Article

Museum Practices as Tools to (Re)Define Memory and Identity Issues Through Direct Experience of Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Marta Wróblewska

History, Art History and Archaeology Doctoral Studies at the Faculty of History, University of Gdańsk, Jana Bażyńskiego 8 str., 80-309 Gdańsk, Poland; marta.p.w@gmail.com; Tel.: +48-504-877-497

Abstract: In the liquid-like times of post-modernity, where the notions of memory, identity, and culture are undergoing a process of redefinition, transition, and interpenetration, the role of museums as institutions responsible for heritage preservation and distribution needs to be revised in terms of their engagement with exhibitions, audiences, and strategies. The following text will analyze some examples of those tendencies implemented in contemporary museums practices observed in two cities: Gdańsk, Poland and Berlin, Germany.

1. Introduction

The subject of my research revolves around the relation between the discourse presented within cultural institutions of my hometown Gdańsk, Poland and the processes connected with the construction of its cultural identity that have taken place after 1989. By cultural institutions, I understand those ones which present specific narrations [i.e., specific ways of communicating particular stories] within their permanent exhibitions, but also those institutions that gather and present collections, and this includes also non-museums. The timespan chosen for analysis is very significant as far as the development of identity politics is concerned. The symbolic year 1989 marked an important caesura in the contemporary history of Poland. The fall of the communist regime gave rise to the development of self-governance, freedom of speech, the inflow of investment funds (also applying to cultural institutions), and a unique kind of revolution in thinking about local memory and identity. What I am particularly interested in is observing how cultural institutions in Gdańsk have been responsive to and mirrored the aforementioned transformation processes. It is my goal to analyze how (if at all) the negotiation and adjustment of the new understanding of cultural identity manifests itself in the storyline of the permanent exhibitions and the shape of the collections of those institutions. Needless to say, it is them who are active representatives of the local narrations directed to the Gdańsk community firstly, but of course, secondly to the visitors from all over the world. Thus, cultural institutions are still the obvious platforms to present the city's image and to a large degree it is up to them to shape it. A semester spent at the Technical University of Berlin as a guest PhD student provided a possibility to observe similar processes in Berlin, a city which is 10 times larger than Gdańsk, but which surprisingly has much in common, especially regarding the evolution of thinking about its memory and identity after 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) is concerned.

When thinking about and exploring museums, one should be aware of numerous issues connected with those institutions, such as the strategies and cultural policies influencing their activities and narrations. Visiting a museum no longer entails a sheer esthetical pleasure, but often also involves social commitment on the part of the "museum creators" as well as the "museum consumers". Present

perspectives on the museums' function and mission position them further and further away from the 19th century concept of a temple of the arts, supported by such authorities as Goethe or Schinkel [1] (p. 145), which with time slowly turned into a mausoleum of arts as Adorno put it [2] (p. 19), where after a couple of decades, many times "dust and disorder reigning supreme" [3] (p. 2) could be unfortunately observed.

Nowadays, the museum experience includes also an active discussion about a vast array of topics like memory, identity, and both tangible and intangible heritage. The latter is presently an important highlight of an international debate on the European Union level, as 2018 was declared European Year of Cultural Heritage. This is strongly connected with the reinventing and reshaping of the institutional approach that preserves and popularizes cultural heritage. This is in turn visible in the self-reflecting and self-critical practices already taking place, especially in institutions presenting exhibitions and gathering collections or exploring their archives.

Current events and tendencies taking place in the realms of politics, sociology and culture tend to exert revision of their cultural policies on various European countries, provoking many European cities to take a closer look at the strategies represented by their local culture institutions. Institutions themselves, however, are urged to redefine their sense of mission and activity profiles. The postulate to include in the museums' discourse the areas of interest that had been rejected by their narrations for many years, which by some researchers are referred to as "bastard domains" [4] (s. 21), is in fact becoming more and more often an integral part of museum practices. Those practices illustrate the tendencies of the general process of rethinking Europe. The big questions which are posed in relation to this complex and long-term phenomenon concern first and foremost the so-called European identity. Or rather multiple identities constituting the European community.

