

## **THE ROLES OF MUSEUMS IN MODERN SOCIETIES AS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR HIGHER-EDUCATION STUDENTS – CASE STUDIES PRODUCED FOR SPANISH CULTURE FOR BUSINESS III**

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**ABSTRACT:** Widely acknowledged as drivers of social and economic development, in the past few decades the number of museums has grown dramatically all over the world, as key elements in public policies related to the requalification of urban areas.

Due to the different values and roles of contemporary museums, they are recognised as providing a variety of learning opportunities for higher-education students engaged in cultural studies. Therefore, the 2021-22 class of Spanish Culture for Business III, of the MA in Intercultural Studies for Business (ISCAP, P.PORTO), were invited to explore the characteristics and distinguishing features of several recently-opened museums, located in small or medium-size cities of Spanish-speaking countries. The result was the production of eight original case studies that shed light on different aspects of the relationships established between those institutions and their surrounding areas.

Thus, the most relevant findings of the students' research are presented, adapted for the purposes of this paper, as well as the necessary theoretical contextualisation. Dealing with very different types of museum, each case study illustrates the variety of, positive or

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negative, ways in which museums can articulate with the communities that they seek to serve.

**KEYWORDS:** museums; creative and cultural industries; heritage; urban development; tourism

**RESUMO:** Amplamente reconhecidos como motores de desenvolvimento socioeconómico, o número de museus tem vindo a crescer exponencialmente em todo o mundo, constituindo-se como equipamentos cruciais no âmbito das políticas públicas de requalificação urbana.

Pelas diversas valências e funções assumidas pelos museus contemporâneos, considera-se que estes proporcionam um leque de oportunidades de aprendizagem para os alunos do ensino superior em cursos relacionados com os estudos culturais. Assim, no ano letivo de 2021-22, os estudantes de Cultura Espanhola para Negócios III, do Mestrado em Estudos Interculturais para Negócios (ISCAP, P.PORTO) foram desafiados a explorar as características distintivas de diversos museus de inauguração recente, localizados em cidades de pequena ou média dimensão de países de língua oficial espanhola. O resultado foi a produção de oito estudos de caso originais, que focam variados aspetos da relação entre essas instituições e as áreas em que estão implantadas.

Embora adaptadas para os fins deste artigo, apresentam-se aqui as descobertas mais relevantes das pesquisas dos estudantes, bem como a necessária contextualização teórica. Apresentando um conjunto de museus bem diferenciados, cada estudo de caso ilustra as diversas formas, quer positivas ou negativas, em que os museus podem articular-se com as comunidades que procuram beneficiar.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** museus; indústrias criativas e culturais; património; desenvolvimento urbano; turismo

## **1. Introduction: the roles of museums**

Capital culture has already been widely acknowledged as a driver of social and economic development, contributing to social cohesion and collective identity, as well as to job creation related to innovation and entrepreneurship. In fact, in 2019, cultural and creative industries in the European Union accounted for 4.4% of the GDP and employed 7.6 million people, particularly young qualified professionals (De las Heras, 2021). Although very badly hit by the covid-19 pandemic, the cultural and creative economy is expected to recover faster than other economic sectors, particularly in developed countries, with up to a 40% share of the employment by 2030 (Deloitte, 2021, p. 23).

This essential role played by culture in socioeconomic development has increasingly led to the design of public policy related to the cultural sector (Cuenin, 2009, p. 28). Particularly since the 1990s, there has been a growing amount of public investment in the rehabilitation or requalification of historic buildings and the construction of new monumental structures, as well as in the requalification of old towns. Using place branding strategies and marketing campaigns, cities and entire regions seek to give prominence to their heritage and traditions, in order to offer unique, differentiated products that may attract tourists and investors, boosting economic activity and increasing the perceived quality of life of the local populations. Some of these strategies, as analysed elsewhere (Furtado, Tallone & Pascoal, 2022, p. 109), usually lead to the commoditisation of culture, with the possible loss of authenticity and originality. On the other hand, the “commoditisation of cultural assets plays a positive role in the preservation of traditions, monuments and sites that otherwise could be lost or neglected” (*ibidem*). The delicate balance between preservation and massification can, not only be a factor in the sustainability of a cultural project, particularly in smaller urban centres, but also determine the formation of “new circuits of cultural power” (Fyfe 2006, p. 41).

