Revisiting Cultural Participation in Museums
An Early Community Outreach Experience in Mexico City

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to deepen theoretical and practical engagement with the work of cultural participation in museums from the perspective of early outreach experiences in Mexico. The ideas and practices concerning museums’ social role and their commitment to communities have been consolidating for decades, from conceiving the museum as being “at the service of society” to museum and society working hand in hand. Using La Casa del Museo (1972–1980) as a case in point, this article shows how early experiences and thoughts in Latin America—often unknown to the English-speaking world—contributed to this change of perspectives. Moreover, from a theoretical point of view, it offers a review of cultural participation, its potential contributions as well as its problems and limitations, including the author’s model of Holistic Cultural Participation. From a practical perspective, the article shows how this project worked on the outskirts of Mexico City in the seventies and its long-term effects.

KEYWORDS: community, cultural participation, Mexico, museums, outreach

La Casa del Museo was an experimental outreach project carried out by the Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA), part of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) of Mexico City between 1972 and 1980. Its conceptual foundations were derived from the postulates of the Integral/Integrated Museum outlined in the iconic Latin American meeting “Roundtable on the role of museums in relation to the social and economic needs of modern day Latin America,” held in Santiago de Chile in 1972. The project was also developed in line with other discussions on the social role of museums, participation, and community engagement that were taking place at the same time.

Despite being a pioneering case in community museology in the region and in practices that later came under the umbrella of the New Museology, details of its foundations, way of operating, actions, and results have remained largely unknown. Spanish museological literature contains few references to the project, leaving this key experiment consigned to oral tradition. Internationally, it has been analyzed by only two authors (Hauenschild 1988; Hudson 1977), although it received passing mention by Karen Brown and François Mairesse (2018), Bruno Brulon Soares (2018), and Hugues de Varine-Bohan (2008). The scarcity of source material on La Casa del Museo changed after the discovery of the project documentation in 2014.¹ This discovery triggered my PhD research based on historical anthropology (Pérez-Castellanos 2020a). Among other results, this inquiry enhances the theoretical and practical understanding of the social work of museums, locating them in the broader field of cultural participation, especially regarding their potential benefits, long-term impacts, and inequalities of access. This article also emphasizes the relevance of Latin American museological thought and practice, previously little known or ignored in wider debates on the relations between communities and museums worldwide.
To broaden the discussion, this article offers a review of cultural participation from a theoretical point of view. It also shows how this project worked in practice on the outskirts of Mexico City in the seventies. This experiment exemplified all the work that shifted attention away from tasks that had hitherto been central in museums—to collect, preserve, research, and exhibit—to other activities related to social work (Crooke 2015; Silverman 2010; Watson 2007). Finally, the article offers a reflection on the legacies and qualitative long-term effects of La Casa del Museo, and offers some ideas as to why contributions from non-hegemonic centers do not make an impact on research in museological thought and practices more broadly.

**Cultural Participation in Museums and the Latin America Contributions**

Cultural participation in museums has recently taken a more relevant place in academic and public policy discussions, and particularly community contributions to these hegemonic institutions. For instance, the definition approved by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) states that museums “operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities” [emphasis added] (ICOM 2022), an aim that has been gradually advanced for several decades.

To understand this process, it is necessary to place museums within the broader field of cultural participation and the public policies that encourage it. These developments have been affected by social, technological, and political changes in the social and cultural relationship that led to a participatory turn (Bonet and Négrier 2018). Such transformations are not exclusive to the cultural field; rather, they are part of international neoliberal trends that point to deliberative democracy and governance, which are described as increasingly shifting responsibility for public services from state control to the private or voluntary sectors (McGuigan in Jancovich 2014: 1).

Cultural participation has been a guarantee in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1949, but it was considered synonymous with access to institutionalized cultural opportunities or simply as consumption. More current visions conceive it as the action and effect of taking part in the cultural life of society, participation in cultural, artistic, and/or creative activities, both from the perspective of cultural consumption habits and cultural production, starting at amateur artistic or cultural practices and volunteering in cultural associations (Servicio Central de Publicaciones del Gobierno Vasco 2016: 12). It is also seen as being part of daily life, and not only includes attending events, but is associated with a wide range of values—cognitive, aesthetic, spiritual, physical, political—that shape identity. It is a conscious act that exists in different degrees (UNESCO-UIS 2012).

