

Museum Education, Contemporary Architecture and Teenagers. A Step Towards the Shaping of Identity. Two Case Studies from MAXXI Education Department

Educación de Museos, Arquitectura Contemporánea y Adolescentes. Un paso hacia la Configuración de la Identidad. Dos Estudios de Caso del Departamento de Educación MAXXI

Educação em Museus, Arquitetura Contemporânea e Adolescentes. Um Passo para a Formação da Identidade. Dois Estudos de Caso do Departamento de Educação da MAXXI

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MAXXI-National Museum of 21st Century Arts

The article examines the educational role of museums –particularly regarding informal architecture education– from a singular perspective, the one of MAXXI-National Museum of the 21st Century Arts. It's the first national museum devoted to contemporary art and architecture in Italy and promotes architecture education since its Education Department was set up. Starting from theoretical premises – the work of Eilean Hooper Greenhill above all - the article offers an overview of MAXXI and presents two case studies relating to architecture learning projects devoted to teenagers “RE-CYCLE. Experimental recycling workshop” and “Let me explain you contemporary architecture!” Stressing how museum education can influence the shaping of identity.

Keywords: Museum, Education, Learning, School, Art.

El artículo examina el papel educativo de los museos –particularmente en lo que respecta a la educación informal de la arquitectura– desde una perspectiva singular, la del MAXXI-Museo Nacional de las Artes del Siglo XXI. Es el primer museo nacional dedicado al arte contemporáneo y la arquitectura en Italia y promueve la educación arquitectónica desde la creación de su Departamento de Educación. Partiendo de las premisas teóricas –el trabajo de Eilean Hooper Greenhill sobre todo– el artículo ofrece una visión general de MAXXI y presenta dos estudios de caso relacionados con proyectos de aprendizaje de arquitectura dedicados a los adolescentes “RE-CYCLE. *Experimental recycling workshop*” y “*Let me explain you contemporary architecture!*” Enfatizando cómo la educación museística puede influir en la formación de la identidad.

Descriptores: Museo, Educación, Aprender, Escuela, Arte.

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O artigo examina o papel educativo dos museus –sobretudo no que diz respeito à educação informal em arquitetura– a partir de uma perspectiva singular, a de MAXXI-Museu Nacional do Século XXI. É o primeiro museu nacional dedicado à arte contemporânea e arquitetura em Itália e promove a educação em arquitetura desde a criação do seu Departamento de Educação. A partir de premissas teóricas – o trabalho de Eilean Hooper Greenhill acima de tudo– o artigo oferece uma visão geral do MAXXI e apresenta dois estudos de casos relativos a projetos de aprendizagem de arquitetura dedicados a adolescentes “*RE-CYCLE Experimental recycling workshop*” e “*Let me explain you contemporary architecture!*” enfatizando como a educação nos museus pode influenciar a formação da uma identidade.

Palavras-chave: Museu, Educação, Aprender, Escola, Arte.

Introduction

The museum¹ is a living institution, and as such it is constantly changing. In the 21st century it is increasingly more often a meeting and interaction place, open to dialogue with different communities and pursuing the objective of making visitors and non-visitors alike active participants in its daily activities. Only through the direct involvement of them it is possible to construct –together– a shared meaning that transforms over time, matching the changes taking place in our societies. The museum also contributes to the shaping of collective values: a process that depends not only on the previous knowledge of its audiences, but also on the perspectives and values of the communities to which they belong. This construction of ideas, however, depends above all on the museum’s cultural and educational strategies.

The educational role of the museum is actually complex: it is about to focus on the learning strategies of the individuals, and the educational potential of such institutions and their collections, and to place them within knowledge of the social and cultural roles that museums play. The American-Canadian scholar Henry Giroux (1992) defined a concept of critical pedagogy that can be helpful in understanding the relationship between museums as cultural organizations and museums as sites for learning. In the middle 1990s the Emeritus Professor of Museum Studies of the University of Leicester (United Kingdom) Eilean Hooper Greenhill (1999) accounts for this connection as follow:

Critical pedagogy is concerned with the way that students actually construct meaning, what the categories of meaning are, and what beliefs and values students bring to the encounters. Critical pedagogy recognizes that people “write” meaning rather than just encounter or receive it [...]. Museums [as schools do] claim to be for everyone, but both the visitor statistics and the research studies [...] insist that museums are not experienced equally by all.

