



COMMITTEE FOR MUSEUM DEFINITION, PROSPECTS AND POTENTIALS (MDPP)

Submission to the Executive Board, according to decision by the EB, December 2018, of five different proposals for a new museum definition, for a final selection by the EB, July 2019

The Museum Definition as the Backbone of Museums

A shared definition of what museums are and what they do, of their purposes, functions, methods and responsibilities, acts as the backbone for the global museum community.

This definition has remained essentially unchanged for a long time. But museums are deeply embedded in the societies around them, and are directly and indirectly impacted and shaped by societal trends, by political, economic and social change. And as museums face the complexities of the 21st century, and have begun to radically adjust and reinvent their principles, policies and practices to face these new challenges, the ICOM museum definition seems increasingly inadequate in articulating current responsibilities and commitments of museums and in guiding and supporting museums in their manifold and complex visions for the future. The last couple of decades have thus seen an almost continuous intent within ICOM to revise the museum definition.

With the Executive Council's adoption of the MDPP's report and recommendations in December 2018, the MDPP was asked to initiate, in accordance with the submitted plan and time schedule, a process of collecting and developing new, alternative museum definitions with a view to a change in Article 3, section 1 of the Statutes of 2017 (and this article only) of the ICOM statutes, at an Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM.

An open process

This next phase of generating new museum definitions should be open to members from across the globe.

A letter with a call for contributions was sent by the ICOM Secretariat, for the MDPP, to all ICOM national and international committees, regional alliances, affiliated organizations as well as standing committees and working groups. Invitation letters were also sent to selected partners and stakeholders. A special page was opened on the ICOM website, to which everyone could upload a proposal.

In case of questions about or difficulties with the process, Afsin Altayli at the ICOM Secretariat was available for consultation. The ICOM Secretariat and the MDPP monitored the patterns and figures of participation throughout this collecting phase and proactively encouraged underrepresented regions to take part. Additional support materials and toolkits were made available for those interested.

The format was free. Everyone could upload a proposal in their own language, with just a provisional translation into English. Contributions were anonymous, so only the quality of the phrasing should count.

It was, however, encouraged that new definitions, to the extent possible, should reflect and include the eight parameters, that provided a crucial framework in the MDPP recommendation and EB decision. These parameters are attached in *Appendix 1*.

During the period January to late May 269 different proposals for an alternative museum definition were received from 69 different countries and in 25 different languages through the ICOM website, <https://icom.museum/en/news/the-museum-definition-the-backbone-of-icom/>. As was the case with the roundtables organized by the MDPP, the global participation turned out much higher than expected.

There were contributions from countries where ICOM is not at all represented, like Mozambique, Uganda, Yemen, Trinidad and Tobago. There was an extraordinarily high participation, relative to their membership numbers, from countries like Mexico, Spain, Brazil, Colombia, Portugal. A country like the US also contributed relatively higher than its membership should indicate. Some countries remained mute, like Switzerland and Denmark. Some countries' contributions corresponded closely to their percentage of the membership, like Norway and the UK. There seems to be no one clear trend in the frequency of participation by country.

However, a regional perspective gives some important reasons for reflection:

Region	% of the region in the definition proposals	% of the region within the ICOM memberships
Africa	4,83	0,9
Arab States	8,18	0,7
Asia and the Pacific	8,55	4,8
Europe	44,24	83,1
Latin America and the Caribbean	25,28	4
North America	8,92	6,5

The five proposals selected for the Executive Board

Late May 2019 the MDPP started the process of analysing, categorizing, comparing and filtering the proposals received. This layered process and the methods employed in generating consecutive shortlists into the final five hereby submitted to the Executive Board are described in detail, step by step in *Appendix 2*.

A museum definition serves multiple needs, and there are multiple and contradictory expectations to its phrasing. It should be short, readable and memorable, and yet also unite the diverse functions and express the multifaceted richness of what museums are and do. Its core concepts should carry across cultures and languages. It should guide our practice within the sector as well as present our unique identity outside the sector. It needs to strike a balance between what is said, precisely and explicitly, and what is to be understood between the lines. What is left unsaid carries its own weight. It should be descriptive, but will inevitable also be prescriptive. It will contain elements of hope, ideals and wishful thinking, but should not just gloss over current conflicts or difficulties. It should, in accordance with the original parameters, support and guide museums in their visions as well as their challenges in the 21st century.