Among all the infrastructure involved in the requalification of urban areas, museums play a most prominent role, and it is estimated that approximately 90% of today’s museums were established after World War II (Boylan 1995, *apud* Fyfe, 2006, p. 39). Because of their monumental nature, they usually rise as central elements within urban contexts. Though no longer the princely palaces of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, still the great architectural diversity of the contemporary museum is intended to attract attention to itself, turning museum buildings into objects of admiration that compete with their own collections for the visitor’s gaze. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (1997) or, at a local and much smaller scale, Santo Tirso’s MIEC - International Museum of Contemporary Sculpture (2016), in northern Portugal, both rely on the symbolic capital and visibility offered by architectural brands<sup>2</sup> in order to make their statements as iconic elements in the urban landscape.

On the other hand, museums may be useful vehicles for political agendas. They preserve and display for us “what is most valuable and essential in culture and science” (Crane 2006, p. 98). Through curatorial design and control of exhibitions, museums gain an

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<sup>2</sup> Both museums were designed by Pritzker winners – Frank Gehry was responsible for the Spanish museum, whereas MIEC was signed by Portuguese architects Álvaro Siza Vieira and Eduardo Souto Moura.

authoritative voice that conveys the sanctioned version of reality – they show what is worth seeing and remembering, by selecting, classifying and ordering, and, by the same token, by omitting and excluding. Their contents therefore attempt to “produce understandable narratives”, using “discourses that make complicated events decipherable and compelling” (Apsel & Sodaro, 2020, p. 9). Even though contemporary exhibitions are staged in ways that give viewers a more active role, sometimes through the addition of new text and information (Crooke, 2006: 175), the fact remains that their core characteristics, language, forms of display and spatial arrangements are rarely neutral or objective.

The discourse of museums, however, is taken as based on fact, objectivity and authoritative knowledge. As a result, museums have long been acknowledged for their educational role, as consecrated in the definition of *museum* provided by the International Council of Museums - ICOM (2007, our emphasis)<sup>3</sup>:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment **for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.**

The juxtaposition of the words *education*, *study* and *enjoyment* signals the undeniable incorporation of museums into the leisure sphere, but somehow fails to account for the more informal approach to learning developed by most museums. As argued by Falk, Dierking & Adams (2006, p. 335), “museums are quintessential free-choice learning institutions”, where, unlike schools, people go because they choose to learn, in order to make the most of their leisure time. This form of edutainment (i.e., entertainment with a learning component) has been widely embraced by museums, which more and more include interactive exhibits, storytelling techniques, family-oriented initiatives and, especially since the March 2020 lockdowns, online activities such as workshops and games.

The educational role of museums is closely connected with their social and political values, as learning is seen as a means for operating social change and the improvement of society (Hein, 2006, p. 349). In addition, some museums give emphasis to more local and particular histories, instead of grand national narratives, thus focusing on aspects that

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<sup>3</sup> This definition is currently under review, with proposals including notions related to “ethics”, “inclusion”, “diversity” and “sustainability” (cf. <https://icom.museum/en/news/on-the-way-to-a-new-museum-definition-we-are-doing-it-together/>).

may strengthen community bonds by raising awareness about shared characteristics and, consequently, the sense of belonging (Crooke, 2006, p. 174). These aspects may be fostered even further if, as expected by the public institutions providing the funding, the cultural heritage offered to public consumption succeeds in enhancing tourist flow and creating new opportunities for economic development.

## **2. The SPFB III project**

Parallel to their ever-growing number, scholarly interest in museums has risen exponentially, proving that they are privileged objects of study, allowing for a myriad of different, but complementary, approaches coming from every corner of the social sciences, cultural studies being one of the most productive fields in this respect. Thus, in the course year of 2021-2022, the students of Spanish Culture for Business III, of the Master's programme in Intercultural Studies for Business, lectured at ISCAP- P.PORTO<sup>4</sup>, were invited to explore the characteristics and distinguishing features of several fairly recently-opened museums (from 2000 onwards), located in small or medium-size cities of Spanish-speaking countries. The result was the production of original, three-thousand-word essays that shed light on different aspects of the relationships established between those institutions and their surrounding areas.

Though re-written in order to fit the length of this paper, the following eight short case studies are based on the students' research. Dealing with very different types of museum, they illustrate the variety of, positive or negative, ways in which they can articulate with the communities that they seek to serve. In Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática, Ana Rita Magalhães Lopes explores the relationship between a spectacular museum building and renewed activity in the waterfront of Cartagena. Maria Eduarda Flores examines the Picasso Museum, showing how the city of Málaga has used the figure of Pablo Picasso as a successful place branding strategy. Maria Teresa Rocha analyses the ways in which La Fábrica de Luz has given new meaning and use to the industrial heritage of Ponferrada. Maria Inês Pinto points out the relationship between The Balenciaga Museum in Getaria and the development of the fashion industry in the area. Four Latin American museums in Panamá, Perú, Argentina and Colombia are also studied. Ricardo Silva Oliveira comments on the educational activities carried out by Biomuseo and its