Critical pedagogy, working between cultural studies and educational theory, reminds us that knowledge is always concerned with relationships between power, language, imagery, social relations and ethics. (p. 22)

Since knowledge and culture construct individual identities, identities are also structured through the relationships above mentioned. Education is centrally concerned with the construction of identity through knowledge and experience, and it is perhaps

¹ The use of the term ‘museum’ is intended to include museums and galleries.

here that museums can begin to fulfil some of their potential for individual and group empowerment.

Hooper Greenhill (1992) states “One of the tasks of a critical pedagogy is to provide students with a range of identities and human possibilities that emerge among, within and between different zones of culture, and these museums are well able to achieve” (p. 22), and concludes:

to perceive the educational role of the museum as a form of critical pedagogy entails understanding the museum within a context of cultural politics [...]; and it means recognizing the fact that museums have the potential [...] to create new contact zones where identities and collections, people and objects can discover new possibilities for personal and social life and, through this, for democracy. (p. 24)

Starting from these premises, in the middle 2000s the concept of post-museum emerged (Hooper Greenhill, 2007). It deals with a more conscious understanding of the complex relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity that support a new approach to museum audiences. It concerns also the promotion of a more egalitarian society, and the assumption “that culture works to represent, reproduce and constitute self-identities and that this entails a sense of social and ethical responsibility” (p. 1).

We all agree that art and architecture have a *paidēutic* (from the Ancient Greek παιδεία, *paidéia*, science or art of teaching) function therefore architecture education is to be pursued as well as art education, especially in a cultural institution as a museum and by means of projects devoted to children and teenagers. But what do teenagers think about museums? According to an Italian research conducted in 2005 (Bollo, and Gariboldi, 2008), the word “museum” has a negative connotation for teens because it evokes closure, normativeness and distance. Negative factors are related to the form not to the content: in particular, they concern museum’s way of visit and manners as well as lack of effective texts and compelling displays. Moreover, teenagers mainly go to the museums during school visits, in fact they link the museum to the school due to the compulsory attendance, the same approach (frontal lesson and traditional guided tour), and the same rules to follow. The research above mentioned found also that the young prefer museums devoted to photography, modern and contemporary history, science and technology because they match teenagers’ life and experiences. Finally, teens report that the most positive and lasting memories are related to emotions felt during the visit rather than contents: emotional dimension seems to be more decisive than cognitive dimension in providing a compelling museum experience. This probably refers to adolescents’ need for identification.

What do teenagers need and request to an informal learning environment such a museum? They call for the chance to express themselves and learn in a creative and engaging way that enhances their self-esteem and autonomy. Finally, they need to discuss their ideas to their peers: particularly during the adolescence, in fact, the socio-relational dimension determines behaviours, decision-making processes, and evaluation of experiences.

MAXXI Education Department has always paid particular attention to schools and teenagers designing many devoted activities and projects. Its work is deeply influenced by the theories presented by Hooper Greenhill as well as by George Hein’s concept of constructivist museum (Hein, cited in Hooper Greenhill, 1999) and one of its tasks is promoting landscape and architecture education in order to provide a more conscious

approach to the world around us. Before examining in depth two case studies related to architecture education and teenagers, a presentation of MAXXI-National Museum of the 21st Century Arts in Rome and its Education Department is needed.

1. MAXXI and its education department

MAXXI is the first national museum devoted to contemporary art, architecture, photography and design in Italy. In 1997 the Ministry of Cultural Heritage established the National Centre for Contemporary Arts (called MAXXI since 2003), and in 1998 launched an international competition in order to select an original project for the brand-new building. In 1999 the winner was announced: the urban solution of the Anglo-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid was the most ground breaking among the 273 project submitted by studios from all over the world.

