

Small museums in socially deprived areas and identity.

Abstract

The study is an analysis of the potential functions and practices related with small museums situated within stigmatized communities. This paper explores which pedagogical practices can help empower residents living in such area, by critically assessing those adopted by Bir Mula Heritage, a small museum located in Bormla. Literature demonstrates that the small museum can provide different activities and learning opportunities which can help in one way or another to decrease the stigma with groups located outside the community, and help residents to build a more positive self-identity. With this literature in mind, this paper explores whether Bir Mula Heritage was capable of providing and facilitating inclusive museum pedagogy, and whether this helped to ameliorate the community's identity among the residents and outsiders, and how it went about to achieve these goals.

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Country: Malta

Keywords: museum, community, identity, pedagogy

Introduction

The study takes a close look at the functions of a small museum within a region labelled for some decades as socially deprived (Borg, 2012; CACRC, 2013: 18). In this research the term 'small museum' is based on Watson's (2009: 8) definition, where she defined such museums as "develop[ing] directly from the community they serve". Watson regards these museums as community-oriented, whose objective revolves round the return of investment in the locality in which they are ensconced. Their project is primarily aimed at breeding beneficial effects on its surrounding community. These museums do not belong to or depend on state or institutional funding, and they are free to act on these objectives. Museums that are non-state or non-institutional, face different challenges or limitations, challenges of resource self-sufficiency and self-sustainability, and their impact on the community around them is different. The objective of this study is to research whether the pedagogic effect took place and whether it succeeded to improve the community's identity.

The self-chosen decision of the museum under study aimed to bring heritage and culture to the community by functioning inside the community, led to different forms of participation and agencies that state-run or publicly funded institutions and their sub-delegates cannot afford or dare to tap into, as these may lead them into conflict with their sponsor. In some countries the State even delegated the running of national heritage and culture to heritage agencies, which in turn sub-delegated to publicly-funded non-government organisations through partnerships, with the intention of promoting the perception of a less hegemonic imagery to wider society.

Background

At the dawn of the 21st century, the community of Bormla found itself struggling to reduce the stigma attached to this region¹. As investment in regeneration, restoration and embellishments were not equally shared among the localities of the region, the community of Bormla was left out, lowering the already low self-esteem even if pride in the locality is still reflected during religious and collective events (Cutajar, 2014: 15-20, 43-51, 169-186). The small local museum also helped to raise this self-esteem as shall be pointed out.

The context at the time of the museum's foundation (1996-1997) was characterised by the decadent state of cultural heritage resources in the region and by a social infrastructure heavily depleted by the fast economic and political down-trend of the dockyard, once Malta's main industry. Another contributor was the unstable social context which produced a first generation of low income working class 'outsiders' who moved to the locality during the post-war reconstruction phase. The 1970s and 1980s housing projects continued in this fortified city, as even old houses which survived air-raid bombings, were demolished to make way for government apartment blocks. Cheaper rents also attracted low income earners and those living in poverty (Cutajar *et al.* 2013: 64).

Literature Review

¹ Before World War II the Bormla community thrived on services, trade, arts and crafts necessary to support maritime activities and the colonial Dockyard. The decolonisation of Malta, the dismantling of the Dockyard, de-industrialisation coupled with events as the demolishing of characteristic mediaeval houses to build social housing blocks, the low renting of private and government units, and the negative attention of the media contributed to a downward trend of the urban fabric and the daily economic activity.

The Museum: exclusive or inclusive

There exists no clear cut definition as to where social inclusivity or exclusivity starts or ends, and it is harder to define where cultural heritage comes into play. Individuals or groups who “suffer from multiple deprivation and are marginalised” are classified as socially excluded (Watson, 2009: 7). Museums were urged to act as vehicles for social inclusion especially among the community where they operate, but Sandell (Watson, 2009: 95, 110) envisioned museums more as agents for social equality and warned against museums becoming government means for political and ‘social engineering’. As safeguards of heritage in all their forms, museums attempted to collect and to preserve both the tangible and to a lesser extent the intangible heritage of mankind. What has inestimable value and is considered as a most precious collectible to an individual is nonsense and garbage to another.

The same is applicable to collections or museums bound by an agenda or a specific theme. Museums selected what went into an exhibit and on display, where it was placed, and what was said about it (Vergo, 2006: 44). Interpretation of heritage may vary between persons, communities and nations, but the last word remained to the interpretation of the museum itself or mainly its curator. Consequently any interpretation, exhibition, display or narrative was subjected to pressures, interests and politics, of its curator or management, of the museum as a theme-oriented idea and mainly to crucial factors or institutions which supported the museum’s functions, existence and sustainability, especially economic sustainability (Vergo, 2006: 44). In spite of all the economic and political factors, Exell (Golding and Modest, 2013: 140) states that the museum plays a key role as a learning tool, but noted that there was an evolution in museum education which shifted the museum’s image from an exclusive and uncontested authority to an inclusive and sanctioning place, which consequently acted as a unifying space for individuals within a local community or for the community with other communities.

