The Challenges for Museums in Abandoned Lands

Mr. Luís Raposo, archaeologist,
President of ICOM-Europe, Portugal

One of the basic principles of the FARO Convention is the consideration of Cultural Heritage (CH) as a matter for the present – not just a relic from the past. In this regard, community involvement appears as pivotal in projecting and evaluating CH politics – which on their side will also have to contribute for the benefit of communities. Departing from a few selected Portuguese examples, one of the most radical issues relating to heritage revitalization is addressed here: what to do in territories (almost) abandoned, either because of economic or political reasons. Migration is viewed here from the emigrant point of view, not from immigrant one. And the hard question of knowing who needs museums instead of employment generators in depopulated depressed lands will not be avoided.

The so-called Faro Convention, or, more accurately, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage (CH) for Society, establishes in its Article 8 (Environment, heritage and quality of life) the need to "reinforce social cohesion by fostering a sense of shared responsibility towards the places in which people live". The problem arises when virtually "no people lives" in places where CH values are documented and could, ideally, be used to promote quality of life in general.

Of course, a lot of causes can cause the abandonment of territory by local populations. Some natural (catastrophes, climate changes, etc.), others human (war, terrorism, etc.). In Europe and in recent years we tend to see this problem occurring mostly outside of our "European fortress" and giving origin to more or less ample and dramatic masses of immigrants and refugees. We have, however, to bear in mind that the most universal, in time and space, cause for territorial abandonment is the economic one. And that the same people seen as immigrants in one region of reception are in fact, first and most of all, emigrants in their original homelands. Seen under this perspective, Europe has never been only, or mainly, a recipient territory, but an extremely important place where successive emigration waves (internally and externally) occurred all along the time and still occur today.

One EU funded project, currently underway, addresses the question of community involvement in CH and Museums, trying to get

mutual knowledge and learning between Europe and Latin-America and Caribbean: EU-LAC-MUSEUMS - Museums and Community: Concepts, Experiences, and Sustainability in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean (http://eulacmuseums.net). One of its aims, as illustrated in its conceptual model, is to research on situations occurred in different countries relating to heavy degrees of abandonment and to observe and collect experiences allowing for local communities to cope with this dramatic issue, having museums and CH recourse as useful devices for sustainability, empowerment and quality of live.

The Portuguese situation is particularly instructive in relation to the impact of emigration in landscape. Almost all along its history, Portugal has been much more a "giving" land, than a "receiving" one. Several factors have contributed for this: geographical European eccentricity, political regimes (the longest dictatorship in western Europe 20th century) and natural disasters (successive earthquakes, being the one of 1755 the most known worldwide; several floods, being the ones of 1967 the most catastrophic, with large hundreds of deaths; severe and prolonged dry seasons, as occurs currently). In recent years, Portugal was the 12th country in the world with more emigration and the 1st or the 2nd in the EU. There are 31,2 million Portuguese spread around the world and less than 10 million inside the country. Portuguese communities abroad are in some cases extremely numerous: more than 1 million people in Paris and surrounding area; 16% of the population in Luxembourg (a country where 37% of the inhabitants are foreigners). The obvious reverse of the coin is that vast Portuguese areas are heavily depopulated, hundreds of villages have literarily been abandoned and thousands are still occupied by scarce number of persons, the elderly for the most part.

When facing extreme situations of depopulation, the difficulty, thus, is to know what reasonably can CH and Museums add in favor of communities. A few Portuguese examples can illustrate possible inspirational avenues to positively answer this question. Let's briefly see some of them:

1) The **Museum of Mértola** was initially promoted by a civic association, the Archaeological Mértola Field (which still is the main vitalizing force), and later formally integrated in the municipal structure. It is located in the interior of Alentejo, out of the main roads from Algarve to Lisbon; being a fairly traditional, although polynucleated, museum, it has developed important educational activities; it acts also as a hub for research, most of it international (connecting both sides of the Mediterranean), involving an important relation with universities and post-graduating programs; this all activity gave origin to a sort of "landmark", linking Mértola to CH, and a very important part for foreigners and tourists in general, which are for the most part forced to make a detour to visit the place, are attracted by that marker; new restaurants, hotels and other facilities emerged as a consequence, in a region otherwise depressed by deep depopulation.

