purpose. For example, the Louvre began its existence as a royal domain. The museums boom after the Second World War and decolonisation required purpose-built homes for the many new museums being established across the globe. Some artists, curators and members of the public are wary that the construction of iconic buildings can distract from the collections, while others note that these new buildings have the power to shape the narrative of an entire city. This debate is however important to evaluate the social and economic role of museums, in relation to Paragraph 14 of the UNESCO Recommendation.

The Museu da Amanha (the Museum of Tomorrow) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has embraced not just modern architecture, but also modern technology. Another example of the “Bilbao effect”, it is the centrepiece in the rejuvenation of Rio’s old port and, aside from its striking architectural design by several Catalan architects, sustainability is a key concept of its design. It uses 40% less energy that other conventional buildings and 9% of its electricity comes from its solar panels. The main exhibits are largely digital and interactive, and architecture is a used to express the essence of the collection. The entire museum itself is a bold statement about sustainability and mankind’s future, suggesting

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10 Plaza & Haarich op. cit.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid. p. 1459
that technology can be part of the solution to the problems facing mankind. Moreover, the Amanha also tells a universal story that is not exclusively Brazilian.

In the Middle East and Gulf Region, there has also been a dramatic expansion of museums, particularly those designed by “starchitects” on the scale of the Bilbao Guggenheim or larger. While the region has a rich archaeological and cultural heritage, many new museums have sought to portray a new, modern vision of their regions. Many of these large construction projects, such as the development of “intergovernmental agreement” museums, have drawn criticism for focusing solely on tourists. However, they are also part of a project to diversify the regional economy away from oil. By creating transnational and cosmopolitan heritage projects, the Abu Dhabi Government has said that they are “contributing to the strengthening of intercultural dialogue and the appreciation of different cultures [through the exchange of culture]”. This is another factor behind the establishment of many high profile museums in the region.

These “intergovernmental agreement” museums are not the only projects employing “starchitects”. Other Abu Dhabi museums more focused on national and local needs are equally ambitious with regards to design, as evidenced by the planned development of a museum dedicated to national political figures and a maritime museum that will examine the trading history of the Gulf. The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, designed by Ieoh Ming Pei, embraced traditional Islamic architecture, emphasising the regional Islamic culture and the contribution of Islam to the art world. The Emirate of Sharjah took this a step further with the establishment of the Sharjah Museums Department in 2006 to oversee the running of its nineteen museums, including the Museum of Islamic Civilisation. The main purpose of the Department has been to strategically oversee the running of these museums, for the benefit of the locals, as well as tourists, highlighting Sharjah as the cultural capital of the UAE.

New Museums as Vehicles for Cultural Diplomacy

The Sharjah Museums Department and Abu Dhabi are not unique in using museums as tools of cultural diplomacy. The opening of the Mohammed VI Contemporary and Modern Art Museum in Rabat, Morocco, represented the first new museum in the

16 Due to the negative connotations connected to the franchising of cultural heritage institutions, the development of large heritage franchise partnerships between museums and states are publically presented as ‘intergovernmental agreements’ (Wakefield op. cit., p.100)
17 Wakefield , op. cit., p. 105
18 Manal Ataya & Aisha Rashed Deemas "Museums and the Representation of Islamic Culture: Sharjah Case Study" in Museum International Vol. 63, No. 3 – 4, 2011, p. 60
country since its independence from France. Providing creative, professional and high-level facilities to help promote the principles of cultural democratization, the museum has emphasised that it has an important role to play in the Government’s modernisation policy for the country as a whole. Like many other high-profile ventures, the Mohammed VI Museum was built in collaboration with international partners, including the Louvre in France and the Smithsonian in the United States, asserting that the museum “[establishes] a platform to explore opportunities for exchange and partnership”. International collaboration is another feature of the Musée de civilisation noire in Dakar, which is being financed by China and highlighted as a new “universal” museum, in an African context. The Museum is not purely a Senegalese endeavour or an attempt to display a national narrative. Rather, as the director of the museum has stated, it tells the story of the vibrant civilizations of all Africa and use the museum to build bridges between the countries of the region. The Dakar project is perhaps one of the most high-profile examples of the aims of the 2015 Recommendation in practice at the moment, specifically Paragraph 35, which encourages Member States to promote international cooperation, especially with regard to developing countries.

Revitalization of Collections and Public Policy

Novelty of museums is not only an issue of their infrastructure. It is also about museums continually working to innovate and connect with new audiences. For the past two years, the National Museum of Burkina Faso has worked to better demonstrate the cultural specificities of the ethno-cultural groups who share the national territory. Through integrated activities (exhibitions, fairground activities, public lectures), the museum allows cultural groups to express themselves, leading to an increased awareness and museum attendance. These are activities which clearly demonstrate the social role museums play, as recognised by the UNESCO Recommendation.

Possibilities of mutually beneficial relationships in museum development and policies are growing as museums forge new collaborations, exchanges and enriched knowledge through research. In Egypt, the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) is currently one of the largest museum development projects in the world. Located near the Giza Pyramids, the new museum will hold over 100,000 artefacts, previously held in other museums, including Tutankhamen’s collection. GEM’s conservation centre was completed in 2010 through a cooperation agreement with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which provided technical and financial assistance.

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21 Merran op. cit.
24 Paragraphs 16 and 17.
24 Paragraphs 16 and 17.
24 Paragraphs 16 and 17.
26 UNESCO 2015 Recommendation, Paragraph 15
Conclusion

Many of the ideas of the 2015 Recommendation are already reflected in examples across the world and UNESCO is accompanying on-going endeavours such as the Black Civilisation Museum in Dakar, Senegal, or National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo. Museums, both old and new, remain cultural “lighthouses” for many countries. Globalisation has brought with it many new challenges, but it has also created infinite possibilities. New technologies, the advent of a global economy and international tourism have allowed museums to engage in new partnerships, reach out beyond their traditional audience and reframe their narratives, while serving as an intersection between national and international narratives. Some cases have contributed to a significant economic revival of a region or city. While shrinking public subsidies and support should be addressed, the fundamental functions and integrity of museums and collections should not be compromised by only economic or speculative means. 26

Museum architecture has been another nexus of globalised cooperation and increased exchanges among museums and various stakeholders. These collaborations yield a new and exciting opportunity to reimagine urban landscapes, stage of collections and foster intercultural dialogue. As icons of urbanization, museums exercise a powerful role as ‘cultural ambassadors’. It is also important to value the creative reuse of existing museum collections and new outreach efforts, which represent the tireless efforts of museums to reinvigorate their missions for a new generation. Combined, collections and buildings, professionals and audiences, offer an exciting opportunity to tell a new story to the world.

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26 UNESCO 2015 Recommendation, Paragraph 15