

# EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM MANAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

*Museums have acquired new roles, thus becoming active actors in society against the backdrop of the expectations of cultural consumers. In addition, consumers now have a higher demand for Romanian museums after visiting great European museums. The managerial approach continues to change considerably, reaching the point where it focuses more on aspects such as activism, sustainability, diversity, inclusion, and interactivity to encourage and bring together people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds around a museum. Speaking about interactivity, one of the ways of attracting a diverse public is the adoption of new technologies such as VR and AI. The paper outlines some of the main dimensions and sub-dimensions associated with the management of a modern museum. It discusses how managerial best practices align with the new ICOM definition of a museum, using the latter as a benchmark. More specifically, modern museum management means participation, sustainability, activism, and new technologies. The investigation suggests that the definition adopted by ICOM is, to some extent, outdated compared to practice and cannot be relied upon alone to define the management of a modern museum.*

## **Keywords**

*activist museum; modern museum; museum management; new technologies in museums; participatory museum; sustainable museum.*

## **Introduction**

In the 19th century, museums started from the idea of a collection, being a place to find objects relevant to the nation, about the origins, and the populations that were in that geographical space, all showing the cultural and historical evolution (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2015; Hill, 2021; Preziosi, 2006, p. 50). Nowadays, however, the museum has acquired other functions. According to Law No 311 of July 8, 2023, its primary functions are "the establishment, conservation, and restoration of museum heritage, the registration, protection, research, and development of museum heritage and the enhancement of museum heritage for the purposes of knowledge, education, and recreation." In the last few years, museums have started to play a more dynamic role in society (Zbucea et al., 2022) and, therefore, need to constantly adapt to consumer behaviors and attitudes to respond to consumer needs, as well as in terms of culture and education, and terms of social engagement and activism. These shifts in museums' role and dynamism have inevitably led to the need to formulate a new museum definition corresponding to current realities.

Hence, in 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a definition more in line with the significant changes regarding the role of museums and with the current directions and trends: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." The formulation and adoption process of the definition was vast and consisted of four rounds of consultations between ICOM committees from over 80 countries (Zbucnea, 2022, p. 7). Broadly, the consultation process revealed seven dimensions as follows: entity - what a museum is; qualifier - what qualifies a museum; object/subject - what are the objects/subjects of museums; action/function - what a museum does; experience - what people experience at a museum; social values - what values shape museums; and target and relationships - whom museums work for and the nature of their relationships (ICOM, 2021b, p. 48).

Based on this definition, this paper aims to capture the dimensions of modern museum management and new trends in the field. However, although the definition mentions some of the essential concepts and functions that museums have, and some of the most critical aspects of the new directions are mentioned, the definition is to some extent outdated compared to practice because it tends to be still object-oriented, although modern museums seem more and more visitor-centric and community-driven (Giglietto et al., 2019; Di Pietro et al., 2014; Villeneuve & Love, 2017) and there are even "museums" without heritage (e.g. Exploratorium: The Museum of Science, Art & Human Perception).

Before this version of the definition, there was another proposal in July 2019 at the Kyoto Extraordinary General Assembly, but it did not even receive 30% of the votes (Nițulescu, 2019). The issues that provoked the most intense debate were those relating to the role of a museum "to contribute to social justice, global equality, and planetary good" because of the political implications. In Romania, a reaction to this proposal comes from Virgil Nițulescu (2019), manager of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant. He highlights the multiple functions of a museum and questions whether museums have already become cultural platforms and, if so, what this means in practice. It is impossible to add such dimensions to the existing functions of a museum because they do not have the means to establish social justice or world peace. At most, these can be values that museums can hold and strive for.

This paper has identified the most significant directions and sub-directions. However, there may be other directions unexplored. The limitations of this research stem from the fact that it is based solely on a narrative literature review, and it is challenging to cover all directions in the museum landscape, as new concepts frequently emerge. Moreover, this approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the state of the research and subsequently establishes new research directions while refraining from introducing new research tools.