While speaking about cultural identity, one must not underestimate the notion of memory; both concepts remain in close connection. We are currently facing a complex process of forming and developing of the so-called "memory culture" interconnected with various institutions, including museums, monuments, and memorials of all kinds [5] (p. 9). If one agrees with Jan Assmann, who emphasizes that the memory can become cultural only when it is cultivated through institutions and artefacts [6] (p. 39), the role of museums as memory sites–or to use the term "lieux de memoire", coined by Pierre Nora—seems to be indisputable. In this way, it is the museums, among other places, which assume the function of the managers of the presence of the past [7] (p. XXXVII) mainly by the ways they approach their exhibition concepts, their collections, and their growing and diversified audiences.

In the light of the present museum practices that increasingly consist of growing self-awareness and self-reference, supported by innovative exhibition practices, collection revisions, and participatory and more direct approaches to the audiences, Museum Studies are currently making a big leap towards social studies, especially anthropology or ethnography, adapting the methods of field work and surveys, which remains in accordance with the specificity of the "liquid" present times [8] (p. 7). This proves the necessity not only to satisfy the intellectual and emotional needs of contemporary audiences, but also to depart from being the cemeteries of arts in order to correspond with the lively everydayness embodied more and more within the notion of the intangible heritage, grasping it and defining it instead of museumifying it [9] (p. 139), and, as a result, co-creating the memory-scapes characteristic of our contemporary times.

2. Materials and Methods

The case studies used to comparatively illustrate aspects of the processes described above were selected examples of museum practices taken from two cities: Berlin, Germany and Gdańsk (former Danzig), Poland. Both cities share a significant turning point (i.e., 1989, the fall of the Iron Curtain) that marked the beginning of a new discourse and approach to memory. In Gdańsk, it happened as a result of the August Solidarity movement strikes of shipyard workers led by Lech Wałęsa. Whereas Berlin experienced the fall of the Wall in November, which symbolised the new era in the European history.

It equalled the end of the Cold War, which meant significant political changes followed by considerable amount of freedom for the social, economic, and cultural lives of the Central and Eastern European nations. Discussions, debates, and analyses followed, introducing crucial transformations into the narrations concerning memory, identity, and tangible and intangible heritage [10] (p. 13–17). Those changes made it also possible for the representatives of numerous excluded social groups to speak up as active and engaged citizens of the new democratic structures of their nations. Many times their agoras were the museums, now forced to reevaluate their traditional their structures and missions [11] (p. 3–4).

3. Results

3.1. Gdańsk

Gdańsk is often referred to as a "memory place". The director of the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, Basil Kerski, wrote: "Here, the Second World War started, here the Solidarity movement was born—one of the biggest and most effective peaceful movements of the 20th century". This specificity strongly focuses the city's identity around its history.

It has to be underlined that 90% of the historical center of Gdańsk was destroyed in the course of war activities. Its reconstruction in the historical style was an important decision that strongly reflected the directions of the city's identity [12]. That is why most of Gdańsk museums bear a function of witnesses of history, constituting almost a specific sort of historical monuments or memorials. Being located in musealized historical architecture, they usually showcase artefacts as relicts of the past, illustrating the knowledge about certain histories. This is typical for the narrations in historical museums [13] (p. 16), which usually resemble "time machines" [14] (p. 9) 9), as they reconstruct certain realities important for the local memory and identity. The major examples are: all branches of the Gdańsk History Museum (Artus Court, The Main Townhall, Uphagen's House, The Prison Tower/Museum of Amber, Museum of the Polish Post, and guardhouse in Westerplatte), the Maritime Museum (located in historical granaries, the Crane—which is the most recognizable symbol of the city, and the Sołdek ship), Archeological Museum (the Naturalists' House, the Blue Lamb Granary, and the Romanesque Cellar), the National Museum in Gdańsk (located in the former Franciscan cloister, in the Abbots' Palace, in the Abbots' Granary, and the Green Gate), and last but not least the BHP (Health and Safety Rules) Room where the agreement between the communist government and the striking workers of Gdańsk shipyard was signed.

