

Museum Management and the Network Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, studies on organizations focus on how relationships between two or more actors may influence the activity of organizations involved within the relationship. Considering the museum as an organization creating and maintaining relationships with similar organizations or different institutions, it's possible to identify the critical actors and the crucial links needed for this organization's life and survival.

In the last decade, the institution identified with the term museum has achieved more and more importance for the characteristics of its activity and for the structure of formal and informal relationships that stands beyond its life. In this paper the museum is considered an organization that purchases, preserves, researches and communicates works and products of the human activity. Many museum types could emerge through the use of different criteria but in this case the object of the paper is going to be the museum or the exhibition area devoted to modern and contemporary art: this typology seems to be the least visitor-oriented in the universe of the museum institutions. Moreover, we can also classify the museums with the amount of assets owned. Does the museum live with its own assets (financial and artistic) or is it financed and helped by other institutions?

We argue that the museum is seen from a managerial perspective: it is considered as an organization related to other actors in the art arena, and as organization that addresses its efforts first to the spreading of art and in the second place to visitors' satisfaction.

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Museum management and the relational perspective

Objectives and object of the paper

The article will try to describe two classes of museums :

- the museum *container*: it is defined museum container the space devoted to exhibitions changing constantly and not having an its own collection. Given the high degree of exhibition changes, the continuous supply renewal, the need to search constantly new resources (either artistic or financial) and the high degree of relationships, the museum container is going to be the object of the present analysis
- the *traditional museum pattern*: moreover, the traditional museum pattern (permanent exhibitions, except some sporadic acquisitions) will also be considered.

These are the starting points of the research. The present article would like to show the specific dimensions of the organization-museum, in order to underline the motivations standing beyond the museum's decisions to cooperate and driving museums in the research of support from institutions unrelated to the specific museum activities.

The present article wants to:

1. identify a link between the amount of museum assets and the degree of relation with other institutions: the more assets the museum owns, the less it is supposed to create relationships with other institution in order to sustain its expositive activity. This could be also considered the hypothesis for the future research.
2. recognize the nature of the relationships, in particular the formal and prescribed relationships and the ones informal and more difficult to identify, and to understand their role in the process of value creation for the museum and its publics.

Historical Background

In order to better understand the meaning of the existence of institutions like museums, it is useful to describe the origins like collecting places and educational devices for the community.

The museum idea has been taken into account between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment Period. It was considered a link with the ancient times, celebrating the Arts. But the Collecting Practice wasn't born in the Renaissance. At the beginning the Humanists tried to find out the traces of Ancient Rome that gained more and more value. Afterwards, a passion for collecting curiosities spread out. This model was adopted by the most influential families in Europe (e.g. The *De Medici* family in Florence).

While for a long period the works of living artists were collected, during the 17th century a passion for the works of deceased artists grew.

While before, the collections were presented in order to elicit a sense of surprise, in the 18th century the exhibition had a demonstrative function supporting the historic presentation originally intended. During this period the proposition to preserve many works in administrative palaces was advanced. It was the middle of 18th century.

On the eve of the French Revolution the public museum became a necessary institution and its birth was unavoidable. Starting in 1789 a process of assimilation began concentrating many works of different origins in few but strategically relevant political centres (Paris, Berlin, Rome etc.). This process saw its height with the Napoleonic conquests, much criticized.

At the beginning of the 19th century the ancient sculpture became the highest art value. Many Greek works were brought to France and other countries, creating a real art cult all over Europe. The museums were considered temples, and all the countries were proud of owning a part of this treasure. Throughout the century museums were regarded as places inspiring all the artists. Young artists went regularly to the museum: the great museums were open only on Sunday afternoon but in 1850 the situation changed. The great success gained by the exhibitions demonstrated the public interest for the museum activities: this led to a bigger number of donations than the past. In this period the Metropolitan Museum of New York opened.

During the 20th century many events took place: the most important are the following:

- 1919: the first museum of modern art was inaugurated in Grenoble, France
- the MoMa (Museum of Modern Art) began its activity with the intent of regularly acquiring the best works of modern art and organizing exhibitions presenting the most famous modern artists and the emerging ones
- since 1975 a number of restorations and extensions have involved the museum world and the most important architects
- 1977: in Paris the Centre Pompidou was inaugurated. It is the first example of the multi-functional centre starting to be diffused during the recent years.

The museum concept has undergone many changes throughout the centuries. The above presentation wants to solve an explanatory function in order to show the different steps through which the museum has evolved: we want to stress the importance of the process that has led to the public vocation of the institution.