Several authors argue that participation in cultural life brings benefits. Individually, it shapes identities, enhances a sense of self, improves self-confidence, provides self-esteem, self-worth, and dignity (UNESCO-UIS 2012: 17), it extends the repertoire of available experiences (Appadurai 2004: 68), develops the imagination, and improves health and wellbeing (Matarasso 1998). Within a social group, it promotes social cohesion, community empowerment, and the development of local identity (Bollo 2013; Matarasso 2007; Scott 2003; and Silverman 2010). If this is so, it is imperative to recognize that nonparticipants are segregated from such benefits, such that inequalities emerge.

On a day-to-day basis, some people participate in culture and others do not, some do it more and others less or never; some become audiences for certain offerings, but not for others, and many are relegated or belong to the so-called “non-audiences.” Historically, those who participate are part of the educated elite and are the best positioned economically and socially, since they have used culture as a form of social distinction to separate themselves from other social strata and preserve their privileges (Bennett 1995; Bourdieu et al. 2004; and Laboratorio Permanente de Públicos de Museos 2012).

Public culture policies have sought to mitigate these inequalities. The paradigms of cultural democratization and cultural democracy in particular focus their efforts on expanding the base of target audiences and correspondingly their diversification. If cultural democratization seeks to facilitate access for the broadest number of people to high-quality cultural goods, then cultural democracy postulates the possibility of each social group obtaining recognition of its own cultural practices and gaining support for them (Bonet and Négrier 2018).
However, both paradigms have limitations and contradictions. On the one hand, in many democratization policies, what is made available continues to be shaped by the choices and tastes of a small group in society, although the scope of the offer is extended. On the other hand, the criticisms of policies of cultural democracy have to do with the rhetorical limitations of its discourse, as some research points out that, beyond the good intentions of state policies, there is resistance to change in the institutions, and sometimes participants are manipulated (Bonet and Négrier 2018; Jancovich 2014; and Kawashima 2006).

During the twentieth century, social transformations and changes from within museums led them to face these problems and to adopt strategies to strengthen their social role. It was not only about promoting access to more diverse audience profiles, but about involving them beyond just being attendees. Charting a world map of this gradual transformation of museums toward engagement with their communities goes beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I focus on the community-based, participatory museology in Latin America, as the La Casa del Museo project was an influential starting point for collaborative and experimental practices that later on proliferated in the museum world.

The notion of “community” was first mentioned in Latin American museological discussions in 1962. The regional seminar “The Museum as a Cultural Center of the Community,” held in Mexico City, featured a debate about different types of audiences who constituted the communities of the museums. At that time, the region had 325 museums in the seven countries represented, with Brazil and Mexico having the most museums, 189 and 100 respectively (UNESCO 1963). The attendees acknowledged the complexity of “community.” For that matter, they recognized different kinds of communities, in terms of territorial links, different scales from the local to the national, different museum interest groups, and types such as museums in universities or school museums. Although no explicit mention was made of the inhabitants within the museums’ proximity, they accepted that the success of museums depended on the services they provide to their community, whatever its composition, including local, rural, and groups (UNESCO 1963). Other important contributions were the recognition of the diversity of visitors, the importance of taking into account their motivations, the idea of having museum activities aimed at the interests and needs of the people, and the appreciation of the multiple barriers that keep people away from cultural participation, such as the lack of free time or illiteracy of the population. There was also a call for self-critique and the need to have continuous evaluation (UNESCO 1963).