However, the more recent approach consists of constructing new contemporary memory places. While they still address events which are very much connected with the historical thinking of the city's heritage, their impact extends far beyond the local. Two major investments in cultural infrastructure took place in recent years. The European Solidarity Centre was established in 2014 with the mission to: "Discover history and decide about the future". It refers to one of the most important subjects for local contemporary memory and identity with an open-minded and comprehensive approach. Its main narrative is centered around the events connected with the August 1980 strikes which arose out of the Solidarity movement and led to the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. The fascinating modern building houses an interactive exhibition arranged with the help of many real objects which are sometimes rearranged into multi-media tools. Being predominantly a "narrative museum" [15] (p. 13) it makes extensive use of modern technology. However, it simultaneously encourages the individual and emotional experience of the exhibition, by illustrating the universalized history of freedom, told from the perspectives of its makers, such as the simple shipyard workers transformed from victims to victors. One follows its consecutive stages immersing in the mixture into the fear, hope, enthusiasm, and pride that builds the dynamics of the narrative. A very significant part of the building is its so-called "Winter Garden", which is a meeting space in the inner courtyard, open for citizens to freely practice democracy on an everyday level. What is relevant is that the Centre has been located just on the edge of the historical shipyard, thus, becoming integrated into a historical dialogue with

it. Further, its self-referential architecture brings to mind the body of an old rusty ship, an obvious allusion to the memory of the place itself.

Not far from the Centre, another impressive building was erected and opened to the public in 2017 (Figure 1). The characteristic "pyramidal" seat of the Museum of the Second World War has very quickly become a new architectonic symbol of the city. The main exhibition space has been placed a few levels underground so as "to hide the entire evil there" [16]. The war is pictured as frightful terror and genocide happening on all fronts. However, the main intention of the museum is to present "the human dimension" [17] (p. 7) of the largest 20th century military conflict, whose first shots were fired in Gdańsk on the Westerplatte peninsula on 1st September 1939. The museum's collection has been completed by outreaching to the memory-bearers in search of personal input. In this way the main narration is presented from multiple perspectives, with a strong emphasis on individual accounts of civilians and military privates, illustrated by their belongings or souvenirs donated to the museum. In this particular example, individuals communicate themes and values that are important for a wider population [4] (p. 20).
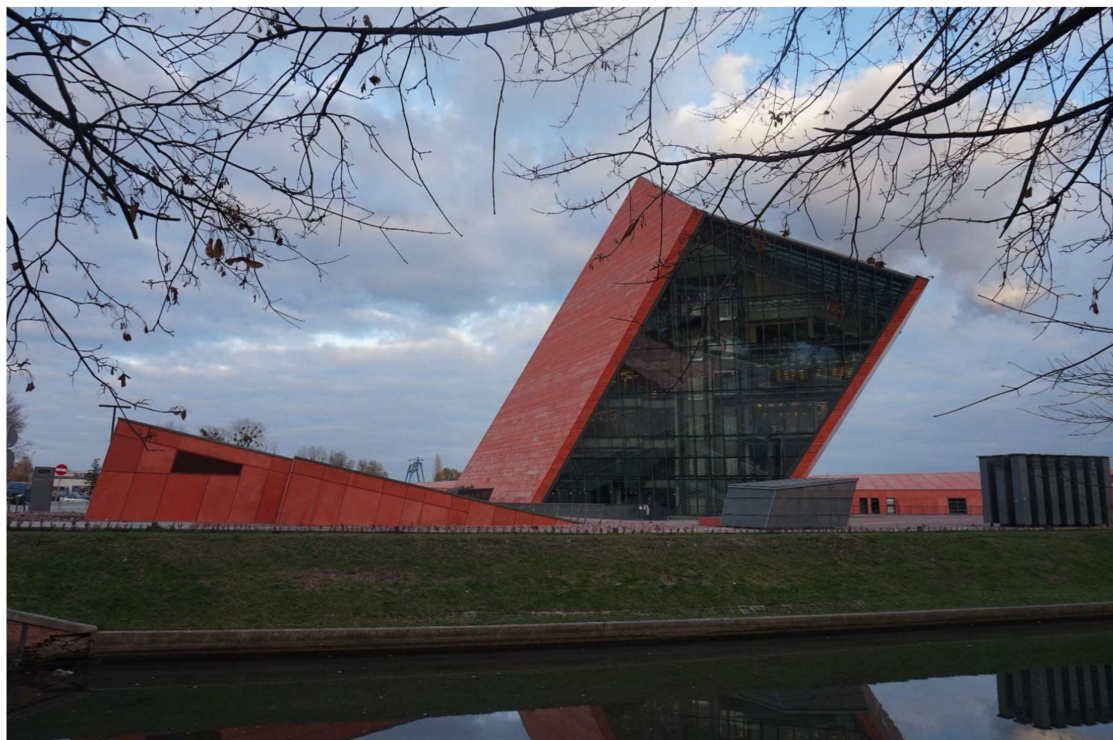