But as described, the purpose of the institution, however, has remained almost the same: the museum must transmit the art to the public and should educate the visitors appreciating the meaning of the art.

To attain these objectives requires a clear strategic plan.

Museum definitions and functions

As an organization the museum is represented by a structure of functions and activities trying to reach the main objectives of diffusing the products of the arts and sharing its meaning with the society. Three main functions summarize the museum *mission* as an institution of *public utility*:

- conservative dimension: all the pieces present in the museum must be well safeguarded and protected from any damage
- exhibition function: the exhibition should permit the visitor to appreciate the paintings or sculptures presented which must be well described; all the information important to the contemplation should be given (artist, place and dates, technique used etc.)
- service dimension: this dimension summarizes three functions: reception, divulgation and complementary services (Solima, 1998, Vaughan 2001).

In all the museums, these functions are more or less developed depending on the collections presented or the exhibitions organized. The question is “why can some museum develop one function more than the others?” and “how is this possible?”. Answering these questions means being able to analyze the museums’ activities and collections.

In this field many attempts have been done for example in the museum management literature (e.g. Stephen 2001, Bodo 2000, Bagdadli 1998). A traditional museum classification identifies several categories depending on the contents of the exhibition. In fact it is possible to classify the institutions using the following categories (Kotler and Kotler, 1999):

- art museum
- history museum
- children’s museum
- science and technology museum
- ethnographic museum
- universal museum.

But after a preliminary exam of the activity of 20 different museums all over the world¹ (through the analysis of the web sites, the exhibitions description, the membership and sponsorship activities etc), two other ways to classify these institutions may be presented.

A first classification system identified could be considered as a summary of the categories shown above, but the criteria used are not limited to the exhibition’s content and also include a reference to the main activities of each type (contemplation activity, direct experience with the objects presented etc.). The result is the identification of the four macro-categories that follow:

- the museum-collection: this is the definition for the structure hosting a permanent collection composed of unique pieces and not changing its programmes and collections during its life. A typical example is the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which hosts works of Italian and European Renaissance artists (the collection is unchangeable during the years except for some structural changes). We can considered this classification as the one of the traditional museum pattern;
- the contemplative museum: an institution that works in the visual arts field, in particular in modern and contemporary art. Inside this structure a pleasant

¹ We know it is not a very representative sample, but the two classification system could help understanding the nature of the activities of the organization-museum.

contemplative experience is possible and complementary services are offered for visitor use. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice well illustrates the characteristics of this category;

- the experimental museum: belonging to this particular class are all those museums enabling the visitor to have a direct experience with art, science and other disciplines;
- the exhibition space: an institution organizing different exhibitions during the year and not having an its own collection is defined as a container. Palazzo Grassi in Venice is an excellent example.

These classifications spread out during the writing up of the graduate thesis: in that context the object of the research was the application of the marketing function to the activity of the museum. In order to see the evidence of this application, the four above categories were identified and the functions of the marketing mix were associated with the typical museum functions.

Briefly it is possible to assert that the three typical dimensions described earlier (conservative dimension, exhibition function and service dimension) are present in each of the four typologies but the museum container should develop the service dimension also respecting the new perspective defining the museum container as a multi-functional centre.

A second classification analyses the museum from the collection perspective. It identifies two macro-categories representing the museums universe.

On one hand there are museums that dispose of a “permanent collection” (the museum-collection, the contemplative museum and the experimental museum could be included in this category) and on the other hand museums organizing only temporary exhibitions (the contemplative museum, the experimental one and the exhibition space could be included). There can be intersections between the first classification system and the second on due to the characteristics of the collection (permanent or not).

The last classification represents the starting point of the analysis.

It is supposed that the last two classes act in different ways according to the different environment in which they work. This means that the environment (other actors in particular) influences the decision making process of the single museum and the strategic planning activities.

This is necessarily true for each museum, but some premises must be made respecting the characteristics of the second classification system described above. They base their activity on the relationships with other institutions; we can say that the relationships are vital to the survival of the two typologies. But the relationships structure may differ from one typology to the other. The absence of a permanent collection may affect the network of relations a museum establishes: frequently changing exhibitions imply a variation in the partners portfolio and this leads to a change in the nature and content of the museum vital relationships.

In this paper the two categories are also supposed to look for different results while setting up a new relation or maintaining an old one.

But to better understand the aim and nature of the relationships, it is useful to analyze each one of the typologies.