The MAXXI design goes beyond the concept of the building-museum. The complexity of the volumes, the curving walls, the variations and intersections of the levels determine a very rich spatial and functional configuration that visitors may pass through via ever different and unexpected routes. Multiple environments coexist in a sequence of galleries illuminated by zenithal light filtered via a special roof system. The large full height atrium houses the reception services and leads into the auditorium, the galleries destined for the permanent collections, the exhibitions and the spaces devoted to the café and the bookshop.

MAXXI are made up of different departments, the main are MAXXI Art and MAXXI Architecture that promote knowledge in contemporary art, architecture, photography and design through exhibitions, performances, talks, seminars, commissions. MAXXI Art permanent collections are composed of artworks of Italian and international artists from the 1960s to today (Mario Merz, Anselm Kiefer, etc.) with a focus on works of Italian artists from the 2000s (Stefano Arienti, Vanessa Beecroft, etc.). MAXXI Architecture permanent collections are made up of archives (complete and partial) of important Italian architects of 20th century (Carlo Scarpa, Pier Luigi Nervi, etc.) and drawings, models, documents and artefacts of Italian and international architects of 21st century (Renzo Piano, Toyo Ito, etc.). Around 1.000 prints of over sixty contemporary photographers (Gabriele Basilico, Armin Linke, etc.) enrich MAXXI Architecture permanent collections.

In 2004 an agency of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage (Direzione Generale per l'Architettura e l'Arte Contemporanea) and the chair of Didactics of Museum and Territory of 'La Sapienza' University (Rome) established MAXXI Education Department. Art historians and architects with training in pedagogy and museum education are the staff members. Since the beginning, it has been working on contemporary art and architecture exhibitions –hosted in the so-called Building D while Hadid's museum complex was being built– as well as on MAXXI permanent collections.

Regarding activities and projects on architecture education devoted particularly to children and teenagers, between 2005 and 2008 the Education Dept. carried out experimental workshops for schools in and on the MAXXI's building site. Since the Museum's opening in 2010 MAXXI in *Azione* has been a permanent workshop on the Hadid's building and her way of design. Among the so-called 'special projects' –medium-term and long-term projects involving different targets such as schools, communities,

the elderly, etc.– the Education Dept. in 2011-2012 carried out “RE-CYCLE. Experimental recycling workshop” in collaboration with and sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research and in 2014-2015 it carried out “Let me explain you contemporary architecture!”, in collaboration with Liceo Classico e Linguistico Statale Aristofane (Rome). Both the projects relate to architecture education, secondary schools and teenagers, and will be investigated in this paper.

2. RE-CYCLE. Experimental recycling workshop

The first case-study refers to the project “RE-CYCLE. Experimental recycling workshop”² (from now on Re-Cycle Lab). It was carried out on the occasion of the exhibition “RE-CYCLE. Strategies for architecture, city and planet” (December 11th, 2011-May 20th, 2012). As the title states, the main theme of the exhibition was architecture recycling and recovery and it served the interest of the Ministry of Education, University and Research (from now on MIUR) that decided to sponsor a tailored learning programme devoted to secondary schools.

Re-Cycle Lab was a complex project made up of different parts:

- Step 1 and Step 2 (October-December, 2011): relating to the workshop carried out by the multi-disciplinary German group Raumlaborberlin³ to build the installation *Officina Roma*⁴.
- Step 3 and Step 4 (January-April, 2012): relating to the so-called ‘distant workshop’ and the final student exhibition set up in *Officina Roma* installation.

In October 2011 the Education Dept. and MIUR launched a national competition to select 20 secondary school students. The ones chosen came to MAXXI from all over Italy to take part in the workshop carried out by Raumlaborberlin (November 24th – December 1st, 2011). Students and architects built together an installation with recycled materials.