## **Literature review**

Various papers discuss the museums' relatively new directions and transformation in

relation to contemporary society (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Kavanagh, 2002; Simon, 2010; Black, 2021). Museums tend to play an important role as a social catalyst or agent of social inclusion (Sandell, 2003; Romanelli et al., 2020). In other words, they aim to diminish differences and bring all categories of visitors together. Another perspective on the museum in contemporary society would be as a mirror of society and its social, political, and economic context, as museums have a very high capacity to adapt (Janes & Sandell, 2019), starting from the 19th-century museum which was a reflection of the nation-state to the contemporary consumerist society. Furthermore, Janes and Sandell (2019) contextualize the concept of the activist museum and discuss a range of issues at length, such as museums' response to migration policies and refugee crises and their involvement in advancing climate change discussions. Jennifer Bergevin examines the long-term impact of activist practices in the museum sector on visitors, focusing on measurable and sustainable impact. She also proposes reframing the impact that contextualizes and situates the museum experience within a broader framework of transformative experiences (Bergevin, 2018). At the national level, museums are not only providers of knowledge but also social drivers of change by expanding the range of topics for exhibition projects and educational programs, as well as their discourse in the public space, increasingly engaging with social and civic issues and addressing issues of concern to their communities and society at large (Zbucea et al., 2020). The museum's role is therefore sensitive to discuss (Kavanagh, 2002, p.116), but at the same time, it is a very important topic for society. For example, in Romania, there are sensitive historical themes such as the Holocaust of the Jewish and Roma communities and Roma slavery. Discussing these topics is essential because museums are a space of inclusion and must show the injustices of history and thus raise awareness about these topics.

In addition, Graham Black (2021) analyses the concepts of both activist and participatory museums. He positions the museum as an active player in tackling society's problems to combat them against the background of expectations on the part of the public, which is less and less willing to accept a passive role on the part of the museum (Black, 2021). In this sense, some specialists consider that a museum successfully implements activist practices when the public gets involved (Zbucea et al., 2020). Another relevant idea can be found in the paper *The Participatory Museum* in which Nina Simon (2010) explains that museum institutions make use of various techniques and tools in the way exhibitions are designed, the way heritage pieces are displayed, and the tools that are used to highlight them as well as to provide an experience as interactive as possible, generating dialogue within the relevant communities. Participatory activities also create the context for learning and encourage critical thinking (Simon, 2010), and "a participatory culture is one in which members believe their contributions are important and feel some degree of social connection with each other" (Stein, 2012, p. 216; Jenkins et al., 2015, p. 2).

As previously stated, ICOM's 2022 definition of a museum emphasizes its role in serving society and encouraging sustainability. To achieve sustainability, museums must innovate to address their mission's environmental, social, and economic risks (Lord et al., 2012, p. 6). A museum can be considered sustainable if it achieves a balance between cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability through its activities (Pop, 2017, p. 123). In Romania, on the sustainable management and development of museums, as well as on the *sustainable museum* concept, the most important contributions belong to Izabela Luiza Pop and Anca Borza, who propose a

model for measuring the sustainability of a museum based on 33 indicators, such as the state of conservation, storage conditions, the level of research of the heritage, the degree of its exposure, online visibility, the "footprint" in the media, the attractiveness of museum collections, the online accessibility of collections (Pop & Borza, 2016). These indicators were organized under the following sustainability dimensions: *Cultural (collection storage, conservation, and research)*, *Social and cultural, Social (collection accessibility, community involvement, the museum's social impact)*, *Social and economic, Natural environment (using the resources as efficiently as possible)*, *Economic (efficiency, economic impact on the community)*

The degree of involvement of museums in society, from the position of activist, participatory, and sustainable museums, translates into greater community involvement in museums' work. Furthermore, to actively contribute to society's development and enhance their communities' well-being, museums are becoming more connected, thus becoming engaged partners for stakeholders (Zbucea & Bira, 2020). Since we have brought up the importance of stakeholders, it is relevant to mention that in the case of Romanian museums, these are visitors, employees, the local community, the public administration or authorizing officer, university and pre-university educational institutions, researchers who study the museum collections, non-profit organizations and companies (Zbucea, 2014, p. 25). Moving forward, one thing that changes the museum rhetoric of community engagement is the transformation of the audience from passive actors to contributing actors in the creative process of an exhibition project, thus making the museum "a truly inclusive space for the communities it serves" (Barnes & McPherson, 2019; Scott, 2010). However, this also comes with risks, both financial and related to maintaining the artistic vision and integrating as many opinions as possible (Holdgaard & Klastrup, 2014, p. 199).