The MDPP believes that the five submitted proposals are all relevant, valid and functional museum definitions. While they all retain and express, in slightly different form, the important defining core of museums of collecting, researching, documenting, preserving, exhibiting and communicating, they also reflect, in different ways, the shifting paradigms that have appeared, unevenly and incompletely, but still consistently, in museums and the societies around us in the 21st century.

The five proposals together contain a good number of the important elements that have emerged through these recent years of discussions and analysis, through the MDPP roundtables as well as through the 269 proposals submitted. At this point of the process, all of the shortlisted five proposals are mixes, abridged, expanded, edited and reedited. They are slightly different, in approach, in emphasis and tone of voice, but they all embed the unique museum functions within a wider social and humanitarian purpose and democratic intent.

1

Museums are dynamic and accessible, participatory and transparent spaces, working in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit to enhance understandings of a complex, conflicted and interconnected world.

Addressing all aspects of the social, cultural and natural life in the past, present and future, they are communal and collaborative places in which to explore ideas, share stories, construct knowledge, challenge assumptions and seek socially just and environmentally sustainable solutions to global challenges.

2

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to cultural heritage of all people.

Museums are participatory and transparent, working in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

3

In partnership with their diverse societies, museums safeguard natural, cultural and social heritages, through collecting, documentation, research, preservation, exhibition and other forms of communication.

Using their material, financial, social and intellectual resources accountably and transparently, museums provide open platforms for dialogue, free learning, critical thinking and the empowerment of individuals and communities.

Acknowledging past and present, local and global societal conflicts and injustices as well as the urgent crises in nature, museums support equal rights and equal opportunities for all humans and a sustainable planetary future for all species.

4

Respecting the past, standing in the present and facing the future, museums promote a global sustainable development.

They are inclusive and participatory platforms for informal education and social gathering, for collecting, preserving, researching, interpreting and exhibiting to enhance understandings of the world.

With transparency and accountability, museums communicate knowledge accurately, care for communities, and, while nurturing imagination, curiosity and empathy, critical thinking and aesthetic vision, they inspire people to consider the challenges facing the world and their own role and responsibilities within it.

5

Museums are stewards of culture. Collecting, safeguarding, and making accessible artefacts and specimens, held in trust for society, they are transparent, inclusive and participatory institutions that enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.

Acknowledging past and present, local and global societal conflicts and injustices as well as the urgent crises in nature, museums provide gathering sites for study, mediation and critical thinking, and support platforms for empowerment, social cohesion, the long-term wellbeing of communities and the sustainability of local and global environments.

The MDPP deeply appreciates the engagement and enthusiasm of everyone who has contributed to this process.

We are - albeit regrettably not unanimously - extremely pleased with the result of the process and the shortlisted five proposals, and will be happy to support and carry forward whichever one of these is chosen by the Executive Board to be brought up for decision at the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM in September 2019.

The call for this EGA has gone out as planned, for September 7th, 2019 in Kyoto. The invitation has been distributed to ICOM members, and can be found with accompanying documents at https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019_EGA_0.Invitation_Letter_EN.pdf

Jette Sandahl,
Chair, MDPP,
July 3rd, 2019

Appendix 1. The eight core parameters that were set up as the framework for creating new alternative museum definitions in the MDPP report and recommendations and on the Museum Definition page of the ICOM website: <https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

- the museum definition should be clear on the purposes of museums, and on the value base from which museums meet their sustainable, ethical, political, social and cultural challenges and responsibilities in the 21st century
- the museum definition should retain—even if current terminology may vary—the unique, defining and essential unity in museums of the functions of collecting, preserving, documenting, researching, exhibiting and in other ways communicating the collections or other evidence of cultural heritage

- the museum definition should acknowledge the urgency of the crises in nature and the imperative to develop and implement sustainable solutions
- the museum definition should acknowledge and recognise with respect and consideration the vastly different world views, conditions and traditions under which museums work across the globe
- the museum definition should acknowledge and recognise with concern the legacies and continuous presence of deep societal inequalities and asymmetries of power and wealth—across the globe as well as nationally, regionally and locally