Museums: social, political or pedagogic

Though heritage was envisaged as a unifying factor, politics manipulated cultural heritage to stress either similarities or diversities thus creating imagined, related or separated communities to accommodate their political interests (During, 2011: 17-18). The role of

museums as means for combating social exclusion was recognised by various entities at international, national and regional levels. Among these the European Commission (EC, 2005: 7) was at the forefront to recommend that “[e]ducation policies should provide an important mechanism for celebrating a variety of cultures and introducing children and young people to a range of cultural services and activities.” In spite of the EC’s pressure on national governments, national museums even at regional level remained reluctant and missed the chance to qualify as role models of social inclusive practices for various reasons (GLLAM, 2000: 5). The struggle for survival and superiority among groups was always marked by the attempt to categorize identities into hierarchies, ethnicities and opposed political factions, creating inequalities and a taxonomy which allowed or restricted access to various resources (Even-Zohar, 2011: 34) amongst which were cultural resources in museums. Howard (2003: 165) explained that since society could present us with various communities, or imagined communities, at neighbourhood, town or national level, the legal and publicly funded authority administering national/state heritage was reluctant and strongly adverse to any community claiming an equal share of identity in national museums.

National identities were constructed through the grouping of a variety of horizontal identities existing along a defined geographic territory, which had similar and diverse facets, but hegemonies placed them in a vertical hierarchy, which created differences based on structures and aptitudes of the large institutions (Marcoevic, 1996: 31-32). This led to disparities, divisions and barriers between different groups of society, which in turn led to the social exclusion of individuals and groups since the individuals or groups tend to accept their perceived exclusion within the social order as projected by the hegemony (Bourdieu, 1984: 471). Hegemonic groups applied the semiotics of collective identity to justify their group’s claims and status, both as a dominant group and a separate community, while at the same time reaffirming the exclusion of others (Even-Zohar, 2011: 34) and setting collective boundaries which limited resource reachability (Bourdieu, 1984: 480-481). Through the interpretation of heritage objects, museums reinforce or deteriorate the relationships which diversities project among a community or the communities which compose, enrich and strengthen a nation’s identity, even when values were not similarly shared (Marcoevic, 1996: 32). As cultural heritage articulated diverse meanings to museum visitors deriving from different social backgrounds, museum pedagogy had a crucial role alongside with inclusive new museum practices: amongst which stood the practice of a negotiated and mediated

interpretation of museum content (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010: 20, 32, 36, 46-47; Vella, 2013: 11).

Case studies show that museums are not simply a formal education institution but likewise serve as places that offer people with the opportunity to socialise and to interact with other cultures, help improve child-parent relationships, local quality of life and social skills, increased interest in education and further learning, raised self-esteem among teenagers that considered themselves as school failures, added value to school curricula, and among other, contributed to crime reduction (GLLAM, 2000: 36, 39, 40, 43). Apart from the material benefits other benefits were identified. Kelly points out that museums had to raise the “appreciation of place and culture, community pride”, awareness about heritage preservation and learning opportunities for all ages, the enhancement of individual social interaction with visitors and other community members, and attracting tourism which in turn opened up opportunities for further employment and entrepreneurship (Kelly, 2006: 4). Most of the pedagogic attempts in society tend to be a top-down indoctrination designed by the few in order to perpetrate a ‘defined culture’, and those who did not open up to and embrace the culture dictated and accepted by the structure as ‘education’, became or remained socially excluded (Howard, 2003: 47). As Bourdieu argues, social exclusion resulted when social divisions devised by the few were accepted by people as the unchangeable social image of the world around them (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]: 471). Through the cultural heritage displayed in museums people become cognizant of their roots in time and space, their past and existing relationships, and of various other fundamental factors which construct a society, with its shared and diverse facets, and which construct individual and community identities (Marcoevic, 1996: 32). This therefore shows a contrast between what small independent local museums and public museums transmit to their visitors. According to Macdonald (2003: 5) national public museums endeavour to convince their audience and cultivate in their publics the sense that they all belong to one common and unifying national identity, different only from other nations but not within themselves. Macdonald (2006: 3) argues that exclusivity, marginalisation and low representation in public museums resulted from their inadequacy to address and actually recognise the ‘voice’ of non-national identities.

New museology emphasizes on education and social inclusion: giving more value therefore to the presentation of cultural heritage rather than the protection and conservation of the buildings that house it (Howard, 2003: 77). New museology emphasizes that museums should do their utmost to focus on museum pedagogy and apply factors of social inclusivity in museum practices (Howard, 2003: 77; Vella, 2013: 7). The EC (EC, 2005: 3-4,7) recognised and recommended that national policy, including national cultural policy, could no longer sacrifice and omit human and social issues to prioritize the political and the financial. It called for a concerted effort by all stakeholders in cultural and national resources to create tangible opportunities for social inclusion of persons and communities most at risk of social exclusion (EC, 2005: 3-4, 7). Dodd and Sandell (2001: 26, 32, 72) argue that museums contribute to an exploration and an affirmation of a sense of identity both for the individual and the groups at risk of exclusion or marginalisation, but this was only envisaged in museums “provided with the resources for audience development.”

It is through the shared and common meanings, context, experiences, discourse and values that a community can come together and act socially and politically, and which consequently facilitates initiatives for local development (Ruiz Ballesteros and Hernández Ramírez, 2007: 677-678). It was noted that most of the identity-building process occurred not before or during a museum visit, but after a museum visit experience when visitors were evaluating and interpreting their own actions and experience, and the reason for doing so (Falk, 2009: 153-154). Since studies of visitor behaviour in museums also departed from didactic factors, rather than social, interactive, behavioural and experiential facets of the museums visit (vom Lehn *et al.* 2001: 190), it becomes even more important to concentrate on the pedagogic role of museums as these may address community needs and in a method that the same community, especially the socially excluded, may take ownership of. Community identity is largely constructed by and mediated through local heritage as identities help people to “act, create and communicate”, and through their “symbolic, open, political and dynamic” nature, (identities) “guide and stimulate [society] as catalysts of social action” (Ruiz Ballesteros and Hernández Ramírez, 2007: 677). Marcoevic (1996: 33-36) argues that museum training helps identity building communities not solely on the micro level but also on the macro level.

