Inhabited Exhibitions

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The conference excursion has become an essential ingredient for any international conference, and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) general conference held in Rio de Janeiro in August 2013 was no exception. The theme of the conference was Museums (Memory + Creativity) = Social Change. Excursions to favelas (slum areas) were among several events offered. Visiting the Favela Museum with museum professionals from across the world provoked quite unexpected memories, as well as many questions about the creative uses of heritage as part of social change. The well-chosen Favela Museum certainly stirred unsettling memories for me.¹

In 1914 the “Congo village”—complete with inhabitants—was one of the main attractions of the Jubilee Exposition in Kristiania (now Oslo) in celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Norway’s constitution. Such villages were also found in other outdoor expositions and fairs throughout Europe at that time. Judging from newspaper reports, the village not only confirmed and strengthened prejudices but, perhaps surprisingly, many inhabitants of Kristiania also felt they were given a sympathetic view of village life, particularly through friendly conversations with the “Congolese” (who were actually from Senegal). For the village’s “inhabitants” this was, of course, a job from which to earn an income, and for the owner it was a business venture.

Some 99 years later, I visited the Favela Museum in Rio de Janeiro, which is a (sort of) museum in a favela, but is also the favela, complete with residents. The aim of the Favela Museum is to show life there, to achieve improved living conditions in the favelas, and indirectly to be a source of income for residents by drawing tourists to the area.

Favelas are unregulated settlements that have been characterized by poverty and crime, dominated by drug lords, and prone to frequent landslides that have claimed many lives (see, e.g., Goldstein 2003). The citizens are still poor, but there also seems to be a certain gentrification underway. The most famous favelas, such as Rocinha, are located on the steep slopes above the centre of Rio. After a “pacification process” by the authorities, which combined a strong police presence with the improvement of social conditions, favelas are now gradually becoming some of the city’s latest tourist attractions.

Information through “Graffiti”

What ICOM visitors saw of this favela had been adapted to function as an exhibition. It has different entrance portals, one made of colorful bicycle chains, each referring to different parts of daily life in the favela. Group tours with a guide are advised, both for security reasons and so that visitors are properly informed. But the intention could also be to protect the rest of the favela from tourism. The tour follows a specific route with various stops showing typical envi-

ronments. At each station, “graffiti” decoration conveys the favela’s history, including the social objective of the postpacification program. The museum as such, at the climax of the tour, functions as a development and cultural center for locals, and as an information center for visitors.

The scenography seems to have been consciously and professionally adapted to reflect its surroundings. Although the graffiti style could be an “authentic” expression of the favela’s social context, the distance from the local “graffiti” artist of the favela to the hip street-art intellectuals in the city below is not so great. Meanwhile, the favela we see during the tour is enough in itself, with plenty of opportunities for the visitor to stare at daily life going on in people’s living rooms and kitchens and in the narrow alleys, and at the citizens themselves.

Oh! and Ah! in 2013 and 1914

There was no lack of “oh!” and “ah!” from the group of museum people I was with. Cats on windowsills and cute kids were photographed and commented on. The idyllic slum was loudly prized as residents and visitors met and greeted one another.

One of the questions I asked myself was: how different is this from the relations between visitors and residents at the “Congo village” in Kristiania 99 years ago? We know that residents and visitors had conversations with each other back in 1914. It was not simply a display object/onlooker relation. By the standards of today, the whole setup was, of course, unbearably prejudiced, and many found the village and villagers to be contemptible representatives of a primitive culture. On the other hand, newspapers reported that locals were pleasantly surprised to hear and see the musical performances, and by the agreeable encounters they had with “Congolese”. Back then there was no question of people from Kristiania traveling to the other side of the world within hours. Instead, the world was brought to Kristiania—in this case, a fake village with fake Congolese. Yet this is not so far from the authenticity shown to tourists in some parts of Africa today.

Choosing to Be a Display Object

The major difference from the Congo village of 1914 is, of course, that the favela residents are real inhabitants and they decide how they will present themselves. They select what they think is important to tell their visitors. They have a social program and political goals. They are fighting for the favelas to be recognized as real neighborhoods (with the rights that this implies) and they want to own their houses. While visitors may find the slum idyllic, inhabitants may also be fond of their favela and its qualities while working to reduce its shortcomings.

But They Can Hardly Control the Visitors’ Minds and Perceptions

The ICOM visitors really felt that this “exhibition” was more meaningful than other museums visited as part of the conference program. It was easy to forget that the exhibition version of the favela does not necessarily represent everyone there. It was temptingly easy for external museum professionals to see a collective “them” with whom we felt a strong solidarity. The more enthusiastically we persuaded ourselves that “they” were in command of the information about themselves, the more elusive the nuance. I needed to remind myself of this, enthusiastic as I was, like the others.

Slum Voyeurs

What about our voyeuristic role? I envision a tour of my own neighborhood, with groups of tourists looking in through windows, gently greeting the inhabitants in kitchens and living rooms, and commenting on what they see. Admittedly, the guide tells them that one should ask for permission to photograph, but ...

The problem for the poor is that the walls between private and public spaces are not as high or solid as in wealthier neighborhoods. Their dilemma may be that the tourist's gaze can be a source of income. Does it help that the voyeur's eye is maximally well-meaning?

Slum tourism is now available in more than one of the world's cities. In Cape Town, I have heard one organizer accuse another of social pornography, while himself claiming to provide realistic information and convey serious political awareness. Certainly, during a visit to the Favela Museum it is important to be able to maintain a kind of double vision.

Is it justified to call this a visit to an exhibition? We walk around in an adapted scenography, one to one. What is not "correct" contextual scenography is being talked into this by our guides and by our own desire to see it as an exhibition. An exhibition of reality—is this not the ultimate achievement? Going beyond artificial museum dramatizations to the real people, the real objects? Almost like talking to real people living in the Forum Romanum in the year zero. Be there when it happens, along with those concerned.

Afterthought

When thinking back, it has struck me that the favela we visited must certainly be located in one of Rio's potentially most attractive residential areas: it is only a short walk from the city center with an incredible view. As far as I understand it, no one as yet owns the ground on which the houses stand. But, if and when the inhabitants achieve the right to own the ground on which their houses are built, who will be able to afford to buy such properties? This raises the pertinent question of whether the task of the Favela Museum would then become that of presenting a prosperous neighborhood's poor but colorful past?

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■ NOTE

1. At present, most websites of different favela museums are in Portuguese. The museum and the favela discussed here is Pavão/Pavãozinho (see www.museudefavela.org). Another adapted-for-exhibition favela is Santa Marta (but without a museum), where the houses form a colored pattern, clearly pro-

fessionally designed (see www.favelapainting.com/santa-marta). A museum in a favela in a former swamp area is Museu da Maré (see <http://museudamare.org.br>).

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■ **REFERENCE**

Goldstein, D. 2003. *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.