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<sup>4</sup> ISCAP – Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto belongs in the network of eight Polytechnic schools in the district of Porto, northern Portugal.

articulation with Panamanian official school programmes. In the Museum of Tumbas Reales de Sipán, Isabel de Nunes Seabra shows the relationship between its creation and a new-found pride among the local population of indigenous ancestry. The last two examples are also the most controversial – both Glaciarium (Camila Lousada Martins) and Museo del Carnaval (Magda Silva Cardoso) are promotional instruments that allegedly fail to meet the needs and expectations of the local residents.

### **3. The case studies**

#### **3.1. Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática - ARQUA**

ARQUA may be found in Cartagena, a coastal city (pop. 216,000) in the Autonomous Region of Murcia. Except for a relatively brief period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, devoted to mining activities, Cartagena has had an uninterrupted close relationship with the sea since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, having one of the most important ports in the Mediterranean, and a major naval station (Cano Carmona, 2016). It is therefore no wonder that this was the location chosen for a museum of underwater archaeology, involving not only the display of collections coming from underwater excavations, but also research and cultural and educational initiatives related to its field of activity.

Although the museum was created in 1980 (Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática, n.d. b), it is the current building, opened in 2008, that has given ARQUA a prominent position among Spanish museums. Relying on the importance of iconic architecture to define the cityscape, the design of the new building was commissioned to Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra, a prestigious, multi-awarded architect who, in 2010, was distinguished with the French Trophée Archzinc precisely for his ARQUA design. By a curious twist, the architect and his design became themselves the object of a museum exhibition, as Consuegra's project was showcased at New York MoMA in a 2006 exhibition devoted to new Spanish architecture. Rivalling with the collections inside, the new ARQUA is in fact an impressive building developed mostly underground, accessible through a downward ramp that serves as a metaphor for diving into the sea (Consuegra, 2008, p. 47).

Acknowledging the importance of the new venue for the museum's increased popularity, ARQUA itself points out that the number of visitors grew from 25,000 in 1999 to a record number of over 100,000 in 2014 (Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática, n.d. c),

after which numbers have remained relatively stable at around 90,000<sup>5</sup>. This variation runs parallel to media attention – a cursory search of newspaper articles in the Internet, using “museo nacional de arqueología subacuática” + “Cartagena” as keywords, revealed, at the time of writing this paper, only 5 hits for the period between 2003 and 2008, 113 hits for 2009-2014, and 322 hits for 2015-2019, including a couple of references in the Portuguese press. The same search, using English keywords, shows 107 hits for the 2015-19 period, 9 hits for 2009-14, and none for 2003-2008. International recognition has also come through two UNESCO distinctions in 2019 and 2021 (Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática, n.d. a), adding to the museum’s prestige.

Though ARQUA has undeniably benefitted from its location in one of the busiest parts of Cartagena, it has also contributed to renew the city and its waterfront, generating not only a new tourist hub, but “a new territory of civic exchange for every citizen, in that privileged border area where the city ends and the world begins” (Consuegra, 2008, p. 46, our translation). The museum is therefore a good example of architecture seen as more than an object for embellishment, but as a key element in the development of cultural equipment in total harmony with the landscape.

### **3.2. Museo Picasso**

Since the late 1990s, the city of Málaga has developed a number of strategies in order to position itself as an international cultural destination (Moreno & López, 2020) and combat the seasonality of traditional sun and beach tourism. This rebranding effort has involved, among many other initiatives, turning Málaga into a “city of museums” (Naranjo, 2017, p. 18-9). In fact, Malaga has 37 active museums and cultural centres, many of which were opened or refurbished in the early 2000s or later, such as Museo Picasso (2003), CAC (Centro de Arte Contemporánea, 2003), MIMMA (Museo Interactivo de la Música, 2003), Museo Automovilístico (2010), to mention but a few. Following the franchising model of museum brands inaugurated in Bilbao in 1997, Málaga also sought to reproduce the miracle of the “Guggenheim effect” with the Centre Pompidou Málaga (2015), Museo Carmen Thyssen Málaga (2011), and the Malaga Collection of the Russian St Petersburg Museum (2015), thus turning Malaga into one of

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<sup>5</sup> Except for 2020, not only due to the lockdowns, but also because the museum was closed for improvements for several months.

the Spanish cities with the highest museum density in its historic centre (Humanes, 2013, p. 198).