The attempt to allocate space and place to community heritage and therefore community identity at national museums may seem as a ‘patronizing’ and ‘dominating’ attempt by the dominant community (Howard, 2003: 48). The perception of museums as exclusionary could only be eliminated by the museum staff themselves, in their practices especially those dealing with museum narratives: not applied in the larger museums where the dominant institutions dictate cultural practices (Coffee, 2008: 271). Resistance to the interpretative role and its practice was strong in museums as measures for social inclusion were considered a threat to the status quo of museum professionals conveniently employed in specific fields and in a defined and structured exclusive society (Ross, 2004: 95). Formal education systems prevented the working class from acquiring a passport into the cultural sphere, as it continued to design and redesign methods of qualification to a social status within a pre-defined social order and distinction (Swartz, 1997: 200-204). Museums among other large institutions and service providers needed to adapt and reform their practices and become less exclusive, by becoming more receptive to the requirements of their community as customers not solely of those who have the ‘symbolic competence’ and the Bourdieusian ‘cultural capital’ to access them (Ross, 2004: 100). In this discourse Bourdieu also recognised that elements from the working class did their utmost to penetrate and to access the higher social strata and on succeeding they continued their struggle upwards, irrelevant of their resources and capital, even if they did not become part of the dominant group (Swartz, 1997: 171-172, 175).

Museums: Size matters!

Kelly (2006: 2-3) argued that small regional and community museums contributed to social capital much more than the larger national museums which were disconnected from the community element. Small museums gave space and place in their narratives, texts, exhibitions and displays to voices previously excluded and absent from the large institutional museums (Cameron, 2003: 15; Vella, 2013: 12-13). Nonetheless the advantage of small local museums according to Bourdieu (1989: 16) is that “the closer the agents, groups or institutions which are situated within this space, the more common properties they have” in this case, with the community under discussion. Kelly (2006: 4) also mentioned that the community museum had a major challenge as it transmitted itself as serving either the local indigenous community and therefore being exclusive, or else being exclusive of the local

community. Certain small museums decided to lower the barrier to social exclusion by offering free admission or reduced prices to senior citizens, young visitors, and persons on social benefits, while promoting cultural activities with the disabled, minorities, low income earners and the disadvantaged in their local area, thus opening up participation more and giving access to those excluded by larger museums on the basis of charges and fees unreachable by the socially deprived (EC, 2005: 3, 5). Cultural inclusion in socially excluded areas was also promoted through cultural projects in the specific localities undergoing efforts and projects for regeneration (EC, 2005: 5). This has not been the case in Malta.

The European perspective

The European Commission underlines (EC, 2005: 1-2) that self-esteem and identity were enhanced wherever projects encouraged participation in cultural activities. These projects help individuals, especially disadvantaged youths, disabled persons, minorities and groups at risk of social exclusion, to participate in the labour market, the creative industries and other sectors of society. The EC (EC, 2005: 3) recognised that the three groups most exposed to cultural exclusion were (i) the “economically disadvantaged”, who lack both “financial and social means to access cultural activities” due to their long-term unemployment or dependence on social benefits, refugees and immigrants, and the disabled. In Denmark, local heritage is a factor which contributed to decrease social exclusion and increase social integration among the elderly (EC, 2005: 2). The EC recognised that “inclusion in cultural activities is often an important stepping stone preventing or addressing social exclusion” (EC, 2005: 2). The drawing of geographical boundaries round communities was similarly identified as a factor which contributed to spatial deprivation, causing particular communities to suffer various degrees of deprivation, disadvantages, poverty, unavailability of essential resources, lack of opportunities for social participation, integration and having a social power role in either organisations or community groups (Room , 1995: 241-242, 243).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach set to inquire the past successes and failures of an independent small local museum situated within a community. The study examined what goals the founders had in mind at its conception, followed by a retro-spective observation and retro-analysis of the practices adopted by the curator and management of the same museum, namely Bir Mula Heritage (BMH), at Bormla, Malta, through the years, and compare or contrast them with the main points which emerged from the literature. This section will analyse the type of events and activities that the museum formally or informally engaged in, and how it impacted on the local community, whether the presence of the museum had an effect on the image of the locality itself and the perceptions of both the local community visitors and the non-local community visitors. This could shed light on who were the intended beneficiaries and the actual participants. The analysis of visitor feedback will be considered to find out whether the museum succeeded or failed in its set mission and objectives.

The approach used to analyse the museum's practices and impacts vis-a-vis the community's identity and social deprivation was a content analysis of various sources referring to the museum. These included a read through the comments left by visitors on the Visitor's Book at the end of their visit to the museum, comments left on tourism / travel blogs and websites as TripAdvisor, and on social media as Facebook. The method included an analysis of how BMH museum was presented on tourism and travel websites and guidebooks promoting the Maltese Islands in various languages to the prospective visitor. The presence of BMH on guidebooks and websites could be a measure of how the small museum managed to succeed or fail in its mission to promote the locality and its heritage equally with other tourism destinations around Malta. Articles and reports from the printed media were referred to. It was not possible to go through the audio and visual media as television and radio transmitted programmes, DVDs within which BMH featured, but a note of the programmes, series, news and documentaries in which BMH figured was noted. The keyword with which the search was carried on the web was that of Bir Mula Heritage as the name of the museum indicates, though some other derivatives (ex. Birmula) were at times used by those leaving comments.