- the museum definition should express the unity of the expert role of museums with the collaboration and shared commitment, responsibility and authority in relation to their communities
- the museum definition should express the commitment of museums to be meaningful meeting places and open and diverse platforms for learning and exchange
- the museum definition should express the accountability and transparency under which museums are expected to acquire and use their material, financial, social and intellectual resources

Appendix 2. The method of shortlisting five proposals from the 269 submitted to the ICOM website for the EB's choice

1st round

The MDPP chose between two methods, proposed by the Chair, of starting the process of making a first selection and shortlist among the unexpected high number and the overwhelming richness and diversity of the proposals. One method would be that all committee members chose their three favourites, and that this group of proposals would form the point of departure for the next process of narrowing down the choice. The other method was that Jette Sandahl as chair and Afsin Altayli from the ICOM Secretariat together did a first screening and preselection of 25 different proposals to start the next process. This latter method was chosen for the sake of efficiency and because it might yield the most diverse set of choices in terms of both content and style. All committee members would be free to add to this list if one or more of their preferences had been left out.

Afsin Altayli and Jette Sandahl collated their first selection of 45, respectively 55 proposals, reduced these to 22 shared first choices, added an additional 12 back again to these for an extra check. 30 proposals were then selected and checked, one by one, against a list of six criteria, based on the eight parameters, which a museum definition proposal in some way or other should reflect and address, 1. purpose and values, 2. functions and methods, 3. nature and sustainability, 4. cultural differences and/or societal inequalities, 5. participation and democracy, 6. accountability and transparency. In some cases help was sought in this phase to improve the quality or clarity of the English translation of a given proposal.

This filtering process resulted in a selection of 15 proposals plus 7 proposals that were created by combining and crossing different proposals or parts of proposals which contained important content and/or lovely language, but were not in themselves a complete proposal according to our criteria. In some definitions deletions and additions were proposed. Where concepts were added, the broader, more complex 21st century concepts from the new definitions were used rather than the narrower 20th century phrasing of the current definition, such as 'transparent and accountable' rather than just 'non-for-profit', and terms like 'participatory' or 'democratic' rather than just 'open'. The proposals were selected for different strengths, different qualities and with an intention of including different points of view, culturally different frames of references, different cultural traditions, values and tone of voice.

2nd round

All MDPP committee members were then asked to each identify their five favorites, from among these 22 proposals, or by retrieving other definitions from the group of 269 proposals, and/or by creating their own new combinations.

They were asked to take into consideration that a clumsily written proposal could express important content and could be adapted and rephrased, but also that the precision, poetry and elegance of the phrasing for a museum definition to be able to convey very complex and compacted content should not be underestimated. Finally it was emphasized that all proposals depend on what is said between the lines as well as on what is explicitly stated. Committee members were also encouraged to suggest amendments to optimize the text of their choices.

This process yielded a pattern of two proposals receiving 6 preferences, two definitions receiving 4 preferences, one definition 3, and three receiving 2, and seven receiving 1 preference. One definition was suggested back from the 269, and three new proposals or combination proposals were submitted.

3rd round

Afsin Altayli and Jette Sandahl then collated, based on this, the next shortlist, composed of the two proposals with 6 preferences, the two with 4 preferences, the one retrieved, the three new proposals plus, in addition, one of the proposals with 2 preferences, as it represented a somewhat different point

of view or tone of voice which felt lacking in the selection. While the new proposals were left exactly as they were proposed, the proposals from the previous round were now further adapted to optimize their readability and fulfilling of the criteria.

Proposing that the two top rankings were considered in, all MDPP members were asked to identify their three favorites among the next seven, for a final shortlist of five. The result of this final round of selection was two definitions with 7 preferences, one with 6 preferences, one with 5 (plus a maybe), one with 5, one with 4, one with 2 (plus a maybe), one with 2, and one with 0.

The selection of the top five of these for submission to the EB was confirmed in a round of skype sessions, by a majority of 8 committee members, while 2 expressed their regrets and disagreement with the final result.