

# University heritage, museums and Third Mission: a geographical viewpoint on social engagement

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Social engagement refers to participation in collective activities and today represents a key strategy through which museums and other cultural heritage organisations can both empower their connections with visitors, and improve their own efficacy as cultural and scientific institutions. As explained by Waterton and Watson, understanding the role that heritage plays in a particular society allows us an insight on how the communities engage with it.<sup>1</sup>

That makes it possible for museums and collections to connect with their social context, improving their ability to serve as dynamic social spaces for community engagement and action. Social engagement shows therefore a strong geographical base because 'where', 'who' and 'how' affect any process oriented to encourage local participation in heritage valorisation. Such connections appear even more evident when applied to a geographical collection, like the one present in the University of Padua.

This paper originates from the authors' experience on structuring the scientific project of the future Museum of Geography of the University of Padua in Italy. Even though the museum has not been formally established, two years' work on historical research, collection reconnaissance and space organisation has led to an idea of a 'collections and connections' museum, where the collections become strategic to highlight social and spatial connections to both historical and present research practices and visitors' personal experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Waterton and Watson, 'Heritage and Community Engagement', p. 2.

All the reflections shared in this paper are the result of the interpretation, through geographical lenses, of the growing attention on university Third Mission as a valid opportunity for universities to both enhance and legitimise the cultural and social engagement of their scientific heritage.

### **Third Mission as starting point**

The term 'Third Mission' gained currency in the 1980s. It refers, on the one hand, to the role of the public communication of science, and on the other hand, to the role of technology transfer and applied research. In the last decade, international debate has progressively enlarged the spectrum of its definition, and has brought clarity around this 'umbrella term', reaching some important results in the Green Paper of the E3M Project of the European Commission.<sup>2</sup>

The document recognises the 'social dimension' of the Third Mission, beyond the first economic and industry-related meaning. The Third Mission is thus to be articulated in three activities: Technology Transfer and Innovation, Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, and Social Engagement, the topic of this paper. A second important point clearly stated by the Green Paper is that the Third Mission is not to be understood as a mission in itself, but that it is called to redraw the entire spectrum of university activities, including research and teaching. A third point refers to the need for the Third Mission to promote a careful evaluation of the criteria for measuring all university activity. It adds to the existing quality indicators other parameters and better guidelines to steer, as well as evaluate and classify, the university activities to 'social welfare'.

In the Green Paper, however, the framework of indicators and evaluation methodologies is sketchy, lacking a clear identification and measurement of the activities to be monitored.<sup>3</sup>

In the Italian context, the principles provided by the Green Paper were earlier applied by the Italian Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) in an experiment that lasted six years, from 2004 to 2010. In this project, the evaluation of social engagement was still tentative and for university museums was limited to few indicators (number of active museum centres; number of museum sites managed; number of days of opening; number of square meters; presence of visit counter system; number of visitors; number of paying visitors). In its 2015 report, ANVUR recognised that the indicators were not sufficiently standardised and there was need for the clarification of scopes and methods of the social engagement, so that it could go beyond the most easily quantifiable aspects.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E3M Project, 'European Commission Green Paper'.

<sup>3</sup> Varotto, 'Tertium non datur', 639.

<sup>4</sup> ANVUR, 'La valutazione della terza missione nelle università italiane', 31.

This topic is still top priority for international and national discussion,<sup>5</sup> as confirmed also by the International Workshop on 'Evaluation of the Third Mission of Universities and Public Research Organizations' promoted by ANVUR in Rome on 4 May 2015. However, the evaluation of the Third Mission today remains a self-assessment, information and transparency tool for universities,<sup>6</sup> without any role in allocating economic resources.

While waiting for a system of evaluation able to read and compare different realities on an international scale, universities are invited to pay attention to the communication of science and to strengthen the exchange within their specific communities and territories.

As confirmed by scientific literature, the greatest impact of the knowledge produced by research is to be found in the vicinity of the universities.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly evident when considering technology transfer (e.g. the growing number of start-up companies developing close to the academic institutions). But some other less obvious indicators may be taken into account, among which is the geographical provenance of university museum visitors. It would be interesting to examine where the visitors come from in order to investigate the extent of the geographical area each museum attractions. It is equally interesting to study how universities interact with their environment, and this was the main focus of a recent study by Cavallo and Romenti,<sup>8</sup> who identified three main meanings of territory-community relation models applied by university organisations. This categorisation includes visions such as 'competitive basin' in which the university needs to diffuse its own products, 'co-decisional partners' in which the university looks for resources with a collaborative approach, and 'open, global, connected, creative and socially responsible ecosystem' in which universities are part of a broader system oriented to holistic development. It is interesting to see how such categorisation might apply to university museums as well, highlighting different possible approaches to their understanding of social engagement. According to Boyer's<sup>9</sup> theory of Public Engagement as well as Furco's vision of 'engaged campus',<sup>10</sup> for example, it could be suggested that communities' expectations and needs play an important role in orienting museums' future researches and divulgation projects. What emerges from this exercise is the need for a model of a museum that sees the environment in which it is based as a public agenda, shared and participated in by the local and national community. This vision could be able to merge the meanings of public and community into social engagement.

<sup>5</sup> Vargiu, 'Indicators for the Evaluation of Public Engagement'.

<sup>6</sup> ANVUR, 'La valutazione della terza missione nelle università italiane', 5.

<sup>7</sup> Veugelers and Del Rey, 'The Contribution of Universities to Innovation'.

<sup>8</sup> Cavallo and Romenti, 'Università italiane e territorio'.

<sup>9</sup> Boyer, 'The Scholarship of Engagement'.

<sup>10</sup> Furco, 'The Engaged Campus'.

## Between