The study looked into the museum's permanent and temporary exhibitions, formal and informal pedagogic activities enacted, interpretation, display tags, and narratives within the venue. Other sources tapped into were the publications which mentioned BMH museum and which referred to it as either a cultural tourist attraction, as a local heritage museum or otherwise as a social asset to the community.

History

Bir Mula Heritage museum is situated in an urban region labelled as having a high component of socially deprived persons and families (Borg, 2012; CACRC, 2013: 18). The museum was founded in 1997. This museum as an independent, private, grassroots museum had permitted its curator to set up the museum content to reflect the community's feeling of their own identity and meanings. Though BMH was not backed up by any state or other institutional funding, the museum managed to survive and remain active when national and large institutional museums were facing a downward trend in both visitor volumes and events attendance. In spite of its size and location, the museum at Bormla managed to keep attracting visitors from both the Maltese Islands and abroad. A 'Visitors Book' was kept to provide management with a better picture of the visitors' countries of origin, and what they had to say about the museum. Some reactions and comments were available on internet sites aimed for tourist feedback. The internet was found as another resource for visitor feedback. Visitors left comments on the museum's website and the activity archive where posters and material dealing with events and activities were stored.

A special eye was kept to the material relevant to pedagogic events and activities, social activities organised by the museum both inside and outside (as festivals, and participation in group activities). Activities in cooperation with other entities as the academia and local awareness groups, tours, and media meant projects. The museum curator held a list of entities and sources to which it provided information about the museum, its context, the community and the locality itself. Other source were the visitors themselves and their feedback.

Findings and Discussion

An achieved dream, vision and mission

Bir Mula Heritage (BMH) museum² is an example of Watson's (2009: 8) definition of a small local museum. Its founding document specified clear objectives to promote the local historical and cultural heritage "with special emphasis being given to the people."³ BMH intended to provide space and place for activities which promote local heritage and aid with community development. Its vision complemented Sandell's (Watson, 2009: 95, 100) recommendation that museums can become agents for social change and social equality. Before enterprising in public activities at the venue, BMH started by showcasing artefacts and organising the historic narrative. Simultaneously it involved itself outside the museum by providing heritage awareness sessions for schools, site visits and school-based projects. Once the main activity hall was restored the first public activities came along. BMH helped exhibitors to put up exhibition in a way they themselves preferred, and, at no charge. BMH's practices contrast with Vergo's (2006: 44) statement that museums dictate what was exhibited, where placed and what was said about the exhibits. The lack of restrictions and pressures helped to promote the BMH initiative, while increasing the self-esteem of exhibitors.

Promoting the museum

The initial promotion of the museum happened through word of mouth as exhibitors and visitors, who discovered the museum by chance or became aware of it, started encouraging friends to visit. The free-entrance policy to members of the local community, promoted the museum as a place which evokes local pride and identity with all visitors and offers a particular experience of place (McManus, 2006: 6). Visitors' response was encouraging and most expressed awe and appreciation of the architectural features and the local heritage they became aware of or discovered through the museum. In agreement with Golding and Modest (2013: 140), from the start, BMH played a key role as a learning tool and as a space which brings together individuals and communities. Visitors, local and foreign, acted as promoters of the initiative both on a national scale and internationally.

² Bir Mula Heritage museum was created in 1997 by the Vella family who lived in Bormla, Malta.

³ Taken from the *Memorandum* of BMH.

An analysis of the comments on the Visitor's Book indicated that most of the visitors do not only register their presence by inserting name and date, but add comments about the museum experience. The majority feel pride and thankful for the experience given by the museum and/or the guided tour of the same house. Quite a number of them commented that the visit made them learn and more knowledgeable of the heritage possessed by both Malta and the local community.

Pedagogy through architecture

Apart from oral promotion of the museum, visitors comments on the Visitor's Book and observation show that the house's architectural features are a source of pedagogy⁴. The house exemplifies how an ancient rural dwelling developed into an urban *palazzino*, designed to assist a certain household hierarchy, where the noble and his family were supreme, assisted by a trustworthy butler and a team of servants under his control. The house included a small chapel space with openings once more determining the hierarchical structure within its surrounding society, where the church came second to nobility, and servants were at the base. Apart from the entire building structure, artefacts, a lookout post and several graffitos scratched onto the stones show a long established connection to maritime activity.

The stones, architecture and design of the house, all provoke interaction between visitor and museum staff. Some visitors ask the museum staff for information, while other visitors are themselves a source of learning for the museum. This kind of interaction helped the museum to bring together its interpretation of the building, structure development and uses, but most of all helped in sharing the information learnt with other visitors, who apart from the tangible heritage want to know more about the intangible.

Urban legend

Other valuable information and learning for both museum and visitors were urban legends on the house. From the museum's first days, appeared among visitors those who

⁴ Profs. Denis De Lucca, an established architecture academic, currently Director of the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta on a personal visit to the museum in 1999. At that time he formed part of the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering of the same University. He commented that the house stands witness to the development of Maltese houses through the ages. He also attributed the lower level to the Arab era.

recounted childhood experiences of the house or the neighbourhood. As most either lived or played in the house during their childhood or frequented relatives residing therein, the information provided and the first-hand experiences led the museum owners to take great care on restoration methods and techniques used. Information, experiences and legends on the house did not only come from Bormla, but even from migrants to other Maltese towns and villages, and from distant places as Canada, the United States of America and Australia, where previous residents and neighbours emigrated. Their urban legends defined the house as a place full of history and mystery, which added to tangible features started to provide a basis for the intangible and unwritten history of the house.