2)	The **Museum of Rurality** is located in the same region, not far away from Mértola. It is also owned by the municipality (Castro Verde county) and also polynucleated, with poles in several villages; the archaeological component is less important here; the exhibitions are mostly ethnographic; especial attention is given to orality and musical traditions, with the particular local viola campaniça (country side viola) in evidence and several logistic spaces (projection room, documentation centre, etc.); one of the most popular places is the Taberna (the typical assembling place), where traditionally mostly men meet to drink and sing the cante alentejano; these museologic poles are not conceived to attract thousands of visitors, much less foreigners, but to assemble local communities, where, for instance, festivities all along the year are commonly prepared and where people "just meet" to talk… and they have been successful in doing so.

3)	The **Costume Museum**, is located in the interior of Algarve, away from the most touristic areas. It belongs to the local Misericórdia (a medieval rooted civil society institution, close to the church, but owned by the community, acting on the basis of volunteering, with merciful or caring purposes). In the first approach, it is a traditional museum with permanent exhibitions on costumes and local historical events; what is particular here is the diversity of activities and strong involvement of communities in them, with an important participation of foreigner residents; activities like folk dance, choral singing, traditional embroidery, languages learning, etc. are common and an extremely original project of family albums archiving has consistently been pursued, throughout the registering of personal testimonials and ancient photos; in doing all of this, the museum appears as the meeting point for all the county, a place where depopulation is not the main constraint, but rather a place where the problem of depopulation is mitigated by the successful interaction between foreigners and locals.

4)	The **Ecomuseum of Barroso**, is located in the North of Portugal, close to Spain (Galicia) in an extreme remote, rural region, highly depopulated; it documents a mountain environment, with clear geographic regional delimitations, and long rooted, pre-roman, identity, linked to its supposed sacred nature (the mountain where gods landed in earth); differentiated rich cultural practices, especially with respect to rural life and religiosity, still are vivid today and the museum follows these, by organizing common activities, related to season's cycles, walking circuits and contact with artisans, folk festivals and mystical happenings, which become a sort of "trademark".

5)   The **Quintadona Village**, more than a "museum" is a developmental project, managed by locals with the technical support of the Department in Heritage Studies of the University of Porto; the location of the village, near the "big town" (Porto) places special challenges, not related so much with depopulation of the entire surrounding region, but to the fixation of inhabitants in such a small place; having recourse to public and private renewed spaces, the project aims, in fact, for the revitalisation of the entire village, the fixation of the residual population and the attraction of new inhabitants – which has already been partially achieved, for the first time in decades new children have beenborn in the village; the museologic poles refer to different village practices; some of them are also used as rural tourism residences; older festivities were rediscovered and new others have been created, so to provide locals with motives for assembling and to attract foreigners to celebrate in common, and in doing so, to contribute to the economic wealth of the village.

6)   The **Picote Village** is also a developmental project, located in an extreme remote place, the North interior of Portugal close to the Spanish border, in the international sector of the Douro river course; the project aims community development, promoted by neighbors, organized in an NGO: Frauga - Association for the Integrated Development of Picote; this NGO is integrated in another more encompassing one (either in the geographic as in the disciplinary sense): TERRA MATER; public and private spaces are revitalised with the financial support of the electricity company exploiting a nearby dam, in the frame of its social mitigating policy; several museological poles have been created, but the main focus is on the development of the village and the surrounding region, including scientific research, assistance to economic practices, touristic routes, etc.

7)   The **Interpretative Center for the Iberian Mask** is located in central Portugal, also in a depopulated region, with many villages completely abandoned; people here feels deeply attachment to popular festivities, being particularly known a type masks, used in several occasions and especially in carnival; tensions between youngsters and elders, "modernists" and "traditionalist", are visible and the Center (more than "just" a museum, as they claim to be) acts as an assembling and promoting point: exhibitions, in loco production of masks, rest and encounter spaces…; there are also connections made with other places producing traditional masks, in Portugal and in Spain, giving origin to the "Iberian" nature of the place.