The museum must, above all, offer an experience, an idea emphasized by Kotler and Kotler (2000), who state that the museum must adapt to new socio-cultural and digital realities and compete with new forms of entertainment. However, taking into account the mission of the museum, the aforementioned sources that refer to the concepts of activist and participatory museum, and given the current context, it would be more appropriate to discuss engagement with a target beyond the enjoyment or education of each visitor, with societal stakes, rather than the museum as a provider of a unique experience. According to recent statistics, Romanian consumers believe that the cultural offer of museums is not attractive, urge researchers to address this topic and highlight which tools, once applied, will attract more people to museums (Zbucea, 2015a). Specialists also tend not to consider the public's needs when designing an exhibition project, instead relying on their own opinions. Exhibitions need to be relevant, and visitors need to be involved in the decision-making process; as Emery (2001) points out, even if they are not specialists, specialists need to translate the scientific message into accessible terms so that visitors have an opinion. In this way, social relevance increases, and museums are more visited as they present exhibitions on topics relevant to society and give visitors a sense of belonging and participation in society. In other words, visitors otherwise understand the exhibition's message and relate to the museum as a space closer to them, so nowadays, before an exhibition product is produced, market research is carried out to consult civil society.

Moreover, according to the report "Culture and Democracy, the evidence - how

citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy, and social cohesion," published by the European Commission (2023), people who participate in cultural activities (from a volunteer role for example) tend to be more involved in society. The report also mentions the importance of the museum as a link between different social, economic, ethnic, and religious groups, as a place where they feel represented and where they can discover shared values. Museums in Romania aim to fulfill this role and are supported in this by a range of national and European funding. In this respect, the absorption rate of funds by a museum, which is a mirror of society, is essential. In other words, a museum is modern if, among other things, it can absorb funds and implement projects. One direction in European policies is digitizing public administration and cultural heritage (Oberländer-Târnoveanu, 2006), allowing access to it by as many categories of people as possible. In this respect, mention should be made of "Twin it! 3D for Europe's culture", a recent initiative to accelerate the use and re-use of 3D in the common European data space. This initiative is an invitation from the European Commission to the 27 Ministries of Culture of the European Union to select and present a 3D digitized cultural heritage asset in the European Common Data Space (European Commission, 2023).

This component is also becoming a priority in Romania through inventory, digitization, and valorization of the collections by creating databases and virtual, 3D exhibitions. This trend can be observed at the national level by accelerating the process of 3D scanning of heritage, as well as through the realization of virtual exhibitions and the use of VR and AI technologies in interactions with visitors (Vidu et al., 2021) in exhibition projects (e.g., the exhibition "Danube's Archaeological e-Landscapes. Virtual archaeological landscapes of the Danube region", realized through the transnational program Interreg - Danube - MNIR, 2020). New technologies transform museums into interactive spaces where visitors are more involved in the "story" (Carlsson, 2023). In this sense, virtual reality can "enhance stories" and reimagine worlds. However, the use of these new technologies requires a collaborative relationship between museums to jointly overcome the challenges that come with their implementation (Deakin, 2023). The global museum community has enthusiastically embraced the potential of VR, using it to create immersive tours, interactive exhibitions, and visual narratives (Richardson, 2022). Furthermore, museums use AR to display digital versions of artists, which brings artworks to life, or to add explanations of pieces, meaning visitors gain more information when viewing exhibitions where AR is used (Coates, 2023).

Similarly, technology can also be used in educational activities for children, stimulating curiosity and creativity in a museum setting (Zbucea & Iordan, 2020; Bira & Zbucea, 2023). Moreover, museums can use big data and machine learning for better data analysis to improve the visitor experience and prepare for future exhibitions (Vidu et al., 2021, p. 841). In this sense, it is also important to mention that museum innovation can be threefold: technological innovation in visitor experience, organizational innovation, and technological innovation in management (Vicente et al., 2015).