In this context, Mexico marked a watershed in museum innovation with the opening of the MNA in 1964, which was housed in a building specially designed from the start with educational service areas, temporary exhibition halls, brief texts and supporting illustrations to accompany the display of the most important archaeological and ethnographic collections (Cameron 1993). By this time, some of the staff putting forward the new viewpoints and practices were shaped by the cultural democracy ethos of the Mexican post-revolutionary period, which in turn were inspired by the free educational ideals and popular schemes of the Cuban Revolution. Furthermore, in the 1960s the country faced riots and conflicts between government and various social movements, leading to a massacre of students in Tlatelolco in 1968. This series of events produced a rupture between the intellectuals of the cultural sector and the state, including a critical recognition of the hegemonic, authoritarian, and exclusive role of MNA and other state museums, particularly their problematic representation of “national” art and culture.

Even though Mexico had an authoritarian government, it was possible for young anthropologists and museologists to move into important positions of power in the cultural sector, particularly at INAH. In 1972, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla was appointed as the Institute director. He believed that museums within this organization had to change. His work, along with that of his team, including the museographer Iker Larrauri and Mario Vázquez (the initiator of La Casa del Museo), laid the foundation for the emergence of participatory museology in Mexico (Pérez Ruiz 2008).

At the same time, Mexico played an influential role in the international cultural scene through UNESCO and ICOM. For instance, Mario Vázquez had a central part to play in the ninth general conference of ICOM, “The Museum in the Service of Man Today and Tomorrow,” held in Grenoble, France, in 1971. There he pleaded for the transformation of museums instead of their demise as other critics signaled (Lacroix 1971). He also was one of the people who flagged the lack of diversity in ICOM and the lack of sensitivity in museums towards contemporary social problems (Brown and Mairesse 2018).
Following these events, Latin American professionals took the stage at the Santiago de Chile Roundtable (1972). This international meeting was conducted entirely in Spanish with a majority of representatives from Central and South America, for the first time, to address the problems of the region. The discussion was encouraged by specialists from outside the world of museums who confronted the region’s situation in black and white terms: poverty, illiteracy, overpopulation in cities due to high migration from the countryside, health challenges, and other aspects. The delegates, faced with this situation, wondered: What role did museums have in relation to these issues?

The roundtable group presented the idea of a comprehensive and integral/integrated museum. Integral for dealing with other aspects that would allow it to be closer to the requirements of the society in which the museum is located, and integrated understood as an active and organic part of a larger social and cultural structure, as one link in a chain and no longer as a fortress or an island that only the privileged few could access (Instituto Brasileiro de Museus (Brasilia) et al. 2012: 8).

The “Declaration of Santiago de Chile” had important effects in the world of museology at that time. For instance, the phrase “in the service of society and its development,” which was born then, was included one year later in the ICOM official definition before the current one was unveiled in 2022. So, Brown and Mairesse (2018: 529) believe it opened a channel of dialog between Latin American and European professionals—mainly French—and in a certain way, it influenced the incorporation of the entry “Nouvelle Museology” in the Encyclopedia Universalis in 1980. For Brulon Soares (2018), the New Museology was a revolution with a very clear political center that was reinterpretated from the French version later on in various global contexts. Due to social inequalities and the hegemony of political centers of knowledge, Latin American ideas and related experimental projects are less known. The Santiago Roundtable’s declaration stated that “museums have a primary responsibility to meet the needs of their communities” (Brown and Mairesse 2018: 529) therefore had fewer repercussions in the Anglophone museum world, as confirmed by the subsequent publication of the book The New Museology (Vergo 1989), which is credited with the emergence of this proposal. In any case, the late sixties and seventies saw the emergence of new museum spaces in the world that echo these ideas and ideals.

La Casa del Museo: An Early Outreach Experience

Research Methodology and Theoretical Contributions

The data that follows comes from my PhD research (Pérez-Castellanos 2020a). As part of this research, I cataloged the whole project documentary archive, understanding it as a field (Des Chene 1997). I combined this task with fieldwork in the locations where the project took place, including biographical (Wengraf 2001) and photo-elicited interviews (Serrano et al. 2016) with six staff members. In the process, I analyzed past museum practices to understand their incidences in the present, using multi-sited ethnography as a method, a form of anthropological work that looks beyond local places and situations by examining the circulation of meanings, objects, and cultural identities in diffused times and spaces (Marcus 1995).

