

## City Museums and Conflicts – Annemarie de Wildt (Amsterdam Museum)

‘Museums of Cities and Contested Urban Histories’ was the theme of the 2017 conference of CAMOC, the ICOM committee of the City Museums. Over 60 participants from 23 different countries gathered in Mexico City, one of the world’s fastest growing cities in a country that is rife with tensions and conflicts.

The September 19<sup>th</sup> earth quake made it insecure if the conference would go ahead. Luckily, it was not as bad as the 1985 earth quake and the Mexicans are resilient. On the way from the airport, driving past a anti-Trump graffiti, the taxi driver told me that after two weeks tourism had picked up again, even from the VS. Hotel Cathedral became a temporary home to me and other delegates. Some of them I knew from earlier conferences. Meetings like these are focal points in a continuous global conversation about city museums.

[CAMOC](#) is one of the many ICOM (International Council of Museums) abbreviations. Short for: International Committee for the Collections and Activities of Museums of Cities. It is a multidisciplinary group that brings together museum professionals, museologists, urban planners, historians, urban anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, researchers, and students. CAMOC is a forum for people who work in or are interested in museums about the past, present and future of cities. We all operate in very different contexts, which made the conversations, that continued over breakfast, coffee breaks and dinner, all the more interesting.

### **Dia de Muertos**

Cuidad de México was getting ready for the festivities of the *Dia de Muertos* (Day of the Dead). In private homes and public spaces people were installing *ofrendas* - altars to commemorate the dead. Some were dedicated to the victims of the earth quake. Visiting Mexico around the 1st and 2nd of November is a feast for the eye and a challenge for ideas about life and death.



I have never seen so many skulls and skeletons - sugar skulls in the shops, huge skeletons in the Parade and paper mache skulls on a selfie wall. The pre-Columbian feast of welcoming for one day the souls back to earth with food and drinks merged, after the Spanish conquest, with the Catholic All Saints’ and All Souls’ days. This resulted in a powerful mix of embracing, challenging and making fun of death as well as remembering beloved ones. Even the hotel had its own *ofrenda* in the lobby, with objects made by the hotel staff. The guests could vote for their favorite skeleton.

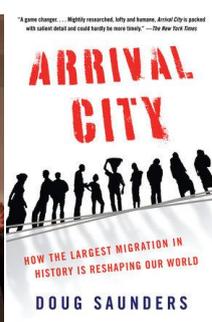
Since 2003 *Dia de Muertos* is declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and like all intangible heritage it keeps on evolving. The spectacular (but invented) [opening scene](#) of the James Bond movie *Spectre* (2015) inspired the Tourist Board and Ministry of Culture to hold a parade for real the next year. On Zocalo square, the conference delegates together with thousands of Mexicans, witnessed the second Parade ever, that started with a wagon carrying a raised fist made of helmets of rescuers, pick axes and broken rubble.

## Arrival Cities

We had just finished the first conference day in *Museo de las Culturas*: a daylong workshop of the project [Migration:Cities.\(Im\)migration and Arrival Cities](#). Canadian journalist and researcher Doug Saunders gave the keynote: *The Museum at the Centre of Arrival*. Saunders has coined the term [arrival cities](#) for the neighbourhoods where migrants settle. He showed images visualizing the growth of Mexico City in the past decades. Ciudad de México has a population of almost 9 million, but in Greater Mexico City live some 21,157,000 people. A big percentage are immigrants from Central and South American countries. But museums in the city, just like in other metropolitan areas, are mostly concentrated in or around the (historical) centre. And which stories of migration do they tell?



Speech Saunders, photo Catherine C Cole



Exhibition Heimat, photo Felix Torkar

The concept 'arrival city' is a useful tool of analysis, also for city museums. These districts are often characterized as problems areas, but they offer the most important prerequisites of an 'arrival city': affordable housing, business opportunities and small commercial spaces, as well as networks of people from the same background, possibilities to loan money or find a place to sleep. An 'arrival city' is a city within a city. Migration is never a random process and clustering together is part of the process of migrations. In American cities specific blocks link to specific villages or neighbourhoods on the African or Asian continents, a myriad dotted lines between where people live now and the villages where their (grand)parents come from. Saunders discusses these issues at length with urban planners, including those in Amsterdam Nieuw (new) West, a neighbourhood in my home town dating from the 1950's and now the home of many ((grand) children of) migrants to the Netherlands.

## Role of Museums

Saunders was also consultant of expo [Making Heimat. Germany, Arrival Country](#) in the German pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016. Four large openings in the walls

of the German Pavilion, necessitating the removal of over 48 tons of brick from the landmark-protected walls, transformed the building into an open house.

Few museums have the resources to symbolize in such a drastic and costly way the need to be an open country/city. So, what role can museums play? Sanders suggested: reach out to the arrival cities, help people tell and understand their story and make current experiences part of the museum exhibitions. Museums can provide immigrants with the opportunity to share their culture with their children and with their new neighbors. Some of the world's most innovative museums are actually right in (former) 'arrival cities', such as the *favela* museums in Brazil and the [New York Tenement Museum](#). Museums in 'arrival cities' can make the community safer, create more social cohesion and safeguard cultural migrant heritage. Their approach may also be different, less top down, but initiated by the communities and grass roots.