Figure 1. The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland.

This very intimate approach not only brings the viewer closer to the institution but also creates a more human level of communicating the overarching history. A lot of effort has been invested into presenting the relatively unknown Central and Eastern Europe perspective on the war, which until the fall of the Iron Curtain, was considered rather peripheral and obscure in the context of general European history.

3.2. Berlin

In his book *Germany: Memories of a Nation*, Neil MacGregor claims that Germany has worked out a specific method of tackling its complex heritage and fluctuating memory via constant revision. This involves particular buildings (e.g., museums), people, and places (e.g., memorials) [18] (p. ix–xxiii). Berlin, having been divided by the Wall, has a peculiar history of political fragmentation, society shifts, and contradicting narrations. It is also a city that in itself constitutes a memory place or rather contains numerous memory places referring to different parts of its cultural heritage (be it the remnants of the

Wall scattered all over the city, memorials to WWII, or monuments and museums dedicated to its Jewish community, to name but a few).

The permanent exhibition in the German History Museum, located in the historical Arsenal, is a classic example of an extremely detailed chronological narrative concerning the big history told by white Christian men. The only woman at the exhibition is Empress Catherine of Russia. While multiple minorities strongly present in Germany (especially Berlin) are referred to (if at all) only marginally.

However, a very interesting departure from the traditional exhibition practice has been recently introduced in one of the major museums dedicated to the history of this city. Märkisches Museum (Museum of the Province of the March [of Brandenburg]) was established at the end of 19th century as a regional museum initiated out of the citizens' need to commemorate the story of their own city. The hybrid brick architecture was a result of numerous inspirations. For many years, its constructor, Ludwig Hoffmann, maintained a traditional municipal collection and conservative narration about the city, which can still be observed in many parts of the museum. However, recently, contemporary elements have been introduced to the permanent exhibition, endowing it with a fresh and up-to-date touch. Vital current social and political issues are brought up, among them the situation of immigrants, local district traditions, and multi-cultural heritage. Sometimes new technologies come in