Substantial investment has also been made in the past two decades to upgrade transport infrastructure (Moreno & López, 2020, p. 193), involving the enlargement of the airport (currently the third biggest airport in the Iberian Peninsula), its sea port, and the construction of the high-velocity Córdoba-Málaga route, which connects Málaga to Madrid in two and a half hours. Accommodation facilities have also been improved, most hotels having 4 or 5 stars (*idem*, p. 190). Commercial activity has intensified, with numerous bars, restaurants and gift shops in the historic centre (Castro, 2014), which account for an exponential growth in tourist-related jobs and businesses (Moreno & López, 2020, p. 193).

Museo Picasso is at the forefront of Málaga's cultural turn. The Palacio dos Condes de Buenavista and its collection of 276 artworks by Pablo Picasso received more than 700,000 visitors in 2019, and is the most visited museum in the south of Spain, attracting over 23% of its visitors from outside the EU (Museo Picasso Málaga, 2019b). It is also the best-known museum in the region, and an important factor when planning a visit to Málaga (Área de Turismo del Ayuntamiento de Málaga, 2016).

In spite of the intrinsic qualities of Museo Picasso, its privileged location and its innovative concept as a "neighborhood-museum" (Fernández, 2013, p. 11), it is the connection with Picasso's name and popularity as one of the greatest contemporary artists that has turned this thematic museum into a protagonist within the branding strategy followed by the city. In fact, other spaces and events related to Picasso cater for the visitors' interest, such as Picasso's birth house (Casa Natal), or the use of Picasso's image for the promotion of leisure, sport and even cuisine events (Fernández & Meethan, 2014, p. 223). In addition, the 2008 Urban and Cultural Tourism Plan encourages the surrounding streets, commercial establishments, hotels and restaurants to adopt the painter's image, in an effort of "artistic thematization" (Fernandez, 2013, p. 16).

As pointed out by Fernandez (*idem*, p. 19), all the references to Picasso are tourist-oriented, in contrast with the absence of the painter's figure outside tourist areas. Spain's official tourist website ([www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info)) offers a page, "La Málaga de Picasso", with a route through all the places related to the painter in the city, including of course Museo Picasso.



Museo Picasso is therefore one of the most important elements in an extremely successful marketing campaign designed to replace the image of sunny Málaga with the concept of cultural Malaga, by imposing its identification with Pablo Picasso, now turned into cultural icon and product for mass consumption, as proven by the thousands of tourists coming ashore from each cruise ship in search of his traces.

### **3.3. La Fábrica de Luz. Museo de la Energía**

The Energy Museum opened its doors in 2011 in Ponferrada, a small town (pop. 64,000) in the heart of the rural area of El Bierzo in the Spanish Autonomous Region of Castilla y León. Once an important coal-mining centre giving employment to thousands, Ponferrada and the surrounding areas have experienced a long period of decline in industrial activity after the demise of the thermal power stations that dotted the landscape until the 1970s<sup>6</sup>. In fact, the unemployment rate in Ponferrada (18.36% in 2019) is the highest in Castilla y León, well above the national average of 13.8% (Paro por municipios..., 2022). The entire region is consequently going through a demographic crisis, Ponferrada in particular having lost more than 6% of its total population between 2008 and 2021 (Ponferrada - Datos... 2022).

Boasting 82 million tourists in 2019, tourism in Spain is usually seen as a sure way of counteracting the trend of job destruction and emigration, or at least it was until the covid-19 pandemic struck, inflicting heavy losses on the service sector. In Castilla y León, although tourism accounts for approximately 10% of the regional GDP, most visitors stay in rural accommodation (elEconomista.es, 2019), and tend to neglect urban areas. More specifically in Ponferrada, hotel occupancy rates are only slightly above 50% and the average length of overnight stays is approximately 1.5 days, almost half the national average (Ponferrada – la ocupación..., 2022).

The museum Fábrica da Luz was initially envisaged as part of a much larger initiative within CIUDEN (Fundación Ciudad de la Energía), set up in 2006 in order to advance energy-related R+D activities, operate the museum and generate social and economic impact on El Bierzo through the establishment of businesses and population, and the development of tourism (Aparicio Rabanedo 2021, p. 205). In its current configuration, however, the museum is made up of a central building housing the main collections, a

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<sup>6</sup> Compostilla II, one of the last power stations of this kind still in operation, also in the province of León, began to be dismantled in 2020.

reception office and a coffee shop, located on the outskirts of Ponferrada, approximately 2 km from the town centre. Although roads have been built or improved upon, thus providing access to a formerly neglected area, there is no public transportation to the museum, and the expected gentrification has not yet taken place, as River Sil and the former coal dump site work as natural barriers.