Verification of legends

Most urban legends called for further investigation into historiography, cartography, and other documentation, leading the museum on a course for further learning, to compare and verify legends against facts. Verification proved to be a difficult task and various questions were encountered as legends without facts were not easy to present to the visitor. This entailed research into historiography, cartography⁵, archives, and old photography, archaeological excavation reports and finds made in the past. Information which was unavailable through publications and written sources resulted from artefacts recovered on-site and graffitos. Artefacts found *in situ* were a critical source of information to construct a basis for history and an approximate dating of the site and its development. The on-site finds, together with finds recorded on 19th century reports, and other finds showed to museum staff by members of the public, gave the museum a strong foundation on which to base interpretation and narratives. Consequently these experiences led both the museum curator⁶ and other academics to revisit historiography about the locality as the discoveries at BMH showed that historiographers excluded most of the true history of Bormla and its community on purpose and discriminatorily as they required the authorisation for publication by institutional powers.

⁵ The most available cartography collection for the Maltese Islands comes with the Great Siege of 1565. Only a few show details before that date.

⁶ The curator led various research projects to unveil the cultural heritage and history of Bormla, its community and its environs. Some of these were published on local publications in Maltese between 1996 and 2006, while papers mainly in English were presented at local, regional, national and international conferences, symposia and fora.

House of Conspiracies

An interesting urban legend, new to the museum staff, was discovered through a journalist's investigation among the neighbourhood and ex-community members⁷. They narrated how the house was known as 'the house of conspiracies': a title attributed to a number of historic events, where the house was protagonist for secret or historically important meetings. Though the journalist was not a visitor himself to the museum prior to his investigation, his contact and interaction with the neighbourhood led to the discovery of a legend which could not be easily discovered by the museum as the source itself was not a visitor though a neighbour who frequented the house decades before and who then could not leave her home. Such oral histories provide what history books cannot tell, but stones though speechless may tell a story too.

Written in stone

If urban legends and historiographies could not concur, graffitos on stones and artefacts found *in situ* could witness for them. The graffitos were a factor of constant consultation and learning both for the museum and successively its visitors. Researchers on maritime vessels, mysterious symbols, ancient script, and other graffitos were invited to give an opinion. Mysterious graffitos on the stones⁸ led the museum to ask for professional and academic advice, and therefore opening for wider interpretation. Visitors listen carefully and ask about meanings behind graffitos⁹. Though the museum constructed its own interpretation based on research and consultation, visitors are allowed to interact and share their own interpretation and provide for further learning. The interaction, opinion sharing and dialogue between museum staff and visitors provided for a negotiated and accepted narrative about the house.

Publications and the media

⁷ The investigative journalist who reported and published such oral history was Charles Mizzi, a noted contributor to the Maltese Sunday newspapers published by the Union Press, and, a presenter and investigative journalist with national broadcasting stations.

⁸ An ancient script on the stones was identified as Paleo-Hebrew. The identification and deciphering of letters came through contacts and especially the support of Profs. Tzadaki, Israel. The other script being letters on their own was deciphered as a possibility of either Phoenician or Neo Punic.

⁹ Other graffitoes on the stones may depict events in history. Among these are 14th to 19th century maritime vessels, coat of arms of Grand Masters, Templar Knight crosses, navigation symbols and unique is an Ottoman Janissary. At times the museum curator required external help to substantiate and determine what a graffito depicted and how it ended up there. The proof that Ottoman Janissaries occupied the house in 1565 came from a diary of a Knight of the Order of St. John (Balbi de Coreggio, (1568) edn 2005: 96-97) while the design of the Ottoman Janissary was confirmed by contacts in Turkey. It shows that whoever did it was very familiar with the uniform and accessories used by the 1565 Ottoman Janissaries.

In the absence of tourist-oriented promotional publications which could raise cultural heritage awareness among the community and beyond, the museum took initiatives and published tourism-related material and information about a number of historic sites¹⁰. The launch made by the then Minister for Tourism, attended by an ex-President of Malta and covered by the media, raised further awareness about the museum and local cultural heritage. Consequently the Malta Tourism Authority offered to promote the museum on its official website. These events led a number of journalists to visit the museum and write features on it, and which sequentially made readers visit. The brochure, features on printed, audio and visual media, and news coverage started counteracting the negative local image and stigma produced earlier. Through BMH, the locality started to appear among other tourist attractions. BMH's practices mirrored Kelly's (2006: 4) argument that museums had to raise appreciation of place and of culture, to instil community pride, raise awareness about local heritage and offer opportunities for learning to all, to enhance social interaction, and attract tourism to create further opportunities.

Inclusive museum

With its practices and mission in mind, BMH offered NGOs and social groups the opportunity of a meeting place. The local residents' association which later became regional¹¹ (Abela, 2005; Attard, 2004; Fenech, 2006) was one of the groups which dawned at the museum. This is an example of what Ruiz Ballesteros and Hernandez Ramirez (2007: 677-678) explain as shared and common factors which help a community to come together, act socially and politically, and consequently facilitate initiatives for local development. Though participants at such meetings were not visiting the museum on purpose, their visit prior to or after meetings, aided the identity-building process (Falk, 2009: 153-154).

