

FRANKFURT HERE, NOW AND DIGITAL: PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP AT THE HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF FRANKFURT

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INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1. New Frankfurt Jetzt! exhibition space opened in 2017, at the Historisches Museum Frankfurt
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The museum has a rather relevant role to play in a modern urbanized life, highly influenced by digital related aspects and new technologies. In the perspective of urban space, the use of digital objects, the creation of digital expressions, the sometimes establishment of digital bonds is already a reality. At the Historisches Museum Frankfurt (HMF), the *Frankfurt Now!* space is a permanent exhibition which opened in 2017, that researches the city of Frankfurt trying to collect and display the many perspectives of its inhabitants. Within this new framework, the HMF is undergoing a transformation from historical to city museum, in which it will enable the citizens to collaborate. One tool among many participative formats is the Stadtlabor Digital (Digital City Lab), a digital platform that enables people to create contents that intend to convey their own perspectives. By observing such museum experiences, some practical and theoretical questions emerge such as the challenge to integrate numerous and dense perspectives into the museum, produced by individuals with reduced academic, aesthetic or artistic capabilities in a formal context, and conceive how these multiple outside subjective views can be displayed in order to be interesting and comprehensible to other visitors.

On another level, the negative aspects are also taken into account when analyzing this new tool. By observing the museum and perceiving it as an ever going process, the institution will be defied to deal with disorientation of visitors and maybe with a negative connotation of a «work in progress» image and still bring people to feel, interpret and understand the city through the museum and other people's perspectives.

This text aims to try to initially tackle the participative process of integrating multiperspectives into the museum and its possible impacts on the visitors, on the museum itself and ultimately on the Frankfurter community. For that reason, an interdisciplinary approach will be used in the analysis by searching concepts that help understand why and how the launching of this new platform occurred recently will serve as an example to understand how museums can have deep effects in the core of societies by innovating its practices that overpass the borders of traditional museum notions. Concepts ranging from urban studies, digital citizenship, through associations with theater and emancipation, and culminating in a museological examination will help develop an initial lead to analyze the use and impact of the Stadtlabor Digital.

To begin analyzing such digital tool and its role, it's possible to notice that the very concept of museum is surrounded by interdisciplinary aspects which structure a museological methodology of analysis, and that transform it into an arena where one can observe the dynamics of society. In this sense, by taking a historical museum with characteristics of a city museum that turns to the present and into researching the contemporary city, through the example of the Stadtlabor Digital, it is possible to observe and generate some interesting insights on how to deal with participation, multiperspective, on how people nowadays deal with their own heritage by using a completely and abstract new social sphere: the digital sphere.

Since new digital technologies and the internet emerged and developed, many aspects came to transform life as we know it. Living in a digital era has generated many changes that imperceptibly immersed most of the citizens in an alternative reality with its own rules and dynamics. In the 1990s, for example, initial research identified the existence of «internet citizens», which also presupposes rights and duties, and that people are therefore responsible for the use and the shaping of the web. Some of the core issues of digital citizenship reside then in the right to anonymity, algorithmic transparency, and control over the distribution and ownership of personal data. Despite its growing social impact, not everyone is aware of these aspects and much less of the creative, communicative and community power of the internet, especially those who were born already in a highly digital world. Even though these most recent social and technological changes menace to disempower us, changing us all from digital citizens into technology consumers, it's greatly visible how digital tools have come to be a part of people's lives and the potential they bear to improve it¹.

In the museum world, according to Simon² the impact of the social web, for example, is visible with the broad range of tools and design configurations that enable participation in an unprecedented way. The participatory approach states that museums are to become relevant institutions in contemporary life by connecting to the public, which is to be engaged as «cultural participants and not only passive consumers». These dynamics lead to people wanting more than just attending, they want to be taken seriously, they expect to discuss and share in an environment that has become fundamental in cultural and community life. It's a space where people can create, share and bond with others. And the museum collects and shares content co-produced with visitors and also it invites visitors to respond and help complement cultural articles, scientific knowledge, and historical evidences that reside on the museum.