As a result of the above, it is safe to conclude that the potential of La Fábrica de Luz as a tourist attraction does not come close to that of other initiatives examined in this paper, with more direct economic impact on the surrounding communities. It is, however, the social role played by the museum that makes it significant as a tool for empowering the local community. In fact, as pointed out by Aparicio Rabanedo (2021, p. 218), the museum and its curatorial strategies find their roots in the social museology school of thought, aimed at the collective appropriation of shared heritage through practices based on the concept of museums as communal spaces (Centro de Estudos Sociais, n.d.).

In addition to featuring some of the original machinery of the former power station, and explanatory texts about operational details, the permanent exhibition comprises photographs, as well as video testimonies by former miners and factory workers. A strategy frequently used in sites of memory all around the world to elicit feelings of empathy in the viewer, these first-person narratives provide not only a vivid description of factory life, but bring the local history closer to home, thus facilitating the process of collective memory formation. The special role played by the individual worker's experience is further highlighted by a number of work garments suspended from the ceiling, making the visitor look up and adopt an almost reverential position. The museum gives additional importance to images as memory aids through its website (<http://www.lafabricadeluz.es/iper/>), showing digital copies provided by locals of a number of historic photographs contained in its archives.

Another aspect strongly linked to the social role of museums is the programme of educational and dissemination activities. In the case of La Fábrica de Luz, these activities are related to topics beyond the local scope, like sustainability and the rational use of energy, therefore creating awareness about issues of universal relevance, as well as with the local industrial heritage taken as cultural heritage, in line with UNESCO's position since the 1990s (Del Pozo, 2010, p. 354). Widely disseminated through the Internet and social media, most of the educational activities (science-related workshops, lectures, competitions and games) target school children of all ages (La fábrica de luz, 2021), and

some are carried out online, especially since the 2020 lockdowns, showing the museum's capacity to adapt to new situations, which is usually only affordable to bigger structures.

The symbolic power of La Fábrica de Luz – Museo de la Energía therefore results from the combination of these two fundamental tools – memory formation and education. While education contributes to raising awareness among the youth about crucial topics for the future, memory prevents them from turning their backs on the past and its heritage, and creates a sense of belonging to the community, thus encouraging younger generations to be active agents in their defence and protection of this legacy.

### **3.4. Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa**

In the small coastal town of Getaria (pop. 2,794), Basque Country, Museo Balenciaga celebrates the life and work of fashion designer Cristobal Balenciaga (1895-1972), probably the best-known personality ever born in the town, beside 16<sup>th</sup>-century navigator Juan Sebastián Elcano. Museo Balenciaga is managed by Fundación Balenciaga, created in 1996 with public funding provided by the Ministry of Culture, the Basque Administration, and the provincial and the municipal governments, and whose goal also included the creation of a fashion design school and the “capitalisation of the Balenciaga brand in order to develop a fashion industry capable of turning creative potential into business fabric” (El Mundo, 2010b). The commitment of these institutions was also visible in their support to other initiatives related to the figure of Balenciaga, such as the publication of Balenciaga's biography, endorsed by the provincial government (Diputación de Guipúzcoa) (El Mundo, 2010a).

Surrounded by scandals regarding the architect commissioned for the construction (Flaño, 2008), as well as the allegedly unlawful appropriation of several items of the museum collection by the former mayor (Nash, 2008), Museo Balenciaga opened in 2011, eight years after the expected date, and with a final cost of 30 million euro, instead of the 6 million on the initial budget (Camacho, 2021). Up to 70% of the museum's operational cost is financed by public funding (*ibidem*).

This may be the reason why the first piece of information provided by the museum's 2021 report has to do with an economic contribution of 14.8M€, generated in its ten years of activity (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 2021, p. 3), followed by an estimate of 33.4M€ generated by the approximately 50,000 annual visitors (*idem*, p. 4). There seems to be an effort to highlight that, far from being a burden to the public purse, the Balenciaga

museum represents an economic benefit to the community. Interestingly, the report also goes to great lengths in order to show the success of the institution's sustainability measures and its low ecological footprint (*idem*, p. 5).

The museum is installed in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Palacio de Aldamar, to which three blocks of modern construction were added. This hybrid architecture is mirrored by the outcrossed nature of the permanent collection – a rotating selection of haute couture garments designed by Balenciaga, and displayed as in an art gallery, stressing the sculptural characteristics of the pieces (AV62 arquitectos, n.d.). Blurring the boundaries between art and design, the museum translates well the aspirations to modernity of the entire Basque region and of the small, traditional town of Getaria in particular.

