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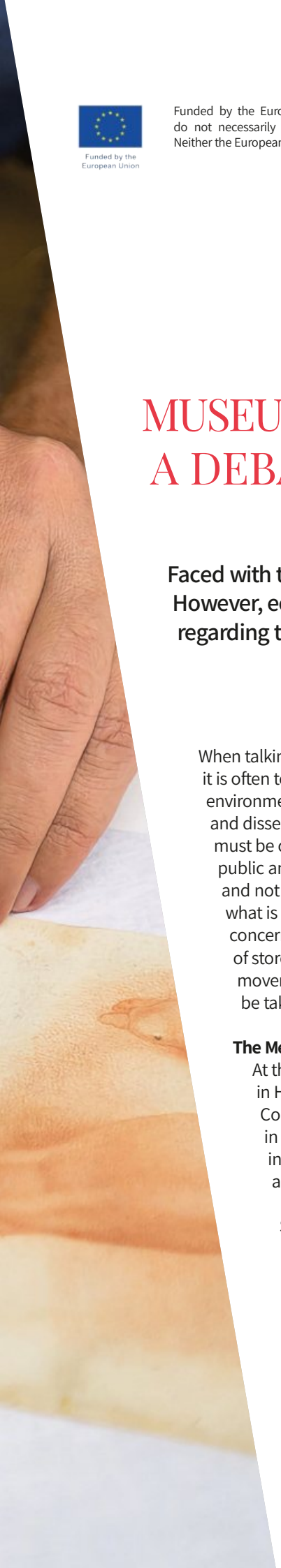

MUSEUMS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A DEBATE WITHOUT BORDER

Faced with the climate emergency, museums are adapting to reduce their footprint. However, eco-responsibility and sustainable development raise new issues regarding the design, organisation and management of museums.

When talking about sustainable development in museums, it is often tempting to evoke the antagonism of two missions: the environmental requirements, and the need to develop acquisition and dissemination policies for heritage collections. This debate must be carried by every museum professional, but also by the public and political authorities. It must also be wide-ranging and not only focus on the issue of exhibitions: although this is what is visible to the general public, they are not the only ones concerned by eco-responsibility… Transport, air-conditioning of storerooms, inertia of buildings, conservation, and even movement of the public are all elements that must be taken into account in their carbon footprint.

The Melbourne declaration

At the International Institute for Conservation (IIC) Congress in Hong Kong and the International Council of Museums — Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) conference in Melbourne in September 2014, professionals in conservation and heritage science discussed and endorsed the following statement:

Sustainability and Management: The issue of sustainability in museums is much broader than the discussion of environmental standards. It must be a key underlying criterion of future principles. Museums must seek to reduce their carbon footprint and environmental impact in order to mitigate climate change, by reducing their energy consumption and exploring alternative renewable energy sources. Preservation of collections should be achieved in a way that does not involve HVAC (Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning): passive methods, simple and easy-to-maintain technologies, air circulation, and low energy solutions should be considered. Risk management should be integrated into museum management processes.

Museum environment: The environmental requirements of collections and materials are complex, but the task of understanding and explaining these complexities falls to conservators and heritage scientists. Guidelines for environmental conditions for permanent display and storage must be achievable with local human, financial, and material resources.

Loans: There is a need to be transparent about the actual environmental conditions achieved in museums to ensure that realistic requirements are made for loan conditions. Most museums around the world do not have climate control systems in their exhibition and storage spaces. For international loans of works, a document would therefore be needed to inform the environmental conditions of display and storage of the collections of any

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museum. If some museums do not meet the parameters set by the guidelines, a certain amount of flexibility could be allowed in the implementation of these environmental conditions, notably through alternative strategies — the creation of microclimates adapted to the vulnerability of the work of art, for instance.

A necessary but complex adaptation

The recommendations of the Melbourne Declaration remain difficult to adopt. Museums operate with conservation standards established over 40 years ago; the context was very different then. Built and developed around a fossil fuel model, their growth was supported by public investment and justified by employment and economic benefits. Today, museums — as well as companies — need to assess their carbon footprint to design solutions for the immediate future. We need to recognise the work that has been achieved, and determine what remains to be done.

For example, a large French museum emits about 9,000 tonnes of CO_2 per year, the equivalent of the footprint of 800 citizens. As a factor of attraction and wealth, culture attracts French and foreign tourists and contributes 2.2% of the gross domestic product. The equation is simple: culture is highly profitable, but it is also a major source of pollution.

Reduce the carbon footprint of conservation, reduce energy consumption, and promote "zero energy" (to heat buildings of heritage interest or manage the climate of new reserves), rethink packaging methods and materials, and find substitutes for plastics wherever possible, evaluate and reduce the risks of pollution due to harmful substances and products, deal with the problem of waste of all kinds (in large and small quantities), rethink the issue of transport, set up "short circuits", integrate protective obligations into public contracts, etc. We also need to review exhibition policies: these temporary events generate income, knowledge, and attractiveness, but the large amount of scenographic material and the travel of the works in air-conditioned boxes devour a great deal of energy.

Questions of method

For some years now, some museums have been applying methods to reduce their carbon footprint, while others have been modifying their exhibition production approaches, and questioning the sometimes contradictory injunctions regarding their mission of opening up to as many people as possible. Museums have a responsibility to inform and convince their visitors and influence their perceptions and behaviour. How can this be integrated into the design of exhibitions and, more generally, into its cultural programming? The debate knows no boundaries: museums form a dense global network, structured for three quarters of a century by ICOM, whose influence could be decisive if efforts converge.

"Thinking about ecology in museums cannot and must not be done from the angle of renunciation," explained Valérie Donzeaud, deputy general administrator of the Musée d'Orsay. On the contrary, it is a cross-cutting issue that must permeate all the museum's thinking. I am working to put in place a strategy whose objective is to answer the question: how does a museum serve society? We therefore start from all the institution's missions to consider how they can respond to objectives in terms of ecology, but also gender equality, accessibility, and social justice. Sustainable development can only be relevant if it involves all the staff, and not if it is just another prerogative in the performance of everyone's duties."

While the issues of conservation of works, scenography, research, and education intersect in the organisation of museums, sustainable development is gradually becoming a new dimension to be taken into account in all fields of human activity. It poses new problems for the design, structure, and operation of public institutions. Science museums are already dealing with the climate. Natural history museums are talking about bio and cultural diversity. Fine arts museums are now allowing artists to express their doubts and commitments to environmental issues. Museums have thus begun to include their questions about the relationship between man and nature in their programming. It is not surprising, then, to see them invest in the same way in the issue of sustainable development.