Besides a thick description of La Casa del Museo, the inquiry allowed me to understand museum outreach experiences in a broader sense, to reflect on them and gain insights to propose a framework to comprehend cultural participation beyond access. The latter assumes a unidirectional nature: cultural action goes from policies, institutions, and their professionals towards society, the public, and people less involved; it seldom, if ever, is examined holistically, looking at the effects in all directions. Considering the documentary and empirical data, I propose my own original framework to conceptualize this phenomenon: Holistic Cultural Participation (HCP). My proposition integrates and complements in one model the formulations made previously by Sandell (1998) and Barbieri (2018) (see Table 1).

I understand Holistic Cultural Participation as the right that people have—and the decisions they make—to access, enjoy, produce, represent themselves, and be represented in culture, and to influence public policy decisions on these matters. It is made up of the interaction between agents of society—social cultural participation—and professional agents of cultural organizations—professional cultural production. The agents position themselves in these two spheres, not with fixed and impassable barriers between them,
but with permeable boundaries, through unequal power relations in the midst of contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes, often irresolvable. HCP includes both rights and the mechanisms to make them effective, through the following dimensions:

- access and enjoyment of culture, in aesthetic and identity registers;
- production, both from professional fields and from other social sectors, including expressive, creative, training, and associative practices;
- representation, when the heritage, cultural manifestations, and interests of several social sectors are reflected and valued by the institutions and a commitment to diversity is adopted; and
- decision-making power to exercise or influence the development of programs and even public cultural policies.

In the same vein as other perspectives about levels of participation (Bonet and Négrier 2018; UNESCO-UIS 2012), the model allows an understanding of different grades of implication using strategies that go from informing to consulting to involvement, ultimately going beyond this to collaborate and finally empower public participation (IAPP 2005 Cited in Head 2007: 445).

### Table 1. Different approaches to the dimensions of cultural participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Holistic cultural participation (Pérez-Castellanos 2020a)</th>
<th>Cultural exclusion (Sandell 1998)</th>
<th>Cultural participation from cultural rights (Barbieri 2008)</th>
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<td>Access and enjoyment</td>
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<td>Production</td>
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The Museo Nacional de Antropología Takes to the Streets

*La Casa del Museo* stemmed from the Santiago de Chile Roundtable discussions. Participants in this event must be seen as visionaries, advancing several topics that led to the recent updating of ICOM’s definition. Putting together experts from fields outside the cultural sector, such as urbanists and agricultural scientists, the meeting embodied the Latin American situation in 1973 and forecast many of the problems that museums could help alleviate, such as poverty, hunger, poor health, water pollution and sanitation, and inequality (Museum International 1973). The proposed integrated/integral museum was thought to be an instrument to raise awareness, a tool of education, an instrument of change, oriented to the future, innovative, multidisciplinary, self-critical, and experimental.

Mario Vázquez, the Mexican delegate, proposed the MNA as the place to experiment with the “mechanics” of this concept through a temporary exhibition on the city and the countryside. The commitment was formalized in the Roundtable Resolutions, but the exhibition never came to fruition. Back in Mexico, Vázquez predicted that its target audience was not in this national museum—located in the Bosque de Chapultepec—but outside. Visitor research confirmed his hunch (González García 1973), so he proposed the idea of taking the museum outside its walls.

With the approval of Bonfil Batalla as INAH’s director, the project spanned the period from 1972 to 1980, during which a team from the MNA worked on its conception, implementation, and execution. They wanted to “bring the museum to the people,” breaking down some of the barriers that separated the MNA from excluded populations. Responding to criticism raised at international and regional meetings...
of that time, the national museum sought to “integrate” itself into these communities and thereby promote positive change through different degrees of participation (Ordoñez García 1975).