As a modern museum, however, Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa would not be complete without educational activities aimed at school children and families. But the core of its educational mission, as announced even before its opening, is found in fashion-related courses and workshops for design students and professionals, as well as collaboration agreements with national and international fashion design schools (Cristóbal Balenciaga Museoa, 2021, p. 17), intended to give shape to its explicit mission as reproduced above. Though it may be too soon to determine if such strategy is working, the number of fashion businesses in País Vasco has been growing, and fashion is pointed out as a promising sector (López, 2021). And that, beside making Getaria a more glamorous destination, on the map of fashion design, may be the most important social contribution made by the museum.

### **3.5. Biomuseo**

Right at the entrance of the Panama Canal rises the colourful Biomuseo, proudly and repeatedly announced as the first building designed by Frank Gehry in Latin America (Biomuseo, 2021). This association with one of the world's best-known architectural brands, unequivocally points to a purposeful use of iconic architecture as an element of prestige, turning the museum into an object of admiration and hopefully a tourist magnet. Of all the museums analysed in this paper, Biomuseo is the one that most explicitly seeks to reproduce the Bilbao effect.

Though in 2018, four years after its official opening and in full activity<sup>7</sup>, it received around 133,000 visitors (Guevara, 2019), these numbers are very far from the more than 800,000 that annually visit the Spanish Guggenheim. Tourist activity was to be encouraged by investment on other infrastructure in the proximity of the museum, namely a new convention centre and a modern cruise terminal, but on March 2020 all museums closed to the public due to the covid-related restrictions, badly affecting those that, like Biomuseo, depend exclusively on ticket revenue. Like many other venues, Biomuseo has strengthened its Internet presence, providing virtual visits, downloadable audio guides and educational activities through its website and social media accounts, in order to maintain engagement levels, with a view to getting back on its feet as soon as possible (Arjona, 2021).

While the disturbances created in museum activities throughout 2020 and 2021 make it almost impossible to pinpoint the precise reason why Biomuseo has not succeeded in replicating the Bilbao effect on the other side of the Atlantic, it is worth paying attention to its role in scientific education, research and dissemination, another important aspect, heavily underlined as one of the main missions (Biomuseo, n.d.).

In addition to its highly interactive galleries showing the history and evolution of Panamanian natural history and biodiversity, Biomuseo has designed educational programmes in coordination with the country's official school syllabuses, so that school children visiting the museum may find a direct reference to the contents dealt with in class. This innovative initiative is completed by downloadable teaching materials that match different topics found in school textbooks (Álvarez, 2018, p. 59). The stress on education is also visible in the "visiting scholar" programme, weekly lectures given by young researchers (*idem*, p. 58).

On the other hand, scientific research and dissemination also have a prominent position in Biomuseo. It is one of the only two partners of the Smithsonian Institution outside the United States, and has standing cooperation agreements with several scientific institutions of Panama (Masaya, 2018, p. 64), as well as private organisations, like ONGs, schools and conservation societies, leading to the construction of a 2.5-ha biodiversity park and the creation of a national network of eco-friendly gardens (Álvarez, 2018, p. 59).

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<sup>7</sup> Biomuseo opened in 2014, but only five of its eight galleries were operational.

Panama's Biomuseo illustrates well the diversified roles played by contemporary museums – no longer self-contained units where visitors are reduced to the condition of “viewers”, but active social players working in articulation with other stakeholders, in order to cater for the community's needs and expectations.

### **3.6. Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán**

In 1987, the discovery of the intact royal tomb of the Lord of Sipán was one of the most important archaeological findings in Perú. The mummy, together with a treasure made up of hundreds of gold, silver and ceramic artefacts, provided new information about the Moche culture that flourished before the rise of the Inca empire. Opened in 2003, Museo Tumbas Reales de Sipán was the first museum in northern Peru with international projection (Asensio & Zerga, 2011, p. 13), quickly followed by at least four other archaeological museums in the area, like Museo de Sitio de Huaca Rajada-Sipán, opened in 2009, at approximately 40 km from Tumbas Reales. Due to its spectacular collection, Tumbas Reales de Sipán has been the most popular museum in the group, with 185,414 visitors recorded in 2019 (Oficina de Relaciones Públicas, 2020).