The recent paradigm of participation in museums illustrated by Simon derives also from a museological turn that took place in the last decades of the 20th century and still influences museum work, which was led by innovative museum experiences, academic developments and international networks as well as encounters, originating a New Museology. Some of those experiences took place in the Americas such as the Anacostia Community Museum founded in 1967, and the Santiago Round Table that originated the *Santiago Declaration* in 1972 in Chile, and the international workshop on New Museology that took place in Quebec in 1984. In Africa the experience of the National Museum of Niamey in Nigeria active since 1958 is another example. In Europe it's interesting to bring the examples of the 1970s Ecomuseum developments in France, the Open-Air museums in Scandinavian countries as well as community museums in

¹ DRAKOPOLOU *et al.*, 2016.

² SIMON, 2010.

Portugal along with the birth of the sociomuseological approach at the University Lusófona of Humanities and Technologies in the 1990s.

An extensive description of the New Museology is not possible in the scope of this article. Nevertheless, this brief and rather simplified overview of the many actions that took part in several parts of the world that helped shape a new museology can also be complemented by the development of participatory approaches in Germany. The Historical Museum of Frankfurt also in the 1970s promoted actions and a mentality that also contributed to set the ground for its today's innovative activities.

FRANKFURT HERE!



Fig. 2. City for all movement in Frankfurt (Germany). ©Historisches Museum Frankfurt. Photo: Meike Fischer

The Historical Museum of Frankfurt, founded in 1878, is the oldest museum owned and run by the city in Frankfurt. With the principles of «a place of learning, not a temple of the Muses»³ and «Culture for all people», the museum decided in the 1970s to concentrate its «educational role» and to «open it up to all strata of society»⁴. Nowadays the institution is changing again as it heads to become a city museum for Frankfurt. The idea is to be more connected with its inhabitants and propose a place where this diversity

³ SPICKERNAGEL & WALBE, 1976.

⁴ JANNELLI & THIEL, 2014: 65.

of individuals can similarly have a voice. In times where we see many movements of citizens claiming for a right to the city and writing «city for all people» on the walls (arguing with the demand of Henri Lefèbvre 1969 «the right to the city»), it is getting more and more important to take the heterogeneous visions and meanings about cities seriously.

The basic idea for the permanent exhibition *Frankfurt Now!* is that the knowledge about the city is not only developed by the institution, but that everybody who lives in Frankfurt is an expert of the city and has his or her own relevant subjective knowledge about it. Therefore the museum strategically started in 2010 to become a participatory museum when the new building started to be constructed. By establishing that participative approaches would be one of the main aspects of its activity, even though without a physical headquarters, the institution started to conceive, design and mount exhibitions with the communities that would develop together with the museum. Throughout workshops about different themes and different aspects, and also throughout all the steps of each exhibition, the new participative exhibition format *Stadtlabor unterwegs* (City Lab) was therefore developed.



Fig. 3. Exhibition «OSTEND/OSTANFANG. Ein Stadtteil im Wandel», first Stadtlabor Unterwegs exhibition
From April 30th until June 25th. ©Historisches Museum Frankfurt

Furthermore, in the new building inaugurated in 2017, the new permanent exhibition *Frankfurt Now!* space was conceived and it will be oriented towards the present time and based also on participative exhibitions, through collaborative research and representation. One aspect of the new museum project is the *Stadtlabor Digital*. It consists in an online platform based on a map that aims to capture the various and diverse knowledge and experiences of the lived city. It will include several tools to integrate the

perspective of the individuals. People will be able to upload a wide variety of contents — videos, photos, audios and texts — and place it into the map in order to express their perspectives, perceptions and interpretations of Frankfurt. This tool is as a part of the permanent exhibition that can be visualized in the museum in specific designed devices, and provides an opportunity to participate in the virtual urban space, create it and interpret it, but also connect to other people's perspectives and possibly impact on the dynamics of the city itself. Not every content about the city can be connected to a concrete place in the city, therefore the map is also limited to show content and discourses specifically about the territory, for every contribution must be linked to a place in the map. It brings us to the necessity to understand urban space which will be approached next.