BMH projected itself as an inclusive museum, with narratives and information tags being constructed on information provided by donors and visitors. The information was then verified against historiography, which sources, at times indicated that historiographers were

¹⁰ The Bormla brochure map was published in the year 2000. In 2014, BMH published the first ever set of postcards featuring Bormla since those by Geo Fürst published a century before.

¹¹ Started as the Cospicua (Bormla) Residents Association, it became known as *ARC – Assoċjazzjoni tar-Residenti tal-Cottonera* (Cottonera Residents' Association) when it started to serve on a regional scale.

biased or deliberately exclusive. Such practices gave donors and visitors a sense of pride and identity as they contributed to increase the museum's knowledge. Similarly the museum gave space to activities initiated by community groups as the local foundation for disabled persons¹². As beneficiaries their activity brought together the philanthropic, the charitable and heritage aspects, as disabled persons themselves supported by relatives and friends set up a live Nativity scene and play at the museum for a number of years. It permitted disabled persons and their families to interact with the public and gain self-esteem as visitors expressed recognition and appreciation of their talent.

These initiatives were possible since the museum was detached from any form of structural pressures and dependencies: a practice which national and institutional museums may not achieve due to their nature and subjectivity (Coffee, 2008: 271). BMH promoted social inclusion and equality by collaborating with pressure groups and national agencies concerned with social and community work.¹³ These collaborations contributed to what Dodd and Sandell (2001: 26, 32, 72) saw as identity affirmation of individuals and groups at risk of social exclusion.

Some of the exhibitors and emerging artists benefitting from the free-of-charge space offer were unemployed youths, single parents, elderly, ex-convicts and ex-abusers, disabled persons, and a local handicrafts and artisan cooperative which had no premises where to exhibit. The museum, later used by more established Maltese and foreign artists to collect funds for charitable purposes, allowed 'socially deprived' exhibitors to feel proud and have a higher self-esteem of themselves since they felt that they were exhibiting at par with established national and international artists. Analogous activities permitted the local community to interact with the traditional 'exclusive' museum community, and feel included at the museum's cultural events. This was impossible at state- or other privately-owned galleries since exhibiting and participating involved paying exorbitant prices, which were not affordable to most artists and visitors. The functions of BMH validate McManus's (2006: 2) argument that most of the activities of a museum are not-for-profit but for the community's benefit.

¹² Known as the *Fondazzjoni Bormliża għal Persuni b'Diżabilita'*.

¹³ These included collaboration in projects with *DarBina*: a national community development agency.

BMH conducted cultural activities of a didactic nature and hence the pedagogic nature. The museum, apart from providing education through the object- or history-related, looked at interactive and personal pedagogy. Educational activities at BMH included all ages. From the initial schools outreach, the museum ventured further and designed certified vocational and specialisation courses for licenced tourist-guides to equip them with information about the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the community. As a visitor attraction, the museum plays an important role, as a tourist attraction and a tool for promoting tourism within the locality, and as a means to revive economic activity and investment (McManus, 2006: 8).

BMH contributed information, consultancy and assistance to publishers and film-makers promoting the locality or the region. The museum's content served students, self-taught researchers and professionals to delve deeper into their studies. It became a reference spot to many from different countries on several themes compatible with museum studies. Through its exhibitions and educational programmes BMH departed from a 'function based model' concentrating on collections, to a 'communicative' branch of museology (van Mensch, 2004: 4).

Formal education curricula and public museums do not leave space and place for sub-dominant groups in a community (Howard 2003: 47). Small museums have the chance to experiment and come up with own methods and approaches as to how they meet the local community's needs, and successively reach out to sub-groups within the same community. This was facilitated since the museum, as a social space, presented the community with shared commonalities (Bourdieu, 1989: 16). The small independent museum found it easier to contribute to the breakdown of the museum historic imaginary as an elitist institution by promoting active participation of other strata of society. It could reach out to the socially excluded by placing its functions and operations at the heart of the community and by building a personal knowledge base of this community. It chose activities which can attract the socially excluded by putting up exhibitions associated with their preferred local religious

and sports events or with arts and crafts which appeal to the community. While they visit the exhibition, they start seeing historical artefacts and interacting with them.

Negotiated Identity

Most of the interpretation and narratives on exhibit information tags were constructed through interaction between visitors and curator or museum staff. Alongside research, most of the house's history and museum interpretation was, as mentioned before, built through a negotiated process with visitors and the community. The BMH practice detaches the image of the museum from that of a traditional exclusive and elitist museum as described by Howard (2003: 47), Macdonald (2006: 3) and Bourdieu (1984[1979]: 471). The opportunity for learning and for building self-esteem created supported what Marcoevic (1996: 32) and Kelly (2006: 4) perceived as the building of identity for the individual and the community.

The museum's collection, originally a family collection, was enriched with donations made by people from the locality and elsewhere who felt that their objects were fit to form part of the museum's collection rather than end up discarded. The artefacts, most of which new to the curator's knowledge, led to a negotiated form of interpretation and presentation, being they utensils, tools, photographs or other musealia¹⁴. Information regarding old photographs was accumulated due to the contribution of visitors who identified people and the events caught on camera. This permitted the museum to gather information about people, places and events which were not recorded in historiographies elsewhere. Every interaction between museum staff and visitors is a source of oral history, which preferably goes recorded, preserved and transmitted for future generations. Although the resources of the museum are limited and do not permit whatever is desired to happen instantly, it started collecting an oral history archive¹⁵.

