



A participant customising the *A Museum For Me* materials, drawing images that represent the experiences of their community, at a workshop held in Bogotá, Colombia, in October 2019

INTERNACIONAL

## A MUSEUM FOR ME: ENGAGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SELF-CURATION

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents the *A Museum For Me* projects and methodologies which were developed by an international interdisciplinary research project that has collaborated with community groups and museums in Colombia and beyond. This project has used the concept of the museum as a memory prop to work with communities to document, create, curate, and narrate self-directed representations of their lives and stories. The article describes the process of creating the *A Museum For Me* products and methodologies, and proposes how they could be employed in different contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** Co-creation, co-curation, museums, community engagement, creative methodologies.

A growing body of research in museology over recent decades has taken as its focus the shape and focus of the museum as an institution. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the museum as an institution is, conventionally, a top-down entity representing the interests of the elite (see for instance Bennet 1995: 30 & 46, and McCall & Gray 2014: 20). As these and other scholars have revealed, museums have held a role in controlling the populace, in differentiating between “high” and “low” cultural forms, and in instilling top-down notions of cultural value in their visitors.

Similarly, scholars have criticised the museum as an institution for naturalising patriarchal norms, for functioning according to “an organizing structure grounded in cultural assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality” (Robert 2014: 26), and for structuring spaces and exhibitions along the “association of active/passive and male/female” (Porter 2004 64). Moreover, several scholars have pointed out how the museum is also a colonial institution, having its roots

in imperial endeavours, with most museum practices being “distinctly western cultural inventions and preoccupations” (Kreps 2003: 1), and with museum collections being “an assemblage of colonial histories and unequal power relations” (Matherne and Quaintance 2019: 16).

In the light of these criticisms, recent debates in museology have proposed challenging the classic model of the museum with propositions including co-curation and decolonial museum practices. Co-curation, referring to “a variety of museum approaches to working with an outside community through collaboration or consultation”<sup>1</sup> has involved opening out the role of curator - previously the preserve of the educated, elite expert - to community groups, and for some this opening out of curation and engagement with communities is closely linked to the endeavour of decolonising museum practices (see for instance Onciul 2015: 1, Chipangura 2020: 437 and Lonetree 2012).

With these debates in mind, the project *A Museum for Me* has aimed to

create materials and practices that open out the concept of the museum to interrogation and co-creation from below. The project is led by Professor Claire Taylor of the University of Liverpool, UK, and has been supported by several research grants, including a UKRI GCRF Translation Grant, and an AHRC Creative Economy Grant.<sup>2</sup> An interdisciplinary team of experts, bringing in specialisms including modern languages, memory studies, museum studies and design, amongst others, worked together to design the products and methodologies.<sup>3</sup>

Starting in 2019, the project team undertook a lengthy period of designing and piloting, in order to develop the central *A Museum For Me* product. This comprises a mini-museum, consisting of pre-designed cardboard kits that the participant can adapt, colour, design and build to represent their own life story and experiences. This design process involved addressing the conceptual issues discussed above: namely, we wished to open out the concept of the museum, and put curation into the hands of the participants. The

design, thus, had to represent this idea of the museum no longer being behind closed doors, and the idea of its contents being designed by the participant. For this reason, we decided on a mini-museum which would be adapted and customised by the participant.

At the same time, the design also had to take into concern practical considerations. Firstly, the design had provide a generic representation of a museum so that the kits could work in any setting. Secondly they had to be appealing to users - visually, the kits had to look like something the users would want to work with. Thirdly, they had to be simple to assemble, since the kits were designed to be used in workshops within museums or other settings where visitors would be available for a limited amount of time; similarly, these visitors would not require any specialist training to use the kits. Fourthly, they had to be cheap to produce, given that the project works primarily with LMEs (Low-to-Middle income countries), and frequently with not-for-profit organisations. To

achieve a low production cost, the project team designed a cardboard model with no pre-cut elements, but sufficient instructions for an easy assembly by users of any age and skill. The resulting kits were based on sheets of cardboard big enough for people to draw on, cut and

assemble easily, but small enough to have structural strength and be produced, packaged and distributed. An example of the pre-assembled kits can be seen in Figure 1.

