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Trembling walls. When the earthquake changes the identity of local museums

Abstract   In 2016 the central regions of Italy were affected by a set of tremendous seism and many tremors reawakened the fear in the area of L'Aquila where a massive earthquake destroyed the city and the community in 2009. More than 300 people died and the city has been only partially reconstructed; in the meanwhile the community got crumbled as well as the walls.

As a consequence of that, the social fabric has deeply changed as well as the cultural agenda. A memory space was opened in 2011 and the National Museum of Abruzzo in L'Aquila in opened its doors again in 2015 in a new building and in a different area of the city. This paper aims to examine how museums changed in the perception of citizens and visitors and verify if they talk about the experience of the earthquake.

Local museums can become a key agent in the comprehension of the cultural identity and memory. They can represent privileged locations to enhance social inclusion, to talk about difficult stories, to rethink at the cultural implications of history.

Keywords   collective memory, historical memory, cultural identity, local museum, revitalization, social inclusion

The 21st-century museum should guarantee full accessibility and inclusiveness to all audiences. For decades educators argued about its educational role, now it is probably time to better focus and discuss its social role as a facilitator between and within communities. This issue is sensitive in those areas where the social and cultural habits were changed and transformed due to a sudden event. This challenge is faced day by day in areas affected by an earthquake where the social fabric has been lost or deeply fragmented (Sciolla 2003).

On 6 April 2009 the city of L'Aquila experienced one of the most severe earthquake in Italy. L'Aquila lies in the centre of Italy along the Apennines and by the Gran Sasso mountain, namely the highest peak of this area about 3,000m high. As many mountain areas, the city is not easily accessible and services are not always available. Winters can be very cold and snowy, this information is needed to understand the context where the disaster occurred. Many tremors for many months affected the area, but nobody expected a 6.2 magnitude one that caused over 300 victims. The clock tower in L'Aquila is still crystallised at 3:32am, the moment of the strongest tremor that caused the first victims and destruction. Many more people died in the following months and years because of increasing cancer and breath diseases, but this is a part of the story that has never been told. Furthermore, the most of the population moved from the city and probably will never get back. Their homes are still not habitable and their job, their families, their kids started a new cycle of life elsewhere.

Consequences in a historical centre with medieval and mainly 17th-century buildings were massive. The city hall, some churches representing the core centre and the historical identity of the city were destroyed. Even talking about churches is suitable to say historical centre for the peculiar foundation system of the city. L'Aquila, indeed, was designed according to a specific order and criterion in the 13th century when all the villages of the area rounded up to build a fortified city. So, tradition says that 99 villages were involved to built 99 squares, 99 churches, and 99 fountains to become the pole of the new communities installing them. It means that losing a church brought to lose part of the local community identity.

In the aftermath of the earthquake the National Museum of Abruzzo housed in the 16th-century castle was closed due to damages to the structure and the collections were moved to a safe place located on the opposite side of the city. That also meant a radical change in the cultural axe because the area

is far from the centre, not easily accessible but it was the best possible choice to open the museum again and give the community its cultural hub back.

The 'new' museum was opened to the public in December 2015 and housed in the former slaughterhouse of L'Aquila, built between 1881 and 1883 and closed in 1990. In the new temporary location, after restoration and repairs carried out between 2010 and 2015, a selection of archaeological finds and paintings, sculptures and jewellery from the Middle Ages to the modern era, made safe by advanced anti-seismic protections, have been exposed. These masterpieces testify the history and the vitality of this region and its culture, some of them were found under the ruins of the earthquake, brought back to new life thanks to complex restoration works. It is actually said the museum that lived twice because of an impressive work of inventory, restoration and redisplay of the collection. The artworks themselves do not talk about the earthquake, but the display, the new location, the protections tell a different story that is hard to hide.

Another museum in the area of L'Aquila was also opened a few years after 2009 and was dedicated to the memory of the city. In these terms, it is still today the only memory space allowing a focus on local museums to see how they interpret the point of no return for the community who stays and for the one that leaves.

The story through images sometimes serves to avoid words weakened by time, which cannot add anything to emotion and sentiment for a place (Fabietti and Matera 1999). The emotion that is perceived entering the Space of Memory in Fontecchio derives from the delicacy and sincere sharing with which the memories, traumas and hopes of rebirth have been exposed.

The Space was born with the aim to re-establish a connection with the territory, to rediscover those stones that preserved individual or community stories, which represented and represent the deep identity of the place. Identity is closely tied to memory, one as an integral part of the other and what matters most in this moment of reflection and awareness of the current situation is the transmission of historical memory, that is to say the ocean towards which all the partial stories converge as a single great shrine of feelings very conflicting with each other (Assmann 1997).

There are many memories to be asked and heard, all parts of a process of identification (Candau 1982) that is necessary to reconstruct together with the monuments symbolising the territory of L'Aquila. The individual memories with personal and family stories are associated and merged with the collective memory, which transmits us through the memory, or a set of

memories, an experience lived together with tenacity and kindness (Halbwachs 1997). All these stories and experiences give body and shape to the feelings that people daily live in the places of collective tragedies.