Typology 1: museums with permanent collection

In this class must be included all these museums and institutions that dispose of only a so called “permanent” collection. This word is not a synonymous of “unchangeable”: in fact the collection may change over time thanks to agreements stipulated with other institutions.

The conservative function is developed because of the great amount of specific pieces owned by the museum itself.

Attention must be paid to the exhibition of the works with correct information under each piece. The creation of a visiting path is also important because it gives coherence to the exhibition and helps the visitors better appreciating the works exhibited.

The actions this typology can realize could be of different nature:

- it can borrow a piece from another institution
- it can lend works to other museums (in this way its reputation will rapidly spread)
- it can exchange with another one
- it can give up a work in order to acquire a piece that completes its own collection

But why does it set all these actions out?

Under the agreements mentioned above lies an intense negotiation process: the negotiation practice could lead to different situations depending on the conditions under which the

agreement has started and depending on the objectives the museum wants to reach. The negotiation results may be the creation of new relationships or the maintenance of the old ones.

Typology 2: museum having only temporary exhibition

This definition identifies those museums not having their own collection but presenting several exhibitions during the course of their life. This kind of activity has implications; in particular the main functions of the museum must be considered in the context of a continuing change. The conservative function is practically limited to the temporary exhibition. The physical and infrastructural conditions under which temporary exhibitions take place are the expression of the conservative dimension but in the meantime help to create the right atmosphere for the contemplation of the pieces presented (expositive function).

The service dimension instead is upgraded in order to facilitate the access to the works and to understand the meaning of each piece, and thus permit a pleasant visit. Being an expositive space and not a traditional museum, the museum container (so, having only temporary exhibitions) has no means to create in the visitor a sort of fidelity. Through the strategic use of the services, a sense of loyalty towards the institution could arise in the visitors. The services can be considered a strategic means to obtain consensus from the different publics and gain credibility in order to facilitate the creation of relationships with museums and other institutions.

After these considerations it is reasonable to think about the museum container as the institution that mainly needs artistic and economic support.

The importance of the relationships is stressed by the definition of the second typology: having no collection is a lack of resources that must be supplied in some way. The relationships with other institutions seem to be one of the possible means a museum has.

Networks of Relationships

In the last years the idea that every organization basing its activity on the economic exchange process, can be represented as network of relationships, has been shaped. But what is a relationship network? A first definition could be summarized in the following way: the networks are constituted by two basic elements:

- nodes (sometimes called actors or units)
- the relations between them (so called “links”).

The nodes are the units of analysis and so could be individual, dyads, subgroups and entire groups.

Network theory asserts that a network is a set of objects bundled by a links connective structure. The connective structure permits interactions between actors. The interaction process implies the development of business relationships that might be stable, but they might also be cooperative relations or conflictual ones (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002)

Another definition might be the following: “a network [is] as a pattern of more or less lasting linkages between nodes, where the nodes represent different organisational units. These units may be firm or divisions within firms. The linkages may be uni- or bidirectional, representing flows of products (goods and services), sharing of resources, relations of ownership or other forms of control, lines of cooperation and communication (Grandori 1999). Linkages can be “vertical”, constituting flows of products, in intra-firm value chains or inter-firm value systems (Porter 1985). The linkages may also be “horizontal”, where similar, competing products are pooled to share a common resource of production or distribution. All linkages can have different strengths, in terms of size, type, frequency and durability of exchange and in term of force of control (Grandori 1999).

In this sense, the attention must be focused on the relationship between the individual action and the context in which it is developed: the environment is constituted by all the actors involved in the individual action or having some interest in the creation of a relationship. So we can conclude that all the organizations are social networks and the formal (existent) and emergent relations are equally important to understand them.

The actors interacting with the institution determine the existence of the relationships but correctly identify the network means considering many variables:

- the network structure
- the actors’ positions (the actors’ actions could be better explained through their position than through their own structural differences)
- the dimensions of the network (represented by the actors number)

- the concept of centrality (measured by the degree of asymmetry, namely by the decision rights concentrated in few actors' hands) (Nohria, 1992)²

These are only some variables defining the network. But what is the main benefit emerging from the adoption of a network perspective? Being in the middle of a communication network gives power in the relationships management.