The concrete solution was the design and construction of three hexagonal modules that created a semi-permanent exhibition space designed to tour in different areas of the city outskirts (see Figure 1). The staff was composed of the director of the project, Mario Vázquez; five women from different professional backgrounds: Coral Ordoñez, Cristina Antúnez, Lilia González, Miriam Arroyo, and Catalina Denman; also one male teacher: Margarito Mancilla. All were financed by the museography (exhibit design) section of MNA. The project had two stages: the first in the west of the city (from 1973 to 1976) and the second with two venues in the south (from 1976 to 1980). The aims, in the team’s own words, were:

To establish an extension of the great museum in one of the most densely populated areas of the city to:
- create and develop, through participatory research, new techniques, and museological concepts;
- modify the static and sometimes austere image of traditional museums;
- modify and over time reverse the composition of the groups of visitors to the MN of A;
- achieve the goal of making the museum a true didactic instrument and that the themes of its exhibitions are a reflection of the concerns, aspirations, and problems of the community to which it belongs;
- create a pleasant and informal atmosphere, exempt from traditional regulations;
- gradually incorporate the inhabitants of the communities, both in an organized and individual way, until La Casa del Museo functions as a true civic and social center, managed by the community itself, in which their needs, material and cultural, are reflected, along with their traditions, aspirations, and problems, always counting on the advice of the MN de A, through an interdisciplinary group. (Casa del Museo, n.d.-a)

These objectives show what Bonet and Négrier (2018) report: an overlap of cultural policy paradigms. On one hand, the museum wanted to extend its actions to the excluded populations with cultural democ-
ratization strategies conceiving “culture” as something that could be delivered to groups that traditionally do not attend the museum. At the same time, it lined up the cultural democracy paradigm aiming to diversify the MNA visitors’ profiles—back then just 10.5 percent of the museum’s visitors were from the lowest educational level (González García 1973)—making the museum relevant and urging populations to participate. Echoing the Resolutions, the team was multidisciplinary and new exhibit design techniques were tested: mechanical interactives, multisensorial strategies, tactile objects, and continuous evaluation.

Before the installation of La Casa del Museo in the Observatorio area, the staff carried out intense social research to delimit the “area of influence” and learn about the characteristics of the population and their needs (González García 1975). For example, construction was guided by the knowledge that the suburban authorities approved the decision to make the building out of steel sheets, similar to the surrounding houses, and make the experience friendly (Ordoñez García 1975). Once the space was open, they focused their efforts on promotional tasks to attract people. In this venue they were only working within the scope of the first level of HCP: access and enjoyment. The staff reflected on the paternalistic strategies they had rolled out, and then agreed to look for another location and to take their self-critique further:

The analysis of the three years of work carried out in the Observatory area has led us to think that if La Casa del Museo, as an experimental project, is based on trial and error, it is valid to prove once again: break with the criticized and self-criticized paternalism, with the deep investigations full of statistical data, with the exhibitions and extension activities produced in the Museo Nacional de Antropología; on the contrary, take advantage of all the experiences that have enriched the relationship between Casa del Museo and its community. For that reason, we change place and method. Currently, La Casa del Museo works in El Pedregal de Santo Domingo in the south of Mexico City. (Casa del Museo, n.d.-b)

They selected Pedregal de Santo Domingo in the south of the city. In this community, they first explained and proposed the project; then there was a phase of negotiation and dialog to establish bonds of trust and found a joint venture. Later, the team invited community members to visit the MNA, to have a common language and discuss the question, “what is a museum?” By 1975, once they agreed to collaborate, some exhibitions were installed in a community school classroom; then they decided to place one of the three modules in its courtyard. Later, they asked to install the other one in a neighboring area: Comuna Ajusco Huayamilpas.

From Access and Enjoyment to Full Participation

Exhibits displayed at La Casa del Museo moved outside the parameters of the MNA exhibitions aiming to be a reflection of the concerns, aspirations, and problems of the community to which it belongs (Ordoñez García 1975). Nevertheless, the first exhibition in the Observatorio zone leaned towards presenting the typical stages of national history—pre-Hispanic, colonial, independent, and contemporary Mexico—but calibrating the content using data from social research. This way it showed history from the local point of view so people could identify with it and somehow feel represented.

As they got closer to the population’s interests, they developed exhibitions focused on the problems of the community, such as, Origin, Nutrition and Schooling, in which they showed information about the local population and its situation. Another exhibit was Man, His Health and Hygiene (see Figure 2), which sought to guide the population—in a highly marginalized area with a lack of social services—with strategies to improve their health and wellbeing, also discussing the community situation in terms of poverty.