handy but do not dominate the original historical identity of the museum. The main source of the new narration has been placed in the audio guide. The presented story is concentrated around eighteen main topics from Berlin's history and is told in the first person by people or animated artefacts presented in the exhibition. Berlin itself (or rather herself) becomes one of the narrators, communicating with the listener in a friendly and familiar manner, immediately building an emotional and personal bond. Various Berliners share their own stories about the city in short film footage. Among them is the Dutch director of the museum, Paul Spies, who guides the viewer to his favorite places in Berlin while riding his bike through the city (Figure 2). Another interesting narrator is Romano, a rap musician who strongly identifies with Köpenick, a district in former East Berlin. Other parts of the exhibition, which did not undergo modifications, are accompanied by self-reflective commentary referring to the sole idea and aim of collecting and curating in museums. This is additionally closely connected with the educational program of the institution.
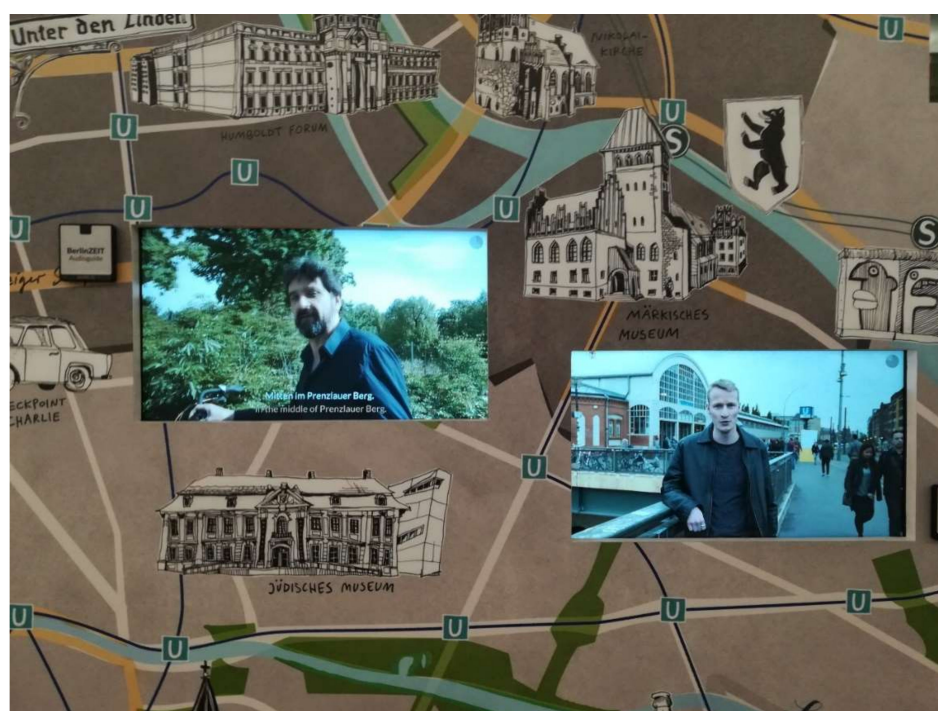

Figure 2. Märkisches Museum in Berlin.

Another interesting experiment based on the strategy of inclusion this time focused more on tangible artefacts takes place in one of the major museums situated on Berlin's Museums Island. In 2017, the Bode Museum transformed its permanent exhibition of European sculpture, introducing the project entitled: "Unvergleichlich. Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum" [Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum] (Figure 3). In numerous museum rooms, side by side with chronologically arranged overview of the development of Western European sculpture, a parallel showcase takes place. Comparably to the canonical presentation of renaissance Italian marble busts or gothic German altars, the masterpieces of African art have been selected from the ethnographic collection, put into glass cabinets or placed on elegant pedestals in a fine arts museum. They have been juxtaposed with the European "classics" according to delineated fundamental themes, like power, death, beauty, identity, justice and memory. The aim of this presentation is not only an introduction of new perspectives on the classification of particular artefacts into broadly accepted canons. It also undertakes an effort to revise the stereotypes built around non-European artefacts, anticipating their comprehensive and egalitarian presentation in the Humboldt-Forum, which is due to be opened in 2019.