URBAN SPACE AND THE ROLE OF THE SPECTATOR

In an era when cities are central conglomerates of people with such distinctive characteristics and many different needs, a public institution such as a museum has a relevant part to play. A city is «a relatively big, densely populated and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals»⁵. Lewis Mumford also states that the city «is «a theater of social action», and everything else — art, politics, education, commerce — serves only to make the social drama [...] more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play»⁶.

Consequently, concerning the role of museums in society, it's possible to suggest that such digital collaborative platforms, such as the Stadtlabor Digital, can operate as a new sphere where the citizens can actively participate, act and interact on the social theater of the city. In this sense the perspective and the situations it creates, the Jacques Rancière's idea of the «Emancipated Spectator»⁷ helps to shine some lights and understand how to deal with such developments. Rancière's standpoint mentions firstly the spectator paradox, which states that when facing any types of spectacle, one is subjected to be «watching», therefore «not knowing» and by only observing the individual remains passive. In the modern interconnected urban space, it's more and more common for citizens to be spectators. To be facing an exhibition, a computer, a cellphone or tablet screen and to be passive. To be a spectator is to accept passively what is transmitted, and take no action towards it. The author proposes nonetheless that another kind of theater is needed. By turning the attention to the old conceptions of theater that considers it as a community area, a way of occupying collectively time and space, as well as a place where drama is produced. Drama, according to the author on the other hand, is synonym for action. The theater is therefore where the action is conceived and where the bodies are

⁵ WIRTH, 1938: 8.

⁶ MUMFORD, 2011: 91.

⁷ RANCIÈRE, 2008.

mobilized to act. He proposes thus that the distance between the stage and the spectator must be reduced and almost extinct.

Rancière also turns to his previous theories that state the master and the ignorant are not so different in terms of intelligence. When affirming that an «ignorant» person can teach another «ignorant» person something that the first does not even know, by opposing intellectual emancipation and people's instruction he proclaims the equality of intelligences. He mentions therefore that even when only observing, the act of interpreting is also an active way of dealing with reality and a learning process. That new theater perception blurs the borders between observation and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulation, collectivity and individuality, possession of one-self and alienation.

Furthermore, the theories of «*Conscientização*» (awareness) and «Autonomous Education», by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, can also complement Rancière's perspectives. Freire, in many of his writings but also in his practical work as an educator, stated that education requires a way of thinking that implies individuals mediated by objects in shared communication processes by which both sides have relevant perspectives and not only occurs a transference of knowledge. It requires a «dialogical act» that challenges both the educator and the apprentice⁸.

Freire also states that the awareness facing reality is crucial for people to become actively responsible for their roles as human as well as historical beings. By affirming that if people are «unable to perceive critically the themes of their time and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change»⁹. The ordinary people inhabiting the diverse societies are then «crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created»¹⁰ that can later annihilate them. Only by acquiring a critical understanding of the reality, one is capable of implying actual changes and impacting on the themes that shape an epoch. «If he lacks the capacity to perceive the «mystery» of the changes, he will be a mere pawn at their mercy»¹¹. Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière provide us then with a perspective in which the citizens must be active and aware of their role in this social theater which is reality, and that by taking over the digital realm as a space it's possible to impact on society.

In this sense, all kinds of perspectives and intelligence can be conveyed when the spectator and the actor, the educator and the learner establish a dialog in a platform that allows such an interaction. Then transplanted to a social theater emulated by a digital platform, it then leads people to create and share their own perspectives and then to be in contact, in an indirect way, with other people that visualize it and interpret it. In an

⁸ FREIRE, 2011.

⁹ FREIRE, 2005: 6.

¹⁰ FREIRE, 2005: 5.