The four dimensions of HCP acted differently in the two project stages (see Table 2). In the first location, La Casa del Museo provided a public space and a recreational area mainly used by children. Access and enjoyment were guaranteed (see Figure 3). Participation was partially achieved through informing and consulting. Nevertheless, MNA established a unidirectional project with fencing and signs indicating the official nature of the new space. Production was fully completed by the national museum staff, while representation was partially conveyed, adapting contents to the local reality and using photographs and information from the social research and displaying it in the exhibitions. Regarding decision-making power, the people at this time did not have any.
Figure 2. Interactive panel in the exhibition *Man, His Health and Hygiene*, 1975. AHMNA, Fondo fotográfico, Colección La Casa del Museo F02F-CM_neg_00629. Courtesy of the National Institute of Anthropology and History/Reproducción autorizada por el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. Secretaría de Cultura.-INAH.-CANON.-MNA.-MEX.
For the second stage of the project in its new location, the previous negotiations and the staff attitudes underwent a substantial change. They did not impose their ideas, styles, and ways of working on the local people. The neighbors decided on the themes of the exhibitions, their contents, approaches, and materials, as a form of self-representation. The displays were: an art exhibition of children’s drawings; the history of the neighborhood; Oaxaca and its altar for the dead; The Mexican Revolution; the region of Michoacán; and the theme of “shelter.”

All the subjects were approached from a local perspective and a “humble museography” was made with materials available in the community: craft paper, newspaper, wire, clothes pins, etc. (Antúnez 2017). They also used objects contributed by the inhabitants that signified and told their history as part of their heritage: photographs of local social movements;
archaeological objects found in situ; insects and arachnids of the region; and newspaper clippings. It was a narrative of self-representation that told their story (see Figure 4).

Although the four dimensions of HCP were present in Santo Domingo, this was not free of conflict. It was reported that “[p]articipation was not well received, because the material was brought by the [MNA] team. The community modified the montage, they made their own montage of the Revolution, they brought material, they modified it” (Casa del Museo, n.d.-b). To share power is not an easy task. Initially, it was thought that the MNA would hold greater power, seeking to “[i]ncorporate the inhabitants of the community … to ensure that they eventually take over the museum in all its aspects, always counting on the advice del MN de A” (Casa del Museo, n.d.-a). Later, the relationship with the inhabitants of the Pedregal de Santo Domingo led to other schemes allowing different results and effects in the long term.

As the project evolved, the adaptations responded to continuous reflexive and experimental practices—something common in Latin American Museology (Brulon Soares 2018). In the first stage, although they
were sensitive to local interests and needs, *La Casa del Museo* came into the community to bring them something from the museum. In the second one, negotiations, meetings, agreements, and disagreements arose but, in the end, it was a joint venture, which built a shared language and a mutual commitment. These features reflect the identification of a community of practice in the terms proposed by Wenger (2000), going beyond mere outreach.

Going back to the Santiago de Chile Roundtable proposals about community participation, the Resolutions were not explicit. The documents state that a museum program must be made with the “participation of all sectors,” but it does not explain how this must be achieved or what is understood as such. This absence has been criticized, as well as its call to raise awareness in the populations (Ferreira de Lima 2014). Nevertheless, even though participation had this limited view in Santiago, it opened the door to thinking about it and to experimenting with new ways of sharing power with citizens.

### Table 2. La Casa del Museo activities and practices at various stages of the project, according to Holistic Cultural Participation.