After the earthquake occurred 6 April 2009 there was a disconnection between the memories that traced the passage of time and there is a strong need to remodel the memory from the rubble. From the break in the land new small fruits begin to blossom, like a sign of the will to revitalize the urban and social fabric of these land, and rebuild with many pieces, all precious, the historical memory and cultural memory. This is needed also to establish again the relations between memory, identity and participation in cultural life that represent the constitution of tradition (Montesperelli 2003). Historical memory and cultural memory have undergone an abrupt suspension and one has to draft and live again the tradition of territories rich in stories and people, to whom the sense of belonging to places of life has been denied (Nora 1984).

The village lies in an intimate valley of the Abruzzo region. Fontecchio is a microcosm, one of the many small, isolated, fragile municipalities that dot the Italian interior areas. The earthquake has accelerated and amplified phenomena of decomposition and entropy already active before that night (Taddei 2014). And now, the physical restoration of places proceeds in parallel with the revitalization of a more cohesive community.

The heart of reflection and actions is the interaction between the place and the inhabitant community. The conviction was symbolically expressed in 2013 with the acceptance of the municipality of Fontecchio to the principles of the *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (Faro Convention) which underlines the role that cultural heritage plays for the building of a democratic and peaceful society, and for its sustainable development.

The previous year, the sharing of an identity atlas and development expectations had already been concretely the subject of a deliberative democracy process called *Borghi Attivi* (active villages) (Held 2014). This was reflected in the concept of cultural heritage as defined in the Faro Convention, art. 2, i.e.:

> a set of resources inherited from the past that populations identify, regardless of their belonging, as a reflection and expression of their values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions, constantly evolving. It includes all aspects of the environment that are the result of the interaction between man and places over time.

In a reconciled relationship between man and landscape, the valorisation of heritage fully appears as a relational protection; each inhabitant assumes a portion of the responsibility to preserve, make use, enrich the inheritance in which he/she identifies himself/herself.

The Space of Memory aims to be a place of reflection, not of sad commemoration, a place in which one can find a glimpse, a smile, a detail that reminds and makes you reflect through the gaze of a photographer who observes the future of his city. To reach the Space, visitors enter the historical centre of the town and take a short walk that already allows getting in touch with the territory and the history of Fontecchio. As in all the fortified medieval villages, next to the main door is the Guard Corps defending the entrance to the town. In Fontecchio, the Guard Corps is enriched with an indispensable tool for the investigation of life from the Middle Ages onwards, that is to say the clock for the organization of social and work life. As the medievalist writer Le Goff argued, people were used to obey to the time imposed by the bells and, not only to work in the fields, time observed a precise partition of the hours of the day marked by the sound of the only clock in the village.

The mechanism still preserved in the Clock Tower is one of the oldest in Italy and it is a six-hour clock, called Roman because it is more widespread in the churches and monasteries of Rome and Lazio. The main function was to indicate the Italian hours, adopted in the ecclesiastical context and the measurement, from 12th to 18th century, did not begin from midnight, but from the prayer of Hail Mary recited in the evening towards twilight, that is to say half an hour after the sunset. The only hand of the six-hour clock had to travel four full laps to mark the twenty-four hours. Some literary references from Giorgio Vasari to Alessandro Manzoni, from Niccolò Machiavelli to Benvenuto Cellini lead us to the use of the Italian hours that refer to the custom of calculating the hours from the sunset onwards. So, for example, the "eleven beats" at the stroke of which Renzo wakes up after escaping from Milan in Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* are about five in the morning according to the current calculation.

Along the road, the clock tower appears in front of the visitor and the vertical thrust is accentuated by the presence of Palazzo Muzi, a noble palace that draws the profile of the village as one approaches it. The Palace, with its luxurious furnishings and the vastness of its surroundings, also recalls a period in which the village represented a vital centre and a strategic junction for the entire Aterno river valley.

The collection is displayed in the watchtower and the photographs make the visitor go back in time with a clear look to the simplicity of life before the earthquake, without forgetting the drama of the stolen lives and the places of memory destroyed. The exhibition plays on multiple levels of the gaze taking advantage of the vertical development of the tower housing it, so as to reconstruct, as in a game of references, all the memories and views. The different sections gradually build the story of the places in a continuous recall between past and present, offering images of the city of L'Aquila and Fontecchio seen through the decades to remember its beauty and fragility, to leave a trace in the memories.

The display of the photographs by Roberto Grillo allows an ascensional exhibition of the works suggesting the delicacy of the themes. The architects Carlo Mangolini and Marcello Deroma have interpreted with great finesse and analytical skills the relationships and references of the photographs in order to create an intense dialogue between the images and their suggestions. To make the visit experience coherent, four main areas have been identified that tell the story of L'Aquila and Fontecchio:

Recent past: contains shots taken in the city of L'Aquila between the 80s and 90s of the 20th century that give back fragments of everyday life between the streets, squares and fountains. The glimpses of buildings, streets, faces, tell the vitality and the strong belonging of the citizens with their city in a crescendo of emotions and memories that are found in the most intimate details.