The digitalization process has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also highlighted the importance of this process in the museum space. In this respect, Valer Rus proposes a new perspective, in which the main functions of a museum should include "the digitalization of cultural and natural heritage" (2020). The same perspective can be found in the article written by Iacob (2020), who believes that the digitalization of cultural heritage in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, would

bring a museum up to date and closer to all generations, especially the younger ones, who are very present online. The most recent trend involves using new technologies such as virtual reality or artificial intelligence in exhibition projects, which is also reported in the works of Ding (2017) and Keil et al. (2013). Another concept targeted by the present research is *edutainment* in the museum sector, a mix of education and entertainment to attract younger generations. This has become a challenge due to competition from theme parks, television channels, and organizations offering educational programs (Zbucnea, 2015b). The decision to use new technologies and make the museum visit more interactive for visitors is beneficial. However, a perspective that would take things too far away from the museum's essential role must be approached with care (Balloffet et al., 2014).

## Discussion

The narrative literature review demonstrates that modern museum management means participation, sustainability, activism, and the use of new technologies, those directions being undoubtedly the most important nowadays. To establish a correlation between the dimensions revealed by the literature review and the new ICOM definition of a museum, we propose two tables, one containing the seven dimensions and critical concepts mentioned in the ICOM definition (Table 1) and one with the dimensions and subdimensions of museum management (Table 2).

**Table 1. Dimensions and key concepts mentioned in the ICOM definition**  
(Source: Author's research contribution)

	<b>Dimensions of the ICOM definition</b>	<b>Key concepts mentioned in the definition</b>
D1	entity - what a museum is	not-for-profit, permanent, open to the public
D2	qualifier - what qualifies a museum	not-for-profit, permanent, open to the public, researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage
D3	object/subject - what are the objects/subjects of museums	tangible and intangible heritage
D4	action/function - what a museum does	foster diversity, foster sustainability, researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage
D5	experience - what people experience at a museum	varied experiences, education, enjoyment, reflection, knowledge sharing
D6	social values - what values shape museums	ethical, accessibility, diversity, sustainability, inclusivity, professionalism, with the participation of communities
D7	target and relationships - who museums work for and the nature of their relationships	open to the public, accessible, diversity, inclusive, with the participation of communities

As Table 1 reflects, the ICOM definition mentions very relevant aspects of a museum's broader mission and role, such as being at the service of society, being open to the public, being accessible and inclusive, and thus being an agent of diversity and sustainability.

**Table 2. Dimensions and sub-dimensions of modern museum management**  
(Source: Author's research contribution)

<b>The dimensions of modern museum management</b>		<b>The subdimensions of modern museum management</b>
<b><i>Strategic approach</i></b>	Sustainability	Economic sustainability Environmental sustainability Cultural sustainability Social sustainability
	Participatory culture	Involvement of communities formed around the museum in the online environment Involving communities in educational activities Event participation Involvement of communities in identifying and preparing new exhibition projects
	Activism	Adoption of social inclusion policies Adoption of gender equality policies Adoption of policies on national and ethnic minority rights
<b><i>Operative approach</i></b>	The use of new technologies	Technological innovation in management Technological innovation in visitor experience Organisational innovation

As Table 2 reflects, the management dimensions of a modern museum are sustainability, participatory culture, and activism, as they bring to mind the three roles adopted by the museum: activist museum, participatory museum, and sustainable museum. Therefore, sustainability, activism, and participatory culture have become pillars of a modern museum. On the other hand, another critical dimension of contemporary museum management is operational, as it refers to how a museum acts to be more efficient and attractive to visitors through the technological innovations it adopts.

After comparing the two tables, we can state that the sustainability dimension is found in D4 (action/function – what a museum does) and D6 (social values – what values shape museum) of the ICOM definition, while participatory culture is found in D5 (experience - what people experience at a museum) and D7 (target and relationships - whom museums work for and the nature of their relationships). Although the ICOM definition includes the previous two dimensions, the activism component is not explicitly included nor fully assumed by ICOM.

## Conclusions

Although the seven dimensions of the ICOM definition are mostly in harmony with the observed directions and explicitly include them, and a significant part of the dimensions of modern management is contained in the ICOM definition (sustainability and participatory culture), the definition does not capture all the dimensions of contemporary museum management observed as a result of the literature review. This can be understood in the context of the dynamic landscape and the fact that the museum is taking on more and more roles in contemporary society. Thus, we can say that the practice is more advanced than the definition, and the latter cannot be relied upon alone to define the management of a modern museum.

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