|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Access and enjoyment | • Field delimitation by establishing a physical and symbolic barrier.  
• Free access. Extended hours in the afternoon.  
• No restrictions whatsoever on rules: touching, dress code, behavior.  
• Outside area operated as a public plaza, playground, open air stage. | • Location within “integrated” community spaces.  
• Free access. Extended hours in the morning (from 5 am), access controlled by the neighbors (they had a key), wide “use” of exhibitions.  
• No restrictions whatsoever on rules: touching, dress code, behavior.  
• Expansion to street activities. |
| Production | • Undertaken fully by MNA staff, from the modules to the exhibitions. | • Installation of exhibitions: painting, placement, nailing, mounting.  
• Installation and adaptation of modules.  
• Parallel activities: parties, balls, etc.  
• Hand-in-hand collaboration with museum staff. |
| Representation | • Moderate. Strategies: adapt national history to local context. Use of photographs and information collected during research as content and resources for the exhibitions.  
• Día de Muertos exhibition. Contributed opinions used in labels. | • Wide and self-representation: They told their history in their own words.  
• Texts fully written by them.  
• Photographs they took and contributed.  
• Tone and style “poor museography.” |
| Decision-making power | • Low. They did not decide to host the project or conclude it. Limited to deciding whether to attend or not, being a spectator or not, to open air activities. | • High. In assembly they agreed to participate in the project. They decided on themes, style, opening hours, guided visits, etc.  
• “They used us,” they did not decide to end the collaboration, the situation changed.  
• They “adopted” strategies and made them their own.  
• They kept the modules. |
It is not possible to ignore the challenges and final outcomes of the project. Although La Casa del Museo had a stable team and a budget assigned from the MNA, it never became a stable program but a “special project.” As the years passed, institutional support eroded. Even though in the second stage the objectives of “integrating” the museum into the community were better developed, its physical and conceptual distance from MNA, budget cuts, a change of priorities in the institution, as well as personal factors, led to the winding up of the project towards the end of 1979.

What happened afterwards? Did the influence of La Casa del Museo end then? Looking for answers, I mapped this distinctive community-based museological practice using the methodology of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), following all possible threads. I visited the areas where it was located and conducted interviews with six members of the staff, including Mario Vázquez. After almost 50 years since the project started, I found some long-term effects, which I characterized using the metaphor of “resonances.” This arises from the impossibility of tagging La Casa del Museo legacies with cause-effect and positivist labels, and is rather an attempt to understand them in a more qualitative way.

One of the most direct legacies is related to the institutional actions carried out by the INAH when it established the Programa para el Desarrollo de la Función Educativa de los museos (PRODEFEM) (Program for the Development of an Education Foundation for Museums) which worked between 1983 and 1988. PRODEFEM was raised by Miriam Arroyo, after concluding her work at La Casa del Museo. For its conception, she combined her personal experience in that project with another experiment that
Iker Larrauri implemented at the INAH operating between 1972 and 1976—Programa de Museos Locales y Escolares (School and Local Museums Program)—and with the tasks that the museums in the Institute carried out through the educational services since 1952 (DESEMEC 1989). PRODEFEM was the official flagship for an institutional program on community museums. In its years of operation, working from a central area of the INAH dedicated to museums, 55 spaces were created in various states of the country. Its methodology consisted of building alliances with local authorities to get closer to the population, using cultural promotion as a tool to raise awareness about the importance of conserving local heritage and history, and giving workshops for people to learn how to create and maintain a museum (DESEMEC 1989).

This program has been criticized as an evangelizing crusade from a central institution that imposed its model on the communities as opposed to another version of community museums that emerged in the state of Oaxaca from 1986. In this case, the initiative was from the civil society as a defense against the continuous looting of local archaeological heritage in favor of its display in state museums or in the country’s capitals. For the members of the movement of community museums in Oaxaca, if the initiative did not arise from the community itself, it is not a community museum (Camarena Ocampo and Morales Lersch 2009). For Tomás Sepúlveda Schwember (2017), this dual vision must be unlocked in deeper analysis that identifies other factors, since different social actors intervene simultaneously in the creation of these museums, including cultural institutions with their policies and financial support.

The Casa del Museo also influenced radical exhibition strategies and methodologies adopted later by Bonfil Batalla in the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares (National Museum of Popular Cultures). This particular museum was established in 1983 with the idea of being a space for the expression and representation of subaltern popular groups. During Bonfil’s years as director, accompanied by a multidisciplinary team—including Vázquez and Larrauri as advisors—35 exhibitions were developed in collaboration with different groups: workers, fishermen, miners, and circus members, among others. In the process of forming the proposals, the people involved acted on several of the many dimensions of the HCP as laid out in Table 2. The anthropologist acknowledged that what was behind this proposal was his experience as director of INAH and his closeness to the projects of La Casa del Museo and the School and Local Museums Program (Pérez Ruiz 2004).