The existence of an actor environment and the concept of centrality and power lead toward the new sociological approach. Granovetter states that "The economic objectives attainment is possible through the attainment of objectives non explicitly defined as economic, bound to the concept of sociability, social status and power" (Granovetter, 1985). Follows that, when involved in a network of relationships, every actor brings with him a certain kind of capital made of three elements (Burt, 1992)³:

- the financial capital: money and investments
- the human capital: human capabilities and competences acquired during the time
- the social capital: the opportunities that flow from the relationships with other actors in order to exploit the financial and human capital

When two actors are involved in a relationship, they both bring into the process an amount of social capital affected by past experiences. In many cases the social capital can also be summarized as knowledge and opportunities but also capabilities: apart from the organisational and technical capabilities required for the production process, these are capabilities that permit the actor to relate to other institutions more successfully, enhancing not only his knowledge but also that of the relationship (Johnsen and Ford 2002).

According to the network perspective, actors develop network relationships in order to utilize each others' resources and capabilities (Håkansson and Snehota 1995)⁴. In this context knowledge is created and plays a crucial role in the process of mutual learning.

A question now arises: why must the actors involve themselves in a network of relationships with other actors? Which advantages would they have from the network?

When the decision to participate in a network must be taken, there is a situation of asymmetry due to the lack of information that the actors have on each others. Even when the web of relationships external to a particular business transaction does not provide enough

² In Nohria N. Eccles R. (1992)

³ In Nohria N. Eccles R. (1992)

⁴ In Hakansson H. and Snehota I. (1995) pp. 24-49

information, the very creation of the partner specific knowledge and competences that tends to “lock in” actors in bilateral monopolies, at the same time gives the information for judging whether or not the partner is trustworthy (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Grandori and Neri⁵). In practice, economists find it important to understand when they should defend themselves as fully as possible against misbehaviour through formal and guaranteed contractual structures etc. (Powell, 1994). In addition, informal agreements can be self-enforcing not in spite but usually thanks to relation-specific investments and the possibility of joint gains (Grandori 1997).

So the main objective of a network is to provide added value to the actors involved. The cost of acquiring resources must be justified by the value added created for the partners. The value creation is fundamentally based on the knowledge of the actors and on how they combine this knowledge (Håkansson 1993), in fact the value of resources is dependent on how they are combined which puts emphasis on the knowledge of resources and on learning involving the use of existing resources, their modification and creation of new ones. If actors want to combine their resources and competencies in order to better use their own or common resources, they have to adapt, and that requires mutual learning, as stated later.

Basically, knowledge sharing and resource development are the results of the interactions between actors. In particular the value creation process in a relationship network consists of acquiring a sort of control over the relation in order to be sure for the future. All the relationships established, formal and informal, teach something to the actors and become part of them. Every time a new relation is going to spread out, all the past experiences help the actor decide if the new rapport is trustworthy.

Considering the museum immersed in a thick network of relationships means reflecting on the possible other actors the museum is in contact with. We don't think about the museum living in an atomistic and neutral world, but acting considering its own resources and also that deriving from a hypothetical collaborations with other actors.

So after that literature review on the network theme, it is useful to analyze the existence of relationships in particular for the two museum typologies representing the object of the paper, in order to understand also the motivations that stand beyond the decision to establish

⁵ In Grandori (1999) pp. 41-66

a relationship. As described before, the two museum typologies look for different results because of each class' exhibition peculiarities.

Analysis and discussion: museum and networks of relationship

It must be done a premise: this paper wants just to be a starting point for a future and deeper research on the theme. In this paper we would just like to present a possible point of view on the management of museums: the reflections on the relationships of a museum with other institutions seems to be linked with the network perspective but the real application of the network concepts to the actor-museum will be the object of a wider and future research.

So in order to show the different approach a museum has to the management of the relationships and the mechanism that stand beyond the activity of the two museum classes, it seems to be easier to use a systematic table: the table is presenting the two typologies using five parameters:

- the goals a museum has for he future
- the actors supposed to be involved in the relationship (from the single museum's perspective)
- the nature of the relationship
- the means used to reach the goals
- the possible results.

The decision to use the five parameters mentioned above is motivated by the desire to find out the real process of network creation that drives the museum activities. In particular it will be interesting to underline the different driving force basing the creation of relationship with related and unrelated institutions.

The table contains some considerations and reflections for each one of the two classes and the considerations are driven by the characteristic of having or not having a "permanent" collection. It will be useful to compare the two classes and the reflections that will emerge.