The German group began working on the issues of contemporary architecture and urbanism in 1999. In various interdisciplinary working teams, it investigates strategies for urban renewal and does research, urban and architectural design, and projects interactive environments following the motto ‘no trust, no city’. The Raumlabor group was selected to be involved in such a learning programme because it has already experienced participatory design: in fact, one of its purposes is to engender alternative practices within the city, fostered through cooperation and self-empowerment. Moreover, establishing temporary communities is one of Raumlabor’s tools to create a surrogate notion of a city beyond the capitalist logic of use-value and profitability.

At the beginning of 2012 the second phase of the project-made up of Step 3 (with different stages also) and Step 4 - started. In January the national competition to select 30 secondary school groups was launched. In February and March, the ones selected

² Re-Cycle. Experimental recycling workshop | MAXXI. (2015). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it/en/events/re-cycle-laboratorio-sperimentale-sul-riciclo/>. MAXXI Educational Playlist on YouTube (n.d.). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2390652B3404FD45>

³ Raumlaborberlin (n.d.). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <http://raumlabor.net/>

⁴ *Officina Roma* – Raumlaborberlin (n.d.). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <http://raumlabor.net/officina-roma/>

took part in a seminar about the exhibition contents (it took place at MAXXI and it was watched from Italian schools thanks to online streaming) and in a ‘distance workshop’, that means distance mentoring and tutoring by the Education Dept. in order to help school groups to design their own project of architecture recycling and recovery. Finally, in April there were the exhibition of five selected students’ projects –set up in *Officina Roma* installation– and the award ceremony of the best two.

2.1. Raumlaborberlin’s workshop with students

Focusing on the workshop carried out by Raumlaborberlin with secondary school students to build an installation on MAXXI square, it was not only a project of architecture education but it was also a social experiment in some sense. It combined twenty 18-years-old guys from all over Italy (who did not know each other and spoke a little English, for the majority) with a group of young architects and landscape planner (who did not spoke Italian, for the majority). They had to work together uninterruptedly for nine days in order to respect the deadline, moreover they had to do much manual labour and had to share ideas with each other to complete the *Officina Roma* installation. Finally, students had also to live together in the same residence.

Students were divided into four groups to better accomplish different manual and non-manual tasks: one of them was to daily update the blog devoted to Re-Cycle Lab project. In order to publicize it, show to teachers and peers the progress of the work and carry out an ongoing evaluation a blog was created. It was updated day to day by students, trainees and coordinators with posts, pictures and videos.

Students’ words and some pictures will help to understand how important were participatory design, autonomy in collaboration, and a good teamworking in order to carry out an effective project (figures 1-6).



Figure 1. Day 1, Students with Raumlaborberlin team before starting to work

Note: ©Inventori di Mondì

One of the member of Raumlaborberlin group stated immediately that the most important thing is not the artwork itself but the realization process and the people involved in. The project of the installation has not been yet outlined, it can be completed through our ideas. Day 1, Nora



Figure 2. Day 2, Students at work with Raumlaborberlin team
Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.



Figure 3. Day 3, Students at work with Raumlaborberlin team
Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.

Everybody struggles and, more important, helps one another: everyone of us is always ready to aid and share information with mates. In four days we became expert carpenters. The collaboration is the focus, maybe the most important lesson of this experience that we bring home. Day 4, Metal on Metal group

I built. I built a roof with barrels and wood, walls, floors, electric wires in the ground, certainties with which I can work, run, dream. I built something in me that I shared with people never seen before but to whom I owe so much. I gave something to somebody and I received so much in return. Day 8, Giuditta



Figure 4. Day 5, The building yard

Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.



Figure 5. Day 6, Students at work with Raumlaborberlin team

Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.

Today is the last day. Going away from here I'll bring with me something new and I'll use it to make out better in my world. I referred to the work concepts as teamwork, willpower, application, that are the basis of the sport I play and this is seldom learnt at school. Everybody is important in what he/she does and for this reason he/she has to do it to the best. We are like the parts of this house: every single screw - if well tightened - contributes to make the house sturdier because it is made up by many little parts that complete it, but only if every one of them is built with care it can make a perfect outcome. Day 9, Chiara

The whole Re-Cycle Lab project had a very good feedback from everyone involved in (Raumlabor group, teachers, pupils, trainees, etc.), nevertheless it showed some weaknesses, particularly regarding the Raumlabor's workshop. First of all, it represented a very compelling experience both for students and staff but it was limited in time. Moreover, students were very tired because they were neither trained to nor used to carry out several hours of hard manual labour. Last but not least, the coordinators had to pay a strong attention to security issues.



