

Definition or Mission Statement? ICOM-CIMCIM and the proposal for a new museum definition

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Good morning. My name is Frank P. Bär. I am the President of ICOM-CIMCIM.

Slide ICOM-CIMCIM

CIMCIM is ICOM's International Committee of Museums and Collections of Instruments and Music. It has about 250 members representing about 120 collections on all continents and was founded in 1960 in Paris.

From the CIMCIM membership, there were few spontaneous feedbacks on the new museum definition text, and they were not positive. The subject has been put on the agenda in the president's end-of-the-year message. Due to restricted resources, no dedicated meetings have taken place so far.

Instead, the board has decided for a structured survey.

Slide UNESCO principles

Starting point is the impression that the new museum definition, as based on the UNESCO sustainability principles of 2015, contains a lot of well-intentioned elements that describe current situations on one hand, and on the other hand situations to be strived after in the future. This sounds as a mixture of a definition and a mission statement. If you ever you accept the entire text as a definition, you can make a simple check for your institution to know if it is a museum or not – and here exactly may lie the big danger for ICOM as an organization.

So, what we as CIMCIM were trying as a method is

1. tentatively accepting all notions in the text as well-intended and legitimate
2. try to distinguish between elements for a definition and elements for a mission statement

Slide survey answer form

For this, we ran an online survey from 12th to 25th February this year. As other committees before us, we have split the text in distinct notions.

The participants could chose a the notion is a definition, or a mission statement, or if it is not possible to attribute to one or the other, or, finally, if the notion is unclear.

For around 200 E-mail addresses based on the IRIS database and that worked out, we had 40 answers, which is a turnout of 20%, and which for CIMCIM is a quite common participation in this kind of surveys.

Slide overview all results pie charts

Here, you see the different notions according to some kind of hypothetical majorities, divided in outright majorities, where a notion gets more than 50% and relative majorities where a notion gets the most voices amongst all the four choices.

With this, we can compose a hypothetical definition text and a hypothetical mission statement text. For the sake of time I will do this in the more encompassing versions of a so-to-say relative majority.

I have to stress the fact that what I will show you is NOT an official or unofficial proposal by CIMCIM for a new museum definition text. It is thought as an idea how to think further.

Slide definition text comprehensive

“Museums are spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. They hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society and safeguard diverse memories for future generations. Museums are not for profit. They collect, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit understandings of the world.”

This reminds much of the current museum definition, but things have been added and changed. Remember: A museum definition says what is a museum and what is not.

If we apply the same procedure to a possible mission statement text, than we get this:

Slide mission statement text comprehensive

“Museums are democratizing and inclusive spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities.”

Remember: A museum mission statement is much about what museums should strive after, and only for a part about what they currently are. It is not the same thing as a definition.

Here, I have to admit that in composing the survey, I have missed out the notion of “enhancing understandings of the world”. Apologies for this.

Slide special notions 1

Two elements didn’t make it into these hypothetical texts:

The notion of “polyphonic spaces” was the only one that got a simple majority vote for being unclear. I was not really surprised to learn this, as “polyphony” and “polyphonic” possess quite well defined and almost sacred meanings for musicologists and musicians, and obviously for them it is not evident to apply this term to museums.

Slide special notions 2

Finally, the statement that museums are “... aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing” is, in my opinion, already formulated as a mission, not a definition. So, here the question was: “Do you think that museums are able to contribute to this goals?” A great majority said “yes”, few said “no”, and a good number of participants wrote thoughts about it.

I didn’t have the time yet to review and structure these comments. The same is true of the 28 in part very detailed free comments on the new museum definition text, and we don’t have the time to do this here and now. They will serve as a resource for further thinking. A more comprehensive report will be published in the CIMCIM Bulletin in autumn this year

Slide “A possible element for further proceeding”

Let me finish with a thought about a possible procedure as it has been agreed as a recommendation by CIMCIM's board:

1. Acknowledge all the work that has been done by MDPP and all those who have initially contributed for bringing forward the new definition draft
2. Analyze which portions of the text are apt for a definition and which portions would be better situated in a mission statement.
3. Continue discussion on this base, coming diligently to a (new) definition properly spoken, and discuss within ICOM about its further goals and its mission.