### **Network of inspiration**

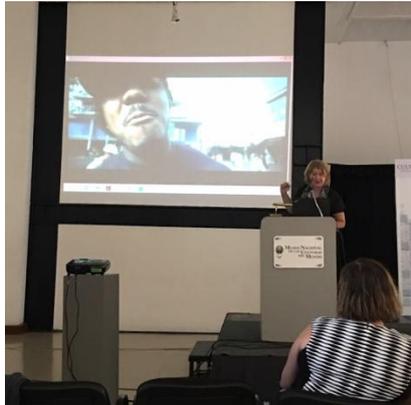
The overall aim of the project Migration:Cities is to create a web platform for city, migration and other museums dealing with this issue. Museum professionals can find relevant experiences, share knowledge and discuss ethical and meaningful ways to engage with new urban dynamics and the diverse realities of 'arrival cities'. Marlen Malliou presented some examples, which can be seen at [CAMOC YouTube channel](#). A toolkit will soon be available on the CAMOC website. The information about the previous workshops in [Glasgow](#) (2015) and [Athens](#) (2017) is part of the website as well.

The museum professionals at the conference tended to stress the positive social impact of migration. I did so too in my presentation 'Representing Amsterdam' about the way various waves of migrants left their traces in music, which by itself also travels the world. The Amsterdam Museum will compare in an exhibition traditional songs from the 17th century arrival city Jordaan with hiphop from 20th century high rise arrival city Bijlmer. It was fun to have the delegates hum along with [Mijn Wiegie was een stijfselkistje](#) and [Doofpot](#). The presentations about Japan and Sao Paolo also stressed the contributions of migrants. In a next panel speakers of NGO's working with migrants in Mexico pointed at the difficulties. Migrants lives are of such a transient nature that committing themselves to museum collaborations is difficult, they feel stigmatized and maybe fearful of repercussions if they speak out publicly.

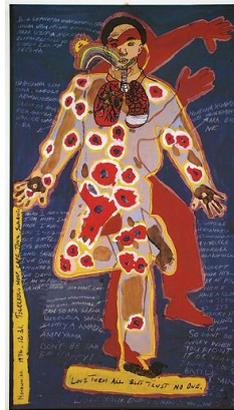
### **Comfort Zone**

At the end of the day [Linda Norris](#) of the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) led a workshop 'Getting Uncomfortable'. Dealing with urban conflicts means working out of your comfort zone. To my surprise (and pride) Linda announced that her workshop was inspired by my [Face book timeline](#), where I share my encounters with a very diverse bunch of Amsterdammers in various meeting place, from palaces and brothels to squats and leather bars. Linda told us about the body maps made by a group of Sri Lanka women, who shared their painful histories with each other and through the maps with others. She asked us to

draw a map of our hands and trace our experiences. If you ask people to open up to you and your museum, you have to be able to increase your own self-awareness.



Talking about Gikkels' Doofpot, photo Linda Norris



Nondumiso Hlwele Body Map from [website](#)

## Missing histories

During the conference migration was an important topic. Doug Saunders pointed out how histories of migrants were missing from urban history. Some of the self built houses and shacks of newcomers, a familiar site in the global south, are demolished and erased from Canadian urban memory. Joan Roca Joan i Albert of the Barcelona city museum spoke about the way his museum tries to safeguard an informal city of the past. Contributing to the invisibility of immigrants is the fact that many are unrecognized and living in 'informal' neighbourhoods. Now some of these, like the *favallas* in Brazil are finally recognized as part of the city. Many other contributions in the two day conference, dealing with f.i. Samoa, Warsaw, Athens, Mexico, Japan and Totoras in Argentina, focused on migration, even though in most cases conflicts did not play a huge role in the presentations.

## 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you'

Attending international conferences like these makes one aware once more of the privileged situation in the Netherlands. For Bonginkosi Zuma of the [Durban Local History Museums](#), it is a reality that local politicians call him to tell him this or that person should be honored in the exhibition. 'So what do you do?' he asks, 'you can't bite the hand that feeds you'. Although in few countries local politicians call to demand an exhibition about a particular politician, many city museums are dealing with the image they present of the city and the question if the unsafe and negative stories also can be presented.

Cintia Velázquez Marroni, who just finished her PhD at Leicester, where I had met her last year at a [conference](#), gave a clear overview of the possible conflicts that can result from tensions about different ways of presenting narratives about the past. There can be differences between the narratives of the institution and those of visitors and between museums who tell different stories about the past. Confrontations are also possible within the institution, for example between curators and educators, as well as between different groups in the community. Donors and local government may be unhappy about certain

exhibitions. Art museums with their almost universal white cubes, says Cintia, are less likely to encounter ideological conflicts than history and city museums, because art allows for a more metaphorical or indirect approach to societal issues than history museums. The social visibility of history museums is more prominent in Mexico, because they have a much wider audience than art museums. Their location, place of origin and often contested (urban and national) histories all may lead to conflicts. Cintia also explained how a nationalist program was institutionalized in Mexico through the [National Institute of Anthropology and History](#) (INAH) that founded history and anthropology museums. State influence is diminishing however: between 1960 and 1970, 80% of Mexican museums belonged to the state, while in 2000 this was only 15%.