So, examples do occur and they have to be attentively observed, in order for it to be possible to disseminate them. But, let's be realistic: they are scarce, fragile and limited in their effectiveness. They are also often in the margins, or beyond, the traditional concept of museum. And, in fact, when dealing with questions of community development, one has to face the hard questions of asking if museums shall be the most adequate frame, or even a possible partner, to fight against the abandoning of territories, by opposing community developmental strategies. Or what exactly are museums and how to differentiate them (if needed…) from other developmental community devices: cooperatives, cultural centers, socio-economic associations, etc. Or still why to stick on museums when perhaps other more encompassing frames would maybe easily achieve the same community goals. In sum, one was to ask who needs museums – instead of employment generators - in (virtually) abandoned lands.

Certainly, there is no simple or unequivocal answer for such questions. But, for those aiming to see museums as social assembling points devices, they are in conditions to fulfil developmental expectations, providing that they accept to evolve and maybe be redefined in vast regions affected by emigration. Here, museums should be part of / lead community empowering and developmental projects, making their expertise and facilities available for the purpose. In order to accomplish this desideratum a new frame will probably be needed and in fact already occurs in some countries where traditional separated institutions are merged, giving place to a new concept: GLAM Plus. Adopting the acronym standing for Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM), originally invented to answer mainly technical needs for these institutions to communicate between them (from software permeability to programming scheduling), we envisage here its amplification to a large set of social community facilities, giving it the "plus" of social commitment with development and empowering: Health Center,

Fiscal Services, Newspapers and Web Access Point, Coffee Shop, etc. The museum will in this perspective be seen as a component of a tool with variable geometry putted at the service of community development.

GLAM was and still is basically an economic/ industrial approach to take advantage of the potential included in traditional separated institutions, dealing all with research, curation and dissemination of memorial contents. Before GLAM, the same generic goal was already present in LAM, "Libraries, Archives and Museums". The focus of both, GLAM and LAM, is however too narrow for the present and immediate future challenge in these institutions. GLAM is basically an industrial or managerial project, devoted to better use and take advantage (and possible profitability) of installed resources. LAM was, at least partially, too much concentrated in digital resources, claiming for the benefits deriving from interchangeable databases and querying software.

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What Libraries, Archives and Museums (also Galleries in the British sense of the concept) would perhaps need now is not so much to take advantage of their specific memorial corpus, by putting them together, but to audaciously take the path of merging processes, giving rise to higher modalities of interaction, at the limit to new global holistic institutions. The day will arrive when in a small village, museum, library, archive and… occasional medical appointments, mailing services, fiscal consultancy, daily press, etc… will all be accessible in a single unitary space, within a building or in several buildings around one central place or in an entire quarter.

This unitary, or holistic, approach will favor and, in fact, potentiates enormously community involvement in post-disaster heritage revitalization – the exact theme of the workshop held in Fontecchio (Italy). The local observed experience was particularly inspiring, as an example of community and local authority's involvement in the rebuilding of a small village, after a dramatic natural catastrophe, an earthquake in the circumstance. We saw how different segments of the population, from children to the elderly, cope with the situation and were in a sense "reborn". We also saw how local authorities learned in order to rebuild public services (like the elementary school) in terms (location, architecture and functionalities). The situation in the all L'Aquila region was also object of observations and learning. Particularly reference has to be made, in the context of this paper, to the visit to the Regional Museum, in L'Aquila. Even if still located in a provisional place, it has been conceived with a complete set of measures aiming to prevent earthquakes. It would be extremely instructive for museums in general to edit a report, or just a booklet, on these measures.

L'Aquila observed region documents paradigmatically one case of disaster event and post-disaster acting. But disasters/post-disaster situations can be very different and they are not being limited neither to natural causes, as to sudden occurrences. They can be also humanly originated, and in this case both rapidly (conventional wars, terrorism, epidemic outbreaks, famines, etc.) and slowly. Among these, depopulation, when extreme, is maybe the most radical disastrous situation. And the point here is that museums and CH in general can and shall be asked to play a role also in such cases.