Figure 6. Day 9, *Officina Roma* installation is completed
Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.

Regarding strengths, the students' words previously mentioned tell most effectively. In fact, the workshop gained an enthusiastic and deep engagement of students; they felt part of the Museum inner community and protagonists of the whole project; they could share ideas and decide steps together with Raumlaborberlin group. Furthermore, pupils acquired new competences in making architecture (the know how) and working in team, meeting goals and respecting deadlines; they learnt the real meaning of cooperation and challenged themselves in problem solving. Regarding methodology, the most important strengths relate to the approach based on a multicultural, peer-to-peer and active experience, and to the ongoing evaluation through the devoted blog.

3. Let me explain you contemporary architecture!

The second case-study investigated in this paper is the project "Let me explain you contemporary architecture!"⁵. It was carried out by MAXXI Education Department in 2014-2015 in collaboration with Liceo Classico e Linguistico Statale 'Aristofane' (Rome), and it also refers to architecture education and teenagers.

The project was carried out in three stages between December 2014 and December 2015 and involved sixty students of a secondary school situated in a peripheral neighbourhood of Rome called Tufello. Pupils were between sixteen and eighteen years old and freely decided to take part in this after-school-time project, that aimed to make them architectural heritage mediators, particularly for their peers.

The project's phases:

⁵ 'Let me explain you contemporary architecture!' | MAXXI (n.d.). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it/en/events/te-la-spiego-io-larchitettura-contemporanea-2/>. MAXXI Educational Playlist on YouTube (n.d.). Retrieved December 9th, 2016, from <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2390652B3404FD45>

- Stage 1 (December 2014-February 2015): guided tours on MAXXI's architecture, collections and exhibitions. Training on the profession of heritage mediator. Tours of selected building and groups of buildings;
- Stage 2 (March-May 2015): producing video-guides. Day devoted to architectural heritage mediation;
- Stage 3 (October-December 2015): publishing online the video-guides (MAXXI's official accounts on YouTube, Facebook, etc.).

“Let me explain you contemporary architecture!” was well integrated in the school curriculum by teachers, especially in a multidisciplinary project focused on the architecture of the city of Rome (from Ancient Roman architecture to modern architecture) (figure 7).



Figure 7. Students filming their peers in Foro Italico

Note: ©Inventori di Mondi.

Between December 2014 and February 2015, students were guided through MAXXI's galleries and trained on heritage mediation, particularly on architectural contents. The Education Department staff worked together with teachers and selected five buildings and groups of buildings that represent modern and contemporary architecture in North-West Rome: MAXXI – National Museum of the 21st Century Arts, Auditorium Parco della Musica designed by Renzo Piano, Palazzetto dello Sport designed by Pier Luigi Nervi, the Villaggio Olimpico area and the architectural and sports complex now called Foro Italico (former Foro Mussolini). Students visited and studied all the chosen sites with Education Department staff and their teachers. Some of the buildings (or parts of them) were expressly opened for that purpose (figure 8).



Figure 8. The professional filmmaker is setting the scene at Duce's gymnasium

Note: ©Inventori di Mondì.

One of the goals of the project was realizing video educational tools, that means five online video-guides of the selected buildings designed by teenagers and devoted to their peers. Twenty students among sixty chose to work for this task. Between March and May 2015 the Education Department staff provided lessons and bibliography on each building and group of buildings. Pupils worked in small groups and every one of them was assigned to examine in depth one of the buildings. Moreover, the teens acted as screenwriters (they wrote a script on the buildings), directors (they chose the framings of the video-guides), and actors/mediators (they were filmed while explaining the contents in front of the building). Sometimes they acted also as camera operators helped by a professional video-maker.