¹⁴ In the BMH museum context and sense, the definition of musealia extended to items which usually are discarded as they are no longer useful to the user. These musealia are mostly items which do not qualify as musealia to larger state museums or traditional museums. Yet BMH museum collects them since they are not repeatable or are becoming rare, as for example, tickets, receipts, craft-tools, recipients, and other items which are abundant during an era and then end up as obsolete items.

¹⁵ The oral history archive at BMH started in the year 2013.

BMH engaged in activities which aimed to attract the socially excluded. One of these was the annual Traditional Passover Table¹⁶ and art exhibition during Holy Week and Easter Sunday. While the Table served to attract visitors who would not opt to visit a museum, the trail planned within the museum served as an opportunity to take them along the exhibits' area. While visitors were there they started seeing the historical artefacts and interacting with them.

The museum under research was avant-garde and a progressive fore-runner applying Latin concepts of new museology in a Mediterranean context. It sparked a struggle for the “creation of better conditions for local communities to take control of their future by means of work with heritage” (Dos Santos, 2010: 5). Through pedagogic activities BMH promoted interaction among community members, among sub-groups and with other communities national and international (Golding and Modest, 2013: 140). Most of this activity was probably propelled by the fact that the museum's activity was not primarily concerned about profit but about the social aspect of giving voice, place and space to those who do not own them in the so-called normal day-to-day society and who become in multiple ways socially excluded and deprived (Watson, 2009: 7). This could not be achieved by public and institutionally funded museums bounded by political agendas, structures, allegiances and financial dependency budgeted by central authorities or institutional funding sources tapped through state agencies, be they political, religious, institutional, non-governmental or even at times corporate (Vergo, 2006: 44).

Alternatively, it might be unethical and prone to conflict, if national museums and institutional were to attempt to interpret a local community identity, as every identity is fabricated. BMH could not access funding once it was registered as a private liability company, even if a not-for-profit initiative. Whilst Maltese legislation did not cater for such socially-oriented enterprise, funding was mainly addressed to NGOs, quangos, state and institutional entities. National legislation and conditions to access EU funds addressed to the cultural sector, as museums, with its bureaucratic procedures complicated the existence of the small museum and limited its socially-oriented activities. Such measures created barriers

¹⁶ Locally know as *Mejda ta' l-Appostli* a Last Supper display which at BMH is based on the Essene Passover tradition.

which hindered to small museums what the EC (EC, 2005: 7) recommended to national museums, in order to become role models for social inclusivity (GLLAM, 2000: 5). All the above is witness to the hardships met by BMH and the great efforts that a small museum has to make to market itself as a visitor attraction, while at the same time trying to sustain its chief community-oriented functions (MacManus, 2006: 3). Its functions and day-to-day operations depended mainly on a handful of unpaid volunteers, on family-earnings and donations made by visitors. The free-entrance policy forced a decrease on opening hours. In contrast the museum, was obliged to pay high professional accounting and auditing fees, charges and taxes imposed across the board by national legislation and regulation, apart from ever-rising utility bills, which by large exceeded the so-called profits.

These factors could be translated into what Even-Zohar (2011: 34) and Bourdieu (1984: 480-481) termed as the hegemonic ways of restricting and limiting access to different resources and henceforth an institutionalised practice of exclusion from existing and available resources. Consequently the deprivation forced on the museum could have reflected on the local community in various ways and increased the social deprivation level, confirming that national institutions strongly opposed that the ‘others’ could ever claim and obtain an equality status within museums and national culture (Howard, 2003: 165). State practices confirmed what Marcoevic (1996: 31-32) and Bourdieu (Swartz, 1997: 86) noted as a rigid structural hierarchy imposed by the hegemony with no tolerance for lateral equal identities. This was in breach of the EC’s recommendation about prioritizing social inclusion practices to political and economic measures (EC, 2005: 3-4, 7). Nevertheless, the free-entrance to local community members policy adopted by BMH, served to promote the museum as a place that evokes local pride and identity with all visitors, and offer a particular experience of the place (McManus 2006: 6).

In spite of various setbacks and limited resources, BMH did not retract from its primary objectives, but constantly negotiated and mediated interpretation of the museum content (Desvallées and Mairesse, 2010: 20, 32, 36, 46-47; Vella, 2013: 11). Oral histories were analysed against documented facts from various historiographies, and in depth research, keeping in mind that historiographers past and present could have been subjective rather than objective and unbiased. The museum kept in mind that even the local community’s interpretation could be subjected to biases and subjectivities. Within BMH artefacts and other primary and secondary sources added to the received interpretation.

Among outdoor activities, the museum started off with a cycle of cultural and tourism-oriented festivals, first in collaboration with University students, artists and crafts-persons, and for three consecutive years for the local council and then again on its own. Outdoor festivals were used as a tool to encourage individuals and community groups to exhibit publicly their talents, crafts and arts to the general public including tourists who would in turn be invited to join guided tours of heritage sites round the locality¹⁷. Festivals were intended to entertain and simultaneously to educate while giving an opportunity for interacting with other people and communities. A determinant and impacting factor was the limitation of funds available.

An innovative activity that the museum ventured into with success was the organisation of activities tied to dark tourism. The museum, as a pioneer of dark tourism in Malta, organised Ghost Tours and Mystery Walks. These activities mostly attracted outsiders as they enjoyed the thrill and experience, in which Bormla and its neighbouring towns were highlighted. Positive comments on these experiences were frequent after most of the activities and many participants posted photographs they took on social media sites, promoting both the localities' heritage and the museum's initiative. The ghost tours as some BMH initiatives were years later imitated by the national heritage agency.