¹¹ FREIRE, 2005: 7.

abstract sense this tool allows individuals to learn from each other, enhancing the social and educational role of the museum.

In the social theater that also constitutes a city, the museum proposes then a platform where people can create and appropriate space, interpret it, experience it and share it so other people can have contact with their perspectives. The space, in the meanings of Lefebvre¹² is not physically given, it is constantly retreated and produced by society.

In order to analyze how to integrate a chaotic range of multiperspectives, make them meaningful and comprehensible to other people, it is interesting to consider then the city as theater of social practices, whereas the digital sphere can be considered another layer in which individuals play a role, interact with each other and exercise their citizenship. There will be also the question: Which city/cities and images about the city will be produced?

FRANKFURT NOW!: THE STADTLABOR DIGITAL

In conclusion to this initial analysis, we notice that the Historical Museum of Frankfurt and the concept of the Stadtlabor Digital are located within the digital sphere, that can simulate a community to wake up the dormant spectator of modern society by actively creating, interpreting and reinterpreting their cultural references. It encourages participation and extracts the spectator from simply passive receptor of a message and affirms that each and every one has his or her own capability to teach something, and creates space where people share their own expertise and knowledge.

When it comes to the museums, it's possible to analyze the impacts of these new ways of participation and digital tools on the main functions of such institutions. Collecting, preserving, researching and communicating are also implicated in the changes we expect to observe such transformation.

If we take the Stadtlabor Digital as a way of collecting perspectives, knowledge, claims, memories of experienced cities, the impacts on how we perceive the museum are visible. When exhibiting it to other people, it can also be considered part of a preservationist plan for which the museum is often responsible; allowing people to receive and retransmit heritage can be considered a preservation method. Besides that, the possibilities to use that collection in a meaningful way are numerous and it is up to the museum to evaluate, as time goes by, on how, why and when to use, as well as what to keep, what to discard and what to communicate. The collection is also available to several readings, interactions and interpretations of its content where concepts about a specific theme are constantly worked and reworked by the spectator. They are a way of enriching a wide and abstract new concept of community and lived city, thus preserving those views to future generations to interpret it and constantly change it.

¹² LEFEBVRE, 1991.

The museum works not only with objects, monuments and archives. With this platform it's possible that it incorporates common heritage references and includes them through the eyes of the common citizens, whether those are cultural expressions, a historical monument or an aspect of the city that constitutes a problem yet to be solved or a potential to be developed. The producing and exhibiting of this shared city within a digital platform is also a process of giving new meanings to these elements extracted, in this case, from the present.

The aim of the Stadtlabor Digital can also be framed within a communication space that allows not only passive reception of knowledge, but the development of actions and concrete social change. The diversity of visitors and creators is also a fundamental aspect, for the variety of views and interpretations can enrich even further the knowledge about the city. Exhibiting may not be the final goal of the museum, but rather a constant process of communication by which people can interact not only with the museum but with each other. The museum becomes then a space for social development, elaboration and reaffirmation of identities and citizenship.

If we observe the museum as an arena and a theater where one can observe reality filtered by different regards and comprehension or incomprehension and their impacts on the social dynamics. In this sense, the platform can also become a source for research. Museology, among other functions, according to Brazilian museologist Waldisa Rússio, supposes the study of people and their interactions with objects in a specific scenario, being this one usually the museum itself, but not exclusively¹³. The digital space created provides a ground for analyzing finally how the Frankfurt society deals with its own heritage, whether it's people's own individual perspectives or those conveyed by other people and the museum itself.

Through Stadtlabor Digital and other tools and methods, the Historical Museum of Frankfurt tries to provide a space where people can appropriate the digital realm to make their subjectivity emerge but also as a tool to tackle contemporary questions of transforming cities and to play their roles as citizens. It's another way to explore the city and to connect with other people, corroborating in another way to interact with one's own heritage and identity, hence contributing to the transformation of the image and role of museums in contemporaneity.

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¹³ BRUNO, 2010.

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