La Casa del Museo left traces in the museological thought beyond Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century. This can be seen in its extensive promotion in international forums, the important role that Mario Vázquez played within ICOM, and the team’s contacts with several socialization networks. The project ended up as one of the pioneering examples of “new museums” in Kenneth Hudson’s famous book Museums for the 1980s: A survey of world trends (1977), gave some inspiration for the community museum movement in the Netherlands (Peter Van Mensch, email to author, 26 March 2020) as well as for the outreach work in the Museo de Arqueología y Etnología in the São Paulo University, Brazil (De Mello 2019), and helped shape the social thinking of the influential Canadian museologist Duncan Cameron (Cameron 1993). The Santiago Roundtable is also considered the starting point for the Latin American New Museology with its social work and the incorporation of participatory strategies (Brulon Soares 2015; Desvallées and Mairesse 2010; and Varine-Bohan de 2008).

Final Thoughts

The analysis of La Casa del Museo allowed me to explore cultural participation beyond consumption. It also yielded an in-depth understanding of the transformative ideas and practices that led the transition in museums from institutions for people to museums built in collaboration with people. This process was not free of conflicts and inequalities that, with reflexivity, self-criticism, experimentation, and evaluation, shaped new strategies in working with communities.

Based on documentary and empirical analysis, I proposed the Holistic Cultural Participation model, with its four dimensions, that considers the participation of all agents. This model is useful in better understanding museum outreach practices and could be tested elsewhere as a way to recognize the complexity and overlap of cultural democratization and cultural democracy policies and tasks. The study also made it possible to locate long-term qualitative effects. Although I located several resonances (Pérez Castellanos
2020a), in this article I focus mainly on those related to the community-based Latin American movement, including the work on community museums associated with INAH and the influence in Bonfil Batalla’s work at National Museum of Popular Cultures.

As time passed, the legacies of La Casa del Museo have become diluted. It is my intention to disseminate this work to deepen theoretical and practical engagement with the work of cultural participation in museums and show the central place that Latin American museology occupies. Inequalities and the hegemony of political centers of knowledge in the Global North have weight, including in the fields of museum studies and professional museum practice. Previous generations of museum professionals from my region were highly immersed in the practical side of the work and used to write less. Nowadays the situation has changed, but a language barrier still exists. It is everybody’s responsibility to bridge this gap, find common ground, and open new channels of communication. By opening up neglected museum histories, new museum futures might be charted.

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**NOTES**

1. The documentation was stored in a cabinet at the office of the Museo Nacional de Antropología and was not part of the historical archive. Now it forms the documentary collection **Fondo documental MNA, Sección Museografía, Subsección Mario Vázquez, Colección La Casa del Museo**. It contains 54 documental files and up to 5,000 images.
2. For Brulon Soares (2018: 57), political centers of knowledge are those geopolitical or linguistic regions that mobilize a large production of specialized knowledge that has, for political reasons, great influence on the other regions of the world.
3. The female character of the staff was unintentional, but it had important implications for its development. This gender side of La Casa del Museo is another element explored in my research. Readers can find more in Pérez Castellanos (2020b).
4. The “pedregales,” including Pedregal de Santo Domingo y Comuna Ajsuso Guayamilpas, arose from land invasions and the subsequent struggle for its regulation. It meant the “colonos” arrived to a rugged landscape made up of old lava flows, without services such as electricity or water. The social movements allowed them the right and ownership of that land (Díaz Enciso and Pobladores y fundadores 2002).
5. Mario Vázquez was a key actor in ICOM. From his youth he was very active as assistant for Georges Henri Riviére in the International Seminar **The Educational Role of Museums**, held in Brazil in 1958. After that, he was a member of the ICOM executive committee between 1965 and 1980, and a member of the editorial board of the UNESCO journal **Museum**.
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