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Museum networks in the Mediterranean area: Real and virtual opportunities☆

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades the initiatives aimed at disseminating innovative, international networks have proliferated, resulting in new forms of collaboration between businesses, individuals and places, different for their activities and functions. Within local development policies participation in global networks has become a necessary complement in order to seize all the extra-local opportunities. For instance, museum networking is getting effective results with respect to the protection and promotion of the immense cultural heritage from which it draws. The aim of this paper is to highlight the new opportunities for collaboration and competition created in Mediterranean cities by the progress of telematics, with particular attention to the cultural sector and the role of museums in the development of touristic attraction. The paper points out there is a strong tendency towards the integration of the different forms of networks, which makes it difficult to operate a neat separation between real and virtual networks. The firsts are those created with specific physical structures deputed to host committees and scheduled meetings. The seconds are those intended to capture fully the opportunities offered by telematics and the Internet, and that only exist on the web. They have a higher openness degree in terms of accessibility and inclusiveness, allowing, for instance, even smaller organizations to gain visibility and to enter mechanisms of competition/collaboration with the bigger ones. Museum networks in the Mediterranean area have, in recent decades, multiplied. This paper will highlight the progress made so far in creating these new virtual networks and the possibilities that they open in different, not always explored, fields. Emblematic examples to which we will refer in the paper will be the networks of contemporary art museums. These, among others, take advantage of the visibility and image that the new eclectic and iconic structures of post-modern architecture can project internationally.

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1. Introduction

Among the various occasions of collaboration and competition among territories, cities and regions, the ones which concern heritage and cultural activities, play an increasingly relevant role. In such a context museums are among the structures that receive greater attention from local government and from the local and regional governances, on the basis of a better protection, knowledge and exploitation of the cultural heritage. With the spreading of the different types of competition–collaboration on a global level, the aims attributed to museums have gone beyond the cultural and educational field. They have indeed become instruments for strengthening the image of cities and territories and the sense of belonging of the town-dwellers. They also demonstrate they can be a driving force from the economical and touristic point of view, too [1,2].

Museums almost always appear as structures that are closely tied to their territory, but at the same time, with great opportunities to opening up to the outside world. Opportunities that have been expanded by the development of information technology and electronic interconnections, which have opened the museums up to enormous prospects, entering these institutions in increasingly pervasive ways, enriching their identity, widening their boundaries. The virtual contents of the museums (texts, images, videos and animation) are presented to the users in a more or less "engaging" shape through Internet links or in memorized material (dvd, cd-rom) [3,4]. There is an increasing number of famous museums (the British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Uffizi in Florence) which use digitalization. These museums, like reference marks, besides being institutional sites of an informative nature, propose "virtual" visits that offer iconographical representations of the collections housed, as well as the rooms which house them [5–7]. Finally, there are museums which only exist on the net, like the WebMuseum, a network which presents texts and images of collections of work not physically

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available, but only collected together visually by electronic means (http://www.ibiblio.or/wm/).

The Mediterranean cities and regions, endowed with an immense cultural heritage and with many museum structures, in order to exploit these resources better have started up on initiatives for the creation of real and virtual networks. However, at present, the projects have too limited thematic or territorial horizons or they turn out to be wishful, compared to the resources in the field. This study highlights the importance that real and virtual networks assume between museums, their cultural and economic value and the prospects that they open up for the re-launching of activities like tourism [8,9]. Among these prospects we consider of significant interest the one related to the creation of a Mediterranean network of contemporary art museums. These museums have spread rapidly in recent years, and also have tended to use an iconic post-modern architecture to increase their visibility and project their image on an international level.

2. The development and functions of museum networks

Where the real networks among museums generally have vertical, centralized organizational structures, the development of virtual networks have made the horizontal structures increasingly more frequent and have tried to draw the vertical and horizontal networks together. One of the main reasons which lies at the basis of their creation is that it allows participants to reduce costs, although many networks are created with other specific objectives, like the exchange of tangible and/or intangible resources (information, money, equipment and materials, clients and suppliers, specialized services). Moreover, networks which tend to give life to real and true strategic alliances are more and more frequent, and strengthen the ability of each component to compete on the global scene [10].