The arrival of tourists at the town Lambayeque (pop. 71,400 approximately), where the museum is located, has been seen as an opportunity for regional economic development and social mobility. In fact, the poverty rate in the district of Lambayeque went down from 63% in 2001 (Herrera, 2002, p. 21) to 16% in 2020 (Instituto Peruano de Economía, 2021). It is of course obvious that the responsibility for this change cannot be attributed to a museum, as the entire country registered a reduction in poverty and inequality for the same period, resulting from the favourable economic conditions experienced in South America from the early 2000s onwards. Tumbas Reales, however, alongside the other museums in the district, has indeed provided direct employment to the residents (from guides to maintenance and cleaning personnel<sup>8</sup>), as well as business opportunities, whether formal or informal, in areas related to hospitality (from catering to tourist guides), crafts, vending, or traditional medicine and mystical healing (Asensio & Zerga, 2011, p. 35-7).

The relevance of these museums and their collections have attracted enormous attention from the media and the Peruvian authorities. In 1993, when the artefacts returned to Peru

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<sup>8</sup> An interesting consequence of the growth in job opportunities is the reduction in the number of looters, or “huaqueros”, many of whom are employed in the excavations due to their deep knowledge of the area.

after being restored in Germany, they were received with state honours by the country's president and the cheering crowds (Semanario Expresión, 2013). The valorisation of the pre-Hispanic heritage has given the local populations a sense of "being put on the map", as well as an important token of negotiation, used to attract the attention of the authorities to local problems and legitimise the population's claims (Asensio & Zerga, 2011, p. 45-6).

But in a country where approximately 85% of the population identify themselves as either indigenous or mestizo (Servindi, 2018), the archaeological museum has a very powerful symbolic value that goes well beyond the practical, tangible aspects mentioned above. For millions of Peruvians, and particularly the people of Lambayeque, the wealth of the Lord of Sipán and the importance of the Moche culture have revealed a past of which to feel proud instead of ashamed, and encouraged the protection of their heritage as part of their identity (Expósito Martín, 2017, p. 10). As direct descendants of the Moche people, today's residents of Lambayeque are part of a cultural universe that may strengthen social ties.

### **3.7. Glaciarium – Museo del Hielo Patagónico**

Glaciarium may be found at 8 km from El Calafate, a small town (pop. 23,000) in the province of Santa Cruz (Argentina), that advertises itself as "land of glaciers", as it is in fact the gateway for the Los Glaciares National Park. Opened in 2011, the museum is offered as an interpretive centre for those visiting Patagonia and the glaciers, as well as a privileged location to admire the icy landscape of Lago Argentino. Tourists visiting the glaciers take accommodation in El Calafate, where they may also book transfer buses, city tours and excursions. According to the reports provided by the tourism bureau of El Calafate (El Calafate, tierra de glaciares, n.d.), the number of tourists in the city has remained relatively constant, accounting for approximately 400,000 visitors per year, 60% of whom come from foreign countries, particularly Brazil and Chile.

Inspired in the jagged lines of glaciers, the construction of Glaciarium sought to cause minimum impact on the landscape, choosing materials and mechanical systems that could ensure efficient insulation and sustainable energy consumption (Guiraldes & Cordeyro, 2011). The exhibitions provide information about glaciers, climate change and other environmental issues. The stress on sustainability is visible in the Ecoshop, selling gifts made of recycled or environmentally friendly materials. Glaciarium has been

distinguished with an award by *Lugares* magazine (Argentina) and two TripAdvisor awards, bearing witness to its excellence.

There is however a sharp contrast between this concern with environmental issues, as shown in Glaciarium, and the urban development of El Calafate. As a result of the decline in other economic activities, tourist-related investment has led to a rise in the urban population in a spontaneous, unplanned manner (Ampuero *et al.*, 2015, p. 42). As a consequence, complaints about the unequal coverage of basic services and infrastructure have been constant, along with real-estate speculation over the occupation of environmentally fragile land (*ibidem*).

The construction of an international airport and more modern tourist facilities since the early 2000s has, as its counterpart, the lack of basic services for the local population, like proper sewage systems (Perret, 2021), waste collection and disposal, efficient supply of gas and electricity and others (Ampuero *et al.*, 2014, p. 55-6). Residents point out other environmental concerns, such as the high number of motor boats on Lago Argentino, stubble burning and noise pollution (*ibidem*).

The example of El Calafate shows that investment on tourism may translate into little or no benefit to local populations beyond the creation of tourist-related jobs and some commercial activities, as estimates point to 30% of the active population being employed in the tourism and hospitality sector (Artesi, 2003, p. 50). The lack of residents' empowerment to find solutions for basic needs is made even more evident by a structure like Glaciarium, showing the distance between global environmental issues and people's everyday concerns.