The project’s logo was designed to be as simple as possible, comprising



Figure 1 caption: the pre-assembled *A Museum For Me* kit



the words *A Museum for Me*, with the keywords chosen to highlight the concepts of place and personal ownership. In particular, in choosing the phrasing “for me”, we aimed to convey the idea that the kit, when assembled, would represent the interests, ideals, experiences or achievements of the individual or collective who had assembled it.

For the graphic look of the kit, we had to achieve two competing goals: it had to present both the image of a contemporary and inclusive museum and still have elements that users could relate to a more traditional notion of the museum. To achieve a contemporary look, we chose a palette of colours that were adapted to the main products within our suite. We also left the walls white, so users could create customised walls, and add details that represented their own life experiences at their will.

The model of this kit, which was the first of the museum products to be developed by the project, became the prototype that then allowed us to develop other products

based on the same principles and ideas, which have been trialled and developed over time, covering 8 prototypes, and now refined into 3 main products: a mini-museum kit, a timeline, and a visitor book.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside each set of materials, a detailed workshop methodology was developed, as well as a didactic and methodological toolkit to help activate the materials in different communities and museums. The toolkit contains training videos and presentations from the project team, along with five guide sheets with instructions, tips and methodologies that could be used by educators, guides or facilitators within museums.

The instructional guides are carefully designed to support educators, facilitators, and community leaders in implementing the materials effectively within diverse contexts. Each guide is divided into five key sections: (1) recommendations for the optimal use of the materials, (2) suggested icebreaker activities to foster an open and engaging atmosphere, (3) characterization of

the target audience to tailor the activities to their specific needs and interests, (4) connections between the various materials provided, and (5) strategies to relate the activities to participants’ daily lives and local contexts. These guides not only provide clear, step-by-step instructions for assembling and using the kits but also include methodologies to spark meaningful conversations about memory, identity, and human rights.

In workshops, the instructional guides serve as a roadmap for facilitators to lead participants through a multi-step process of co-creation and reflection. Workshops often begin with introductory activities designed to build trust and encourage interaction among participants, such as collective storytelling or group-based exercises. Once participants are familiar with the materials, they move on to the personalization phase, where they design their own mini-museums, timelines, or visitor books (see Figure 2). Frequently, participants will bring along to the workshop

images or other materials that are important for them, and stick them onto the walls of their mini-museum. For example, participants may paste a photograph of their loved one, or a

newspaper clipping about an event that was important in their lives. Overall, these activities are highly flexible, allowing individuals to express their personal narratives while also exploring collective themes.

Facilitators are encouraged to use the guides to introduce discussion prompts and reflective questions that help participants draw connections between their creations and broader themes of community memory and cultural heritage. By providing a structured yet adaptable framework, the instructional guides ensure that the workshops remain inclusive, accessible, and impactful, empowering participants to share their voices and reimagine the role of museums in their lives.

In this way, these materials, and the accompanying methodologies and activities, have been designed as tools with which museums and grassroots groups could work with local communities to discuss the museum as a space for commemoration and memory, as well as to develop spaces for reflection and dialogue.