Firstly, it is necessary to underline that the benefits offered by the creation of traditional or real networks are not the same as those that virtual ones can offer. The latter, by fully exploiting the opportunities offered by new electronic technologies and by access to the Internet present a greater degree of openness compared to the traditional or real ones and they often involve a higher number of users. They enlarge the arena of competition, also allowing smaller organizations to obtain a greater visibility and to compete on the same level as the bigger ones on a global level. However, at the same time they increase the chances of cooperation between museums and between these and the other cultural institutions, even if situated at a great distance. On the other hand, one can't help pointing out that the electronic interconnection of more museums tends to give rise to the prospect of great virtual museums which allow otherwise impossible reconstructions, such as the virtual recomposition of collections that over time have been split up, or of works of an artist strewn in many museums.

Creating or adhering to a virtual network has therefore become an indispensible strategic choice for the development of the ability of museum organizations, for the reduction of costs, for the chance to receive on-line feedback and consultancy both for the organization of exhibitions as well as for the activities of marketing and of development. It is necessary to point out, moreover, that the support of technology, and thus the possibility to visit the museum and to receive information and a series of new on-line services, can help to remove the barrier of a physical and psychological type in accessing resources offered by the museum, opening it up to new users, the so-called "remote users". An opening that represents an indubitable factor of promotion, in consideration of the fact that a significant part of the remote users tend to turn into direct users of the museum, and that the fruition of art through the computer is only a simulation and cannot ever substitute totally direct contact with the work of art.

The projects and the intentions of the virtual networks that connect the museums are in continual expansion, in parallel to the development of the Internet network, the World Wide Web and the research engines. The most common types are represented by the web pages on which information and links to museum sites that participate in the network converge. However, their breadth and their content can vary significantly, indeed portals exist which refer to museums in one country or that contain information related only to a certain type of museum. Nonetheless, the trend is that of moving towards an enormous deposit from which it will be possible to extract a quantity of information and images organized according to personal needs. The great potentiality triggered off by the starting up of virtual networks often contributes to achieving the exchange of information between real and virtual networks, exchanges that can contribute to increasing the power of both networks. On the other hand, with the development of cloud computing technology the real networks, which are based on the sharing of some functions and services and on personal contacts, are also involved at an increasing degree of virtuality [11].

The real and virtual networks between museums become the instruments that permit working in synergy, sharing planning, resources and initiatives. There are many advantages that come from the creation of these networks and they are not limited to permitting some costs to be cut down or to extending the number of users. Indeed, they allow more important projects to be set up, such as exhibitions on an international level, inaccessible to individual museums, access to more funding and reduction of the uncertainty connected to its allocation [12,13]. Thanks to the network, it is not the individual Museum, its city or region of reference to become a critical mass, but the whole network which sets up a close weave of knowledge and conservation. These networks present new challenges for the same management that run the museums. These are asked not just optimization and conservation of their collections, but to have the ability to create and run museum networks, to interpret the digital evolution and to take advantage of possible, new opportunities. Moreover, seen from the point of view of the relationship with the users, networks can become efficient means of interaction and integration between individuals and between ethnic groups belonging to countries distant from one another.

3. The global networks and the urban and regional ones

Naturally the advantages that come for the museums and their users vary considerably in relation to the extent of the network. There are indeed networks that spring up inside the same city or which do not extend beyond the regional boundaries and others which have a global reach. Among the latter can be counted, those which have important international organizations, which are endowed with strategic plans and web sites, and which plan important international conferences. Examples are:

- the *International Council of Museums* (ICOM) (http://icom.museum/), an international non-governmental organization of museums and professionals in the sector, where 137 national and international committees participate and which has a site that represents an important international window for large and small museums;
- the *Museum Computer Network* (MCN) (http://www.mcn.edu/), an international non-profit organization, created by the state of New York in 1967, which welcomes members with different and similar professional interests, and deals with museums and cultural heritage, supplying them with the chance to know, implement and spread new technology and the best practices.

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