The delegates and lunch at the roof of the *Museo de las Culturas* photo's Jessica Woods

### **Whose past?**

But it is not only a question of who owns the building or the collection, but more and more: to whom does the past belong? 'Whose history is the museum talking about?' was the title of Masakage Murano's talk about Kyoto Museum, but in many other presentations this question of the right to represent loomed large. My paper 'The biographical perspective in urban memories' presented cases of the way in which the [Amsterdam Museum](#) has focused on stories of individuals in order to give a multi-perspective view on history. The resistance fighter during WWII as well as the collaborator and the mother struggling to feed her children. The Amsterdammers that owned plantations in Surinam as well as the descendants of the enslaved. I also discussed the dilemma's of curating. Talking about what is difficult and what goes or can go wrong, is more interesting than (only) presenting one's successes.

### **Culture Caught in the Crossfire**

Françoise Desmarais who works at the International Council of Museums headquarters in Paris, talked about the Museums' [Emergency Programme Blue shield](#) – a 'Red Cross for culture' in cases of hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes, fire, and war. For many people ICOM membership is mainly that wonderful card that gives you free access to museums in the whole world. ICOM (founded in 1946) is with 37.000 members the biggest cultural organisation worldwide that not only sends out disaster task forces after a tsunami, but also discusses in international conferences standards and definitions of what a museum is. CAMOC Secretary Afşin Altayli generated input for ICOM's new [committee on Museum](#)

[Definition, Prospects, and Potentials](#) asking delegates about their needs and ideas about the future of city museums.

### **Museum are not neutral**

In various past conferences I have met Jette Sandahl, one of the most inspiring museum thinkers and practitioners. Unfortunately the hurricanes in the Caribbean had prevented her from coming. She sent a [video message](#) stressing “there is no such thing as a neutral place” in our culture - museums included. She urged museum professionals not to underestimate the ties between museums and the status quo. The potential of museums to deal with urban national and global contested histories implies “decolonising one’s mind” and “de-pathologising opposition”.

Conferences are ways of deepening the network of museums that try to matter in the face of contested histories. Sarah Henry of the Museum of the City of New York presented the dilemma of her city in its liberal bubble during polarized times. ‘We centre conflict, but we don’t take sides’. The professional exchange also includes talking about with museum practice. What themes to present and what were successful exhibitions? In their new permanent exhibition the NY city museum will focus on five challenges: housing; making a living; getting around (infrastructure); living together; living with nature. The museum will dedicate more space to the future of the city in a City Lab. The ‘Activist New York’ exhibition is a good way to present various case studies and challenging visitors to look at different sides of conflict, including stories we don’t agree with, like opposition against integrated schooling. They don’t shy away from a little activism themselves. After [Trump’s travel ban](#) it took the museum 2,5 week to install the photo exhibition [Muslim in New York](#). It was also great to talk with Jonathan Kelly is working on a fascinating museum project in Chicago with ex inmates and gang leaders who hope a museum will positively change their lives.

Presentations may lead to co-operations. With Bonginkosi Zuma from the Durban I talked about the use of songs in exhibitions. He is collecting songs from the anti-apartheid resistance movement and as part of the group that collected audio-visual anti-apartheid material in the Netherlands I was obviously interested. A theme number of the Public Historian about music in museums perhaps?

### **Museums and pyramids**

And of course we went and saw museums. The [Museo de Arte Popular](#) invited us to a reception on the evening their fantasy beasts are taken for their yearly outing in the park. This was another opportunity to talk with Mexicans about the creativity ignited by the Dia de Muertos celebrations.

Mexican history came alive in the [Casa Azul](#) (blue house) of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and the [house](#) (in the same neighborhood) where Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky and his wife Natalia lived and where he was murdered. More Mexican and international history in the new [Museo de la Memoria y Tolerancia](#). Part of the conference was an excursion to the

modernist studios commissioned by Diego Rivera for himself and Frida Kahlo and to a 16th century monastery that testified to the often violent Mexican history.



Looking at museums with other museum professionals deepens the looking. With an Italian-Canadian-Korean-Dutch group we explored the Teotihuacan pyramids and ate fried locusts and tacos. Cristina Miedico from Milano and I wandered for a full day through the [Museo Nacional de Antropología](#). She is an archeologist who had given a very interesting talk about destroying memories, with many historic examples of destructions of buildings, and therefore memories of multi ethnic models. As we walked among the pre columbic past of Mexico, looking at the amazing statues and objects that had survived the Spanish conquests and wars, inevitably contested urban histories and how museums deal with them came up.

Thanks to the Mexican organizers let by Dr Yani Herriman who co-organised the conference with CAM Secretary-General and ICOM CAMOC Vice-Chair, Catherine C. Cole and CAMOC President Joana Sousa Monteiro and the rest of the boards. Thanks to ICOM Netherlands for the travel grant.

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