Remote past: offers a historic view of the two centres with photographs dating back to the 30s of the 20th century where the common roots of the territory of L'Aquila emerge, as a solid testimony of the traditions, the landscape and architectural treasures. The photographs and postcards of the period show the landscape and architectural beauties of L'Aquila and Fontecchio; they reconstruct the historical and urban nexus of the medieval foundation of the city made by all the castles of the countryside. A city-territory that saw in its birth the value of sharing and collective participation.

Present time: preserves images taken immediately after the earthquake and placed into a hypogeal space. They are the only colour-photographs in the exhibition telling the contemporary drama, with dignity and strength, and recalling the 309 names of the victims written by subtraction on the stele placed at the sides of the entrance (fig. 1, p. 90). Even the format changes, the illuminated screens capture the attention with the sharpness of the photographic lens on what the memory of those days has indelibly imprinted on the residents' minds. The ruins of the buildings, people embraced in an

attempt to regain strength and vitality, the blue sky that overlooks a collapsed roof, and then the white coffins arranged in a geometrically disarming order, almost to recompose what had been distorted.

Comparisons: creates a visual link between past and present through a comparison on three historically sequential moments of some monuments in L'Aquila (the Basilica of Collemaggio, the churches of 'Anime Sante' and San Pietro). The black and white offers the possibility to observe in detail the alterations and retrace the architectural and decorative changes from the baroque reconstruction – after the earthquake occurred in 1703 – to the restoration of Romanesque forms made in the 70s of the 20th century (fig. 2, p. 91). When the restoration of the three churches will be completed, a fourth step will be added with the restitution to the community that marks the final phase of reconstruction work following the 2009 earthquake. This element is of particular importance because it tells of the continuous evolution of the collection and underlines the attention of the municipality towards the ongoing route that is being conducted to revitalize and rebuild the city and its community.

A multimedia station is added to the four sections allowing to deepen the knowledge of places with vintage images and postcards and, above all, providing information on seismic prevention to raise awareness of all age groups on the issues of heritage and landscape protection, and how to deal with seismic events. The educational tool wants to provide not only useful information but, using an accessible language, allows all visitors to know, verify and understand the essential rules to face situations of risk and reinforce the sense of belonging to start a process of active protection of the cultural and environmental heritage.

The goal of the Space of Memory is to contribute to redefining the collective identity of the local community through awareness-raising actions in which the participation and the memory of all are the centre of the reconstruction of the social and cultural fabric (Crane 1997). Shortly, the hope is the creation of a heritage community as indicated in the Faro Convention, article 2, and identified as a "group of people who attribute value to specific aspects of the cultural heritage they wish to support and transmit to future generations, in the framework of a public action". In this sense, the right to cultural heritage that every citizen can and must exercise manifests itself in the participation and the assumption of responsibility even in reviving the memories or reconstructing together the sense of belonging to such a delicate and dense place of meaning.
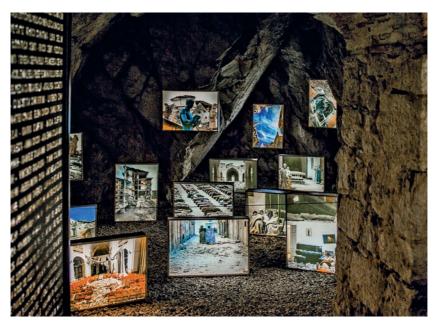
Fig. 1: L'Aquila: Space of Memory, interior. Photo: Valeria Pica, 2017

In this perspective, the research and recovery of collective memory aim at redefining and reconciling with the territory in a broader perspective of sharing and cooperation to start activities respectful of places and "enrich the processes of economic, political, social and cultural development" (Faro Convention, art. 8). All that is part of a set of actions aimed at achieving a common goal for those who live and visit small villages such as Fontecchio, namely to improve the quality of life and strengthen social cohesion (De Martin and Bolognino 2010) in order to look at cultural heritage as a precious source for cultural and collective memory. The heritage walks, organized on

Fig. 2: Comparison on three historical moments of the churches of 'Anime Sante' and San Pietro, and the Basilica of Collemaggio in L'Aquila. Photo: Valeria Pica, 2017

various occasions over the last few years, usually end in the Space of Memory and represent one of the examples of collaboration in the community (Bauman 2007) and enhancement of memory in which the narrative of macro-history that has crossed the walls and streets resembles the narrative of the people who offer glimpses of lived life and moments of micro-history capable to make the places more real and closer to the listener. This methodology contains the deepest meaning of the Space of Memory that welcomes itself and transmits through the images of L'Aquila the places, stories and people that represent the essence of cultural heritage.

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