The project team provides these materials and guidelines, as well as training in the form of videos and online support, to museums, community groups and other organisations for free. To date, the project has provided materials and



Figure 2 caption: a participant customising the *A Museum For Me* materials, drawing images that represent the experiences of their community, at a workshop held in Bogotá, Colombia, in October 2019

facilitated workshops with over 60 museums and community groups across Colombia, the UK, Mexico, Chile and elsewhere. In so doing, the project has worked with four main types of organizations/events:

1. Existing museums. These are museums that already existed at the time of the project. Our project has worked with close to 30 museums in Colombia, and has helped these museums develop new forms of participation and engagement, has brought local communities into the museum, has developed new routes for museums, and has co-created content with them.
2. Museums at planning stage. These are museums that are planned, but are in the process of being scoped. A particular example of this is the Afro-Colombian Museum. The project was approached in 2022 by a team set up by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the National Museum Colombia, which is designing a strategy for the forthcoming Afro-Colombian Museum. This will be the first museum of its kind

in the country to represent the descendants of enslaved peoples. The Afro-Colombian Museum team is employing a co-creation methodology, and the PI's team was invited to run co-creation laboratories using the *A Museum For Me* products (see Figure 3).

3. Grassroots community groups. These comprise a wide range of grassroots groups, predominantly in Colombia, who represent the victims of the armed conflict. The *A Museum For Me* products and methodologies have been employed by these community groups to engage with their local communities and to enable the telling of difficult or traumatic stories.
4. Continuing Professional Development. The project has run a number of CDP workshops and events for museum professionals and others, including at the International Council of Museums' General Conference - a hub for exchange about issues facing museums today, and innovative solutions - and at the Regional Encounter of CECA LAC.



Figure 3 caption: a poster advertising the co-creation laboratories with the Museo Afro de Colombia team

In these sessions, the *A Museum For Me* activities have been used as ways to train and engage museum professionals with new modes of engagement with communities.

In summary, built up over a number of years this project has developed a series of tools and best practice to support community groups and museums in telling untold stories. The team is keen to continue their collaborations in other geographical contexts, and would welcome expressions of interest from any organisation who would like to work with these materials.

## FOOTNOTES

1 N. Matherne, and H. Quaintance, “Meaningful Donations...,” *op. cit.*: 15.

2 The full references for these grants are as follows: UKRI GCRF Global Research Translation Award, *Translation to Policy, Practice and Product for Low and Middle Income Countries*, ref. EP/T015217/1 and AHRC Follow-on Funding - UN Creative Economy for Sustainable Development Grant, *Community Museums in the Creative Economy*, ref AH/W006693/1.

3 The full team involved in the design of and implementation comprise: Claire Taylor (University of Liverpool), Ailsa Peate (University of Westminster), Lucia Brandi (University of Liverpool), Patricia Barrera (University of Liverpool), Camilo Sánchez (International Quilt Museum, Lincoln), María Mónica Fuentes Leal (National Museum Colombia), Rob Miles (University of Liverpool), Cecilia Andrea Acosta Sánchez (Independent Researcher) and Andrew Robertson (University of Liverpool).

4 Earlier kits that the team designed and trialled also include a theatre

stage, a personal timeline, a human-rights “museum scavenger hunt”, a bookmark, a calendar and several virtual products that were developed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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### CLAIRE TAYLOR

She is Gilmour Chair of Spanish and Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Liverpool UK. She is a specialist in Latin American culture, with a particular interest in two main areas: literary and cultural genres developed online by Latin(o) Americans; and memory practices and transitional justice contexts in Latin America, especially Colombia. She is the Principal Investigator of the project Memory, Victims and Representation of the Colombian Conflict, and also leads two impact projects which follow on from this main project, focussed on archives of human rights and historical memory (ArchiCom), and the development of community museums and processes of co-curation (*Un Museo Para Mí*).

### MARÍA MÓNICA FUENTES LEAL

She is an internationalist with extensive experience in communication and education projects within museums, cultural institutions, and media. She has worked on designing engaging experiences for diverse audiences, developing digital content, cultural programming, educational strategies, and mediation processes. She has collaborated with museums to create narratives that promote cultural heritage and community engagement through transdisciplinary approaches. She is a correspondent for CECA Colombia, ICOM Colombia, a consultant for the University of Liverpool in the “A Museum for Me” project, and a producer at Prisa Media and BiblioRed in Colombia.