

Exercising communal power

How community museums strengthen identity and self-determination

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In 1986, the Shan Dany Community Museum in Santa Ana del Valle, a Zapotec village in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, opened its doors. The methods brought about by this emblematic experience within the community museum field now extend to 15 communities in the State of Oaxaca, dozens throughout Mexico and 12 countries in Latin America. As such museums have multiplied, the concept of the community museum itself has been continually enriched.

Promoting horizontal relations

Community museums are understood as a process born within communities to satisfy collective needs and demands. They are established by organisations such as community assemblies in Mexico, communal councils in Venezuela or juntas of communal action in Colombia, which develop consensus for these initiatives, decide on the stories they will tell and appoint community representatives to oversee all aspects of their management. Thus communities appropriate these museums as tools to strengthen their relations, develop awareness of their history, foster reflection and critical analysis, and create projects to transform their collective future. Collective memory is the dominant value, rather than collections of objects, and is vitalised by the recreation and reinterpretation of meaningful stories. Community museums are a vehicle to validate and analyse memory, identifying and reinterpreting what has been learnt from past experiences. They serve to manage heritage through grassroots community organisations in which communal power

is asserted; maintain or recover possession of the community's material cultural heritage; and dignify intangible heritage by elaborating its meaning in the community's own terms. Communities may exhibit valuable archaeological collections created by their ancestors, or present stories of their struggles over land tenure or resistance during national social movements, such as the 1910 revolution in Mexico.

Over time, community museums foster the development of skills, experiences and social resources enabling communities to be autonomous. Rather than vertical, dependent relations to authorities, they promote horizontal relations between community members and with other communities, encouraging community appropriation through consensus-building and participation. For example, in Oaxaca, the decision to establish a community museum is made in the local community assembly, the funda-

mental decision-making body, which may meet monthly or according to need, presided by local municipal authorities and legally valid with the attendance of a majority of registered citizens. It elects a committee to coordinate the project, decides on the themes to be researched and represented in the museum, and allocates a building or property.

Research is developed by community members who document selected themes such as land struggles, the boundaries of their territory, the traditional organisation of the fiesta or weddings, community folk art, and

the processes of change they face. Community members construct their own representations of these themes through methods including oral history, photography and video, and participatory workshops for design, production and installation. Subsequently,

the museum continues to serve the community, responding to a wide variety of needs that include strengthening cultural identity, providing training for community groups and contributing to processes of participatory community planning.

Serving diverse communities

Although longstanding traditions of community decision-making and service of the indigenous villages of Oaxaca facilitate this process, communities of diverse contexts have developed similar experiences with a high degree of community appropriation: in this way, the communal council of La Vela de Coro established and developed the Community Museum of La Vela in Venezuela, and an association of community representatives and students expanded a small

These museums are tools for communities to transform their collective future

museum to create the successful Mulaló Community Museum in Colombia.

Networks of community museums are a fundamental motor of this process. The Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca (UMCO), founded in 1991, currently brings together 15 communities to address their common needs. UMCO supported the creation of the National Union of Community Museums of Mexico, and since 2000, has encouraged the development of the Network of Community Museums of America. Today, this network brings together community museums from Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico. In a gradual process, this network is projecting the capacity for community self-governance to higher levels, generating a broader field of action and greater autonomy to face the challenges of a globalised society. In this sense, both community museums and their networks are tools that local communities can appropriate in order to help them face the future. ■



A traditional healer explains the use of medicinal plants, Santa Ana del Valle, Oaxaca