Figure 3. "Unvergleichlich. Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum" [Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum] Exhibition view.

Speaking of the Forum itself, it will be located in a replica of Berliner Schloss (Berlin Palace), which in its original version was a symbol of military Prussia (Figure 4). Hence, the reconstruction itself, as well as the intention to locate there the exhibition of the ethnographical collection from Berlin museums, is the subject of a heated discussion. Highlighting the non-European tangible heritage in this way seems to be a tool to build a cultural bridge connecting Berlin with the rest of the world and making it the genuine capital of world cultures, and a credible one when bearing in mind the complexity of its memory and identity [19]. The afore-quoted Neil MacGregor, who is one of the founding directors of the Humboldt-Forum, views this institution as another dream come true, presenting Berlin as a peaceful place of inspiring dialogue of cultures framed within the building, which is a new (and perhaps very peculiar) memorial to the complex German past [18] (p. 558–559).

Figure 4. Humboldt-Forum, Berlin, Germany.

4. Discussion

The examples of museum practices brought up in this article seem to very well reflect the following observation: "If museums want to popularize the truths included in their collections and in fact aim at making history an important part of human development, it is recommended that they remain in dialogue with contemporaneity" [4] (p. 19). Hence, the growing tendency to address issues connected with memory, identity, and generally understood cultural heritage from multiple and revised perspectives is more and more visible in the thinking of cultural institutions. This is proven by the extent to which they are constantly undergoing self-revision in response to the surrounding reality. Their strategies and practices tend to be reoriented towards a more inclusive and participatory approach. The major priority is no longer to freeze a moment from the past, but rather to include, share and discuss a certain common experience. It seems that the salvage paradigm, that consists in saving endangered historical objects, slowly becomes secondary. Thus, museums tend to re-configure themselves more and more towards the conceptualization and contextualization of everyday reality which, though strongly stemming out from the memory anchored in the past, addresses the present contexts and identities represented by their contemporary audiences.

Summing up the presented museum practices which aim at (re)defining memory and identity issues through direct experience of tangible and intangible heritage, I would like to enumerate the main objectives resulting from my analysis:

- the comtemporalization paradigm: if museums represent certain structures, by which their main functions preserve and explain certain heritage in an orderly way to enhance and encourage the identification with it, then the language of this communication should be adjusted to the current expectations of those to whom the message is delivered. It can be done so by using new media and technologies, although one should bear in mind their auxiliary role towards the original objects of the museums' collections, rather than entertaining substitutes;

- the social paradigm: is very much connected with the comtemporalization paradigm, as it negotiates the museums' narrations (that is, the way they communicate their stories/narratives) with the needs and expectations of their contemporary audiences. It is based on the strategy of inclusion, by addressing issues which incorporate into the museum narratives the representatives of different social backgrounds together with their personal cultural identities as well as both tangible and intangible heritage they represent;

- the interdisciplinary paradigm: the discussion over the final shape of the museum exhibition and the narrative (the story) behind it, may be supported by combining various research methodologies. Entrusting the design of the exhibitions to the representatives of different fields of knowledge, including scientists of multiple fields representing comprehensive academic expertise, together with artists providing the practical hands-on solutions based on high level creativity, social sensitivity and innovative perspectives, as well as cultural workers who constitute the real bond between the institution and its audience established on a regular everyday basis, would surely provide all-round solutions addressing all three paradigms listed here. Above all, it would provide a fresh democratic and complex view on the multiplicity of tasks the contemporary museums should undertake.

5. Conclusions

As Sharon Macdonald states, museums materialize culture by presenting it and explaining it to help the audience understand it better and perhaps identify with it [14] (p. 7). Having provided the above examples illustrating selected tools and practices, which are in my opinion distinctive and inspiring, I would like to leave the question of "how" to materialize culture within particular museum exhibitions an open one, since I believe that each time it is an individualized site-specific decision depending on the context and objective mission of each institution.

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