

The Cultural Institution as a Public Environment

The post-revolutionary enthusiasm for the restoration of rights and restitutions of private property, as well as the restoration of the individual as opposed to the collective or communal, and not complementarily to them, has unfortunately not brought about the same rehabilitation or restoration of the public. This sphere is still, not entirely without reason, associated with something thought of as simultaneously desirable but useless, legitimate but alienated, highly appreciated but undervalued, something prestigious but of little practical use, something generally beneficial but used very individually.

It is obvious that the distinction of public and private has not only the dimension of proprietorship (expressed usually in legal or economic terms), but, after its many years of suppression, private ownership almost disproportionately overshadows not only the full understanding of its own import (for example the plurality and equality of various kinds of ownership is far from obvious, much like how ownership as a right significantly eclipses ownership as a liability), but also other dimensions, such as that of culture. This very dimension may contain the traditions, norms and models, revival of which would not only make the restoration of proprietorship and restitution complete, but the cultural sphere would also reduce both the consequences of our survival of the deformations and undesirable effects of a new simplification of the relation towards private and public. The situation is further complicated by the relatively low ability of citizens to distinguish among various forms of public ownership and differentiate their attitude to them (e.g., free cultural goods, public property managed by the state, public property managed by a municipality, private property accessible to public use, and so on). This state of affairs is exacerbated by the lack of positive models for the treatment of these public properties.

The specific character of the public environment informs the simplistic understanding of the cultural sphere as the practical, material environment for the activities of cultural institutions, interest groups, and individuals. It is evident that the creation, collection, preservation and interpretation of cultural goods and the vitalization and cultivation of human potential are among the comparatively highly formalized and institutionalized social and cultural activities generally carried out in the name of the common or public interest. It would be more appropriate, however, to carry out these activities so as to fulfill one of the basic human rights – the right to culture. It is only fortunate that in advanced democracies the common or public interest seems to correspond with this basic right.

The specific features of culture institutions' activities called for the development of the cultural sphere, which, at least since the end of the nineteenth century, has acquired the character of a public environment both in the sense of space and in social and cultural terms. It even seems that the social and cultural character of the environment is experienced, at least at present, as more important than its location and technological equipment. Most cultural institutions in the narrow sense of the word (with some exceptions, e.g. ancient Greek theaters) originated foremost as private, representative, and amusement sites, which were initially imitated. Only gradually did they begin to be accessible to larger audiences and turn into centers of artistic and scientific work and of the presentations of their results. The appearance and the arrangement of the institutions responded to these purposes. We can say that their facilities were considerably above-standard not only in their cultural goods but also in their facilities and technological outfitting. During the end of the eighteenth and, particularly, in the nineteenth century, cultural institutions in the modern sense of the word (libraries, museums, galleries, zoological and botanical gardens) took shape as institutions open to the public. They maintained a tradition of the architectural and space arrangement which represented for the visitors a model worth repeating. This tendency survived up until the middle of the twentieth century. Many cultural institutions were founded by private individuals or interest groups, whose economic share often gradually was substituted more and

more by public funds, which in Europe since the 1920s began to represent an increasingly important guarantee of the existence of the public institutionalization of cultural life.

The public sector in culture guaranteed by the state and municipalities smoothly took over the role played by the patronage of the enlightened nobility. The patron's personal taste is then substituted by the preference for the above mentioned public interest often conceived politically in a narrow sense. The building of new institutions is marked by considerable traditionalism, expressed by the architecture's stateliness and showy respectability, which are positively accepted by the public. It is hard to say whether the psychology of the superiority of the tax-payer's rights over the citizen's rights was already making itself known at that time.

In the course of the twentieth century the outer appearance and operation of cultural institutions have become streamlined. This is manifested in the tendency towards the highly specialized efficiency of their management and towards the building of economizing multipurpose spaces in places where specialization is not possible.

The availability of cultural goods, opportunities for individual creative cultural activities, and of the technology for the transmission of culture information, remained even further restricted. Thus the public environment of the cultural institution still represented the standard. As a result, the cultural institutions were still in the good favor of the public and they did not have to make great advances to their audience. But the development of communication technology, the rapid increase in the equipping of the household, and the change in lifestyle in the second half of the twentieth century has shifted off the environment of culture institutions into a new position. Numerous groups of what had been traditional visitors are equipped themselves with comparable, often more stimulating cultural goods and technologies for their transmission or reproduction. Also their private intimate environment surpasses in many respects the standard upheld by culture institutions. The lack of public funds further reduces the standing differences.

Thus the advantages of cultural institutions remain the following: the extraordinary breadth and diversity of the presented culture goods and services; the expertise of their presentation; and the arena they provide for making specific social contacts. It is apparent that the above mentioned virtues do not suffice in and of themselves. It is necessary to bring change to this environment which can no longer solely pursue technological specialization and the artistic and professional quality of activities (which are, after all, necessarily a matter of course). The cultural sphere and its institutions must also seek first and foremost to be welcoming to the very diversified public whose attendance and use of services confirms not only the primary usefulness but also the public quality of the environment. This represents the continuous strategic contemplation of the significance of public cultural institutions and fulfillment of their missions.

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