Parameters	<i>Typology 1</i> _ Museum with permanent collection	<i>Typology 2</i> _ Museum having only temporary exhibition
<i>Goals fixed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the collection • Pay attention to the museographic function⁶ • Lend works to other museums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize many exhibitions during the year • Maintain the attention of the publics at a high level • The service must be impeccable
<i>Actors supposed to be involved</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other museums • Private collectors • Private foundations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other museums • Private collectors • Private foundations
<i>Nature of relationship</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange relationships • Economic relationships • Communication relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrow relationships • Negotiation process⁷ • Communication relationships
<i>Means used</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works that are not closely related to the entire collection might be given in to other institutions in exchange with pieces more interesting for the museum • The museographic function can be improved introducing new multi media supports helping the visit (but other means could be used) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reputation acquired during its life is an important means in the negotiation step. It attributes credibility to the museum's action • Interfirm communication
<i>Possible results</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New works are collected • A relation links more museums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many exhibitions are organized • The museum's name becomes more and more popular

⁶ Give complete and useful information about each work exposed

⁷ The museum container should give some guarantees in order to obtain loans from other institutions

After this analysis some important concluding remarks can be made for the two classes:

- *Typology 1 _ Museum with permanent collection:* as the museum has already a permanent collection the main goals might be to complete the collection (this activity needs a relationships network base but in this case it seems easier because of the great contractual power represented by the collection) or to diffuse its name in the culture society. This goal creates reputation that facilitates the exchange relationships. We can argue that it is a virtuous loop. The partner considered to be the most suitable in order to achieve this goals are other museums that possess works that interests this class, private collectors that has some pieces in their collection (the contractual power in this case in very high) and private foundations. Obviously the relationships with these partners are of different nature depending on the resources that each partner has to offer to the museum and on the results that the museums wants to reach with each partner. The activities the museum has to do are principally two:

- acquiring works from other actors in order to complete the collection
- lending works to diffuse its reputation.

The main facts resulting from these relationships and action are the collection's enlargement and the acquisition of new relations with other institutions also important for the future.

- *Typology 2 _ Museum having only temporary exhibition:* the lack of a permanent collection forces the typology 2 to look for substitutes "products" to offer to the publics: one of these is the organization of temporary exhibition. So one of the main goals is the organization of temporary and different exhibition during the course of the year. This activity must be supported by an effective communication campaign in order to maintain at a high level the attention of the actual visitors and to create interest in the potential ones. Being an exhibition space the museum-container (having no permanent collection) must pay attention to the offering of the complementary services (these that facilitate and enrich the contemplation experience). But all these activities could become very problematic if the museum-container would not have a strong relationships network bundling it to other institutions. First of all, thinking about an exhibition's organization (in particular the theme of the exhibition) means to think about the possible partners and suppliers that can support it (collaborate in the creation of the exhibition). This presupposes the existence of a strong relationships network with: other museums (that lend works), private collectors and private foundation. Moreover also private firms could contribute for the exhibition's mounting (for the

lights, the backgrounds, the multimedia supports etc.). So every time an exhibition is going to be set, a number of relationships are involved depending on the theme of the exhibition. If the museum obtains a loan from a prestigious art institution (it means that the big institution has trusted the museum), the next loan will be easier to obtain (the museum's reputation will grow more and more thanks to the past experiences-relationships with other institutions). It's a virtuous loop. The museum-container gains more and more credibility to the art professionals' eyes every time it creates and maintains a relationship with important institutions. In fact, this is a parameter for the trust the museum creates in the environment. And its contractual power during the negotiation process becomes stronger, even if the museum hasn't its own collection. The compensation that goes to the other institutions is in term of communication advantages and more visibility. The museum obtains two main results through the relationships with other institutions:

- the more exhibitions are organized, the more the museographic activity will be improved
- the museum's reputation spreads and the museum becomes more and more important in the art context.

Concluding comments

As explained, the museum as an organization is not supposed to live in an atomistic world: it works in an environment primarily constituted by other actors more or less related with it. In this sense, it has to maintain some kind of relationships with them even if only to cohabitate in the same "place". The existence of relationships is related to which class the museum belongs. The kind of activity and the works owned are two parameters that could be used to measure the degree of relationship under which the museum acts. The more works the museum possesses, the less borrowing relationships it has to establish and the higher contractual power it has.

This paper suggests a reflection on the concept of museum as an organization working in a living and changing context. This means that the relationships are inevitable and vital especially for the museum-container, a place renewing itself thanks to other institutions. The future research will be developed starting from this point: it will consist of analyzing the relationships a museum-container has and will have, their nature and their goals. Then a

sort of model of relationships management will be suggested considering also the empirical data emerged from the quantitative research (a sample of museum will be considered⁸)

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⁸ The research methodology will defined later.

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