When the museum decided to open up its own website, the radius of foreign visitors grew. Innovative services, as the delivery of sessions on Japanese history, language and culture by a Japanese tutor, were promoted. This triggered the University to initiate studies of Japanese in the following academic year. BMH served as a platform for researchers and scholars, amongst which art historians, archaeologists, linguists, genealogists, academics and self-taught researchers. Later some of the artists and lecturers were called upon by third parties for a repeat session at other venues. All these activities (GLLAM, 2000: 36, 39, 40,

¹⁷In 2008, BMH and the Youths for the Environment (University of Malta) held the first *Art, Crafts and Cuisine* Festival on the street of the venue. Between 2009 - 2012, BMH dedicated its resources to organise festivals for the Local Council as the *Cospicua Bastions Festival*, the *Bormla Culturefest*, and the *DockFest*. In 2014, BMH organised the World Tourism Day events involving locals and national groups as the Malta Tourism Society, the Malta Union of Tourist Guides, the University of Malta, students, artists and crafts-persons. The event was visited by the Minister for Tourism and covered by the media, and supported by the UN-WTO and the Malta Tourism Authority.

43) gave visitors the opportunity to socialise and interact with lecturers: an opportunity which would not have realised since most found it difficult to visit University and interact formally with scholars in an informal community setting. Such practices contributed to the construction of individual and community identity (Marcoevic, 1996: 32), pride, self-esteem and heritage awareness (Kelly, 2006: 4) among other. The museum's activities offered the community opportunities which reflected and reinvested in the community. As McManus (2006: 2, 8) maintains, in spite of the continuous discord between serving the community, the visitor and income interests, museums as BMH, have a major responsibility to champion local identity, by strongly standing sincerely for the community, its history and culture, and by seeking ways with which to engage the visitor.

Informal meetings between local, regional and national pressure groups were held at BMH. The practice, conceptualised in socio-museology, facilitated communication needed prior to taking action on a given issue such as the waterfront regeneration, neighbourhood improvements, and other embellishments which contributed to ameliorate the community's standard of living (Ruiz Ballesteros and Hernández Ramírez, 2007: 677-678). BMH aided consultation which helped facilitate efforts and projects for regeneration (EC, 2005: 5).

Self-esteem

Emerging artists exhibiting for the first time, increased their self-esteem and exhibited again either in collective exhibitions or individual exhibitions elsewhere. Foreign visitors commented that the material exhibited at BMH made them aware of the local identity and its diversity from that projected by the media. It contributed to acknowledge that even in a small island state existed a diversity of communities, histories and cultures. In line with vom Lehn *et al.* (2001: 190) the museum's pedagogic role led to a better understanding of the local community identity by non-community visitors. Other exhibitors at BMH went further and offered opportunities to lead a number of lectures, courses on art for teenagers and calligraphy for adults. Some exhibitors and scholars gave public lectures or talks about their research.

Museums: Size matters!

According to Kelly (2006: 2-3) small community museums contributed to social capital much more than the larger national museums. As noted earlier this may be due to the high degree of agency that small private museums enjoy, when compared to larger institutional and national museums. BMH required no external authorisation to actualise activities and it had no dependancies to affect decisions on either who was exhibiting and speaking, or what the exhibit or lecture was about. As Cameron (2003: 15) and Vella (2013: 12-13) stated the small museum's contribution of space and place to local community voices was an asset to the community itself rather than to the museum, as it was the Bormla community which benefitted rather than BMH. Practices to support and to empower the community were a major challenge to the small museum. Though museums like BMH show a high element of agency, their limitation of resources and their objectives, may as Kelly (2006:4) underlined, lead them to determine who to be inclusive or exclusive of.

The European perspective

The BMH practices, while availing of local heritage and cultural activities, strengthened the self-esteem and identity of local community individuals and groups at risk of social exclusion by enhancing their participation in society and providing them activities which served as a stepping stone to more social integration (EC, 2005: 1-3), and less dependability on social and household factors that led to social exclusion and poverty (Room, 1995: 45, 239-240). These in turn were all steps for learning in various forms that a small museum can offer to its community, individually or collectively. It is museums like BMH, which adhering to EC recommendations (EC, 2005: 7), practically become role models for social inclusivity (GLLAM, 2000: 5).

Conclusion

The study showed that the functions and practices of small museums which develop from the same community and which are situated within stigmatized communities, can help empower residents living in such socially deprived areas, by adopting objectives that put first the benefit of the community. By providing different activities and learning opportunities, small museums can help in one way or another to decrease the stigma with groups located

outside the community, and help residents to build a more positive self-identity. This all depends on their level of agency and detachment from structures which dictate practices and objectives. Bir Mula Heritage was capable of providing and facilitating inclusive museum pedagogy which helped to ameliorate the community's identity among the residents and outsiders. The museum achieved these goals by involving the community, giving them space and place to voice their voices at different levels and spheres of life and society: as cultural, pedagogic, social and political. Alongside with these practices the small museum promoted and raised awareness about local heritage among national and international visitors, putting Bormla on the tourism map.

The functions of this small museum within a socially deprived area were in practice community-oriented, revolving round the objective of a return of investment in the locality in which it is ensconced (Watson, 2009: 8), primarily breeding beneficial effects on its surrounding community. Being free to act on its objectives, it faced various challenges and limitations, but its impact on the community was strong and radical, as it succeeded to improve the local community's identity. This study however proves that small museums with their agency succeed to impact positively on the identity of their community in many ways.

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