At the end of May –as final event of the first two phases– the Education Dept. organized a day of architectural heritage mediation carried out by trained students on and in the five selected sites. The event was mainly devoted to students' peers and schools and institutions of the Roman area in question, such as the *Villaggio Olimpico* recreation centre for the elderly (figure 9).

Between October and December 2015 the five video-guides (in Italian with English subtitles) were published online on MAXXI's official accounts on different social media and reached about 150.000 people thanks to the sharing.

In conclusion, the project "Let me explain you contemporary architecture!" had different strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the last ones, it should be noted that the twenty participants to the production of the video-guides found very difficult to 'translate' specialist language to be understandable to their peers. They were strongly influenced by the traditional scholastic method and accustomed to repeating the same sentences of the books. It was arduous to find their way of write, talk and express themselves. Furthermore, the second stage (writing texts, rehearsing them in front of the camera and then shooting the video-guides) was the most demanding one but it was carried out in two months only (from March to May 2015) due to school calendar and students' tasks and deadlines.



Figure 9. A student/mediator at MAXXI during the architectural heritage mediation day
Note: ©Inventori di Mondi.

Concerning the project's strengths, it should be noted those pupils –especially the twenty ones– did their best in after-school time because they increasingly grew fond of the project: their free choice is a very significant element. They acquired knowledge and new skills through working in small groups and respecting deadlines. Moreover, the project helped to draw attention to closed or difficult-to-visit buildings (for example Mussolini's gymnasium and the so-called *Casa delle Armi in Foro Italico* complex). Last but not least, the spreading through the Internet: online video-guides were very successful on Facebook. As stated before, they reached almost 150.000 people thanks to the sharing. Both the projects "Re-Cycle Lab" and "Let me explain contemporary architecture!" show that MAXXI Education Department tries to take advantage of the Internet and social media as learning tools.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion of this article, two stories should be noted. Giuditta, one of the participants of the workshop with Raumlaborberlin group, was such influenced by this experience and went to Germany to attend a woodwork school. Time after-words she came back to Italy and started to be trained by a maker of stringed instruments. She found her passion for woodworking and her way as well. Beatrice, one of the twenty students who created the five video-guides of the project "Let me explain you contemporary architecture!" decided to study History of Art at the university. She has been always interested in arts but reported that the experience with MAXXI Education Department influenced her significantly.

Even today there is a need for a clearer understanding of the educational role of museums –particularly as fundamental partners devoted to informal education for schools– and also their role in the shaping of individual and community identity. Due to

cultural politics of the last decades, we barely think to museums as political institutions⁶ that hold power to represent a society and address only selected social categories by means of their buildings' architecture, and arrangement of objects in an exhibition (Macdonald, 2007). Referring to Hooper Greenhill (2001), in fact:

Subjectivity, meaning, knowledge, truth and history are the materials of cultural politics and especially in their inter-relationships with power; the power to name, to represent common sense, to create official versions, to represent the social world and to represent the past. (p. 10)

Although the museum is no more perceived as unique holder of an absolute truth, it is still recognized as place where an often incontestable knowledge is preserved. In the museum education field, therefore, working with different target audiences such as children, teenagers, communities, and migrants is a way to widen the sharing of this power through negotiation of medium and message. This should be a step towards the shaping of identity, social empowerment and critical consciousness.

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⁶ About this theme see the influence of Michel Foucault thought in Hooper Greenhill (1992).

research. She obtained the Master of Arts in Learning and Visitor Studies in Museums and Galleries at School of Museum Studies of University of Leicester writing a thesis about the qualitative research project she designed and carried out called MAXXI – Focus Group, realized before the Museum opening. For MAXXI Education Department she curated among others My Iran, the Museum first intercultural project on the occasion of the exhibition Unedited History. Iran 1960 – 2014 and the projects devoted to teenagers Re-Cycle Lab, “Let me explain you contemporary architecture!” and Beyond the Wall. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3686-4463. Email: marta.morelli@fondazionemaxxi.it