### **3.8. Museo del Carnaval de Barranquilla**

Opened in December 2019, Museo del Carnaval is located in Barrio Abajo, one of the most traditional quarters of Barranquilla (Colombia), listed as cultural property ("bien de interés cultural") by the city (Maldonado, 2021). Barrio Abajo is also the epicenter of the carnival festivities of Barranquilla, proclaimed as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2003, and the home of Casa del Carnaval, head office of Carnaval de Barranquilla S.A.S., the organiser of the carnival and manager of the brand.

With the explicit mission of providing cultural and educational services with social impact, Museo del Carnaval defines its scope as the "research, conservation,



dissemination and display of the activities and traditions making up the Carnival of Barranquilla” (Museo del Carnaval de Barranquilla, n.d.). The pedagogical aspect seems to be getting most of the attention – in addition to workshops and other activities devoted to passing down knowledge and skills to younger generations, in order to preserve ICH, the museum maintains several partnerships with educational institutions offering programmes related to arts and design, and cultural management (Cardona, 2021, p. 203-4). A special focus on children, as the future “heritage guardians” (*ibidem*), is noticeable on the museum’s website ([museocarnavaldebarranquilla.org](http://museocarnavaldebarranquilla.org)), with its cartoonish logo and story-telling techniques, showing a long-term concern with strengthening the community’s active participation in the carnival traditions, which are seen as a means of developing civic engagement and inclusion.

The museum itself, however, seems to contradict the inclusive objective as declared by its owner, Carnaval de Barranquilla, S.A.S. (Alcaldía de Barranquilla, n.d.). With no free-admission day, tickets to the museum cost 12,000 pesos (7,000 for seniors and children under 10), roughly 2,70 EUR – considerably pricey in a country where the minimum monthly wage has been fixed in approximately 225 EUR. Its four exhibition rooms have been criticised for omitting the information about the designers and builders of the items on display (Núñez, 2020), thus neglecting the popular background of the celebrations. The Queens’ Room, in particular, is presented as the most attractive part of the museum, showing a selection of exuberant dresses worn by former Carnival Queens, and stressing the glamorous, luxurious aspect of the parades (making them look almost as beauty pageants). The online gift shop offers an assortment of flash drives, stationery and T-shirts, and a few items of industrial-looking “artesanías”, therefore providing few opportunities for local craftsmen. The most controversial space of Museo del Carnaval, however, is the terrace, turned into an exclusive, and very expensive, VIP balcony during the Carnival festivities (Cardona, 2021, p. 211).

Despite its explicit objective of giving the Carnival back to the community, the museum has an obvious purpose of attracting tourists by making Carnival an all-year-round business, which has proved successful. Though it had to close for several months shortly after its official inauguration, due to the covid-19 lockdowns, Museo del Carnaval has been already ranked among the five most visited spots in Barranquilla (Ortega, 2022), which, between January 2019 and January 2022, recorded a 39% growth in the number of foreign visitors, particularly from the USA and neighbouring countries, like Chile, Peru

and Panama (Delgans, 2022). This increased visibility of Barranquilla results from a promotional and public-relations investment in dissemination on the international press (*ibidem*), highlighting the qualities of the city, including its hotels and restaurants, and its typical locations, like Museo del Carnaval.

#### **4. Conclusion: what has been learnt**

The analyses of the eight museums chosen for this paper give us a glimpse of the number of perspectives that may be adopted when looking at these key elements within the urban fabric – from marketing and place branding strategies to social cohesion issues, museums provide a unique learning opportunity, as they allow us to start disentangling the intricate mesh of social and economic aspects interlocking within their walls.

One of the conclusions to be drawn from the study of museums is that, while remaining non-profit organisations for the most part, they have definitively adopted business practices, in order to face the challenges presented by their expanded scope of responsibilities. Museums, “in the company of the entire cultural sector, have become progressively preoccupied with business concerns about costs, financing, evaluation, development, and profitability” (Tobelem, 2007, p. 294). As public funding is gradually being reduced and cultural tourists become a potential, and much coveted, source of revenue, museums compete with each other and with other recreational organisations, to attract the highest number of visitors and sponsors. Social media, temporary exhibitions and enhanced facilities and services are some of the tools used by museums to reach out to larger audiences.

Due to this increased pressure of having to compete and succeed in the global market, it may be easy to forget that museums are, first and foremost, the main custodians of the world’s heritage and, as such, have a social responsibility towards their constituencies, mainly as “facilitator[s] of civic engagement, agent[s] of social change, and moderator[s] of sensitive social issues” (Smithsonian Institution, 2002, p. 9). Thus, the main lesson to be learned from the museums analysed here is, perhaps, an obvious one – that the number of visitors should not be the only criterium to measure a museum’s success, and that other factors need to be considered, that have to do with the development of our human capacity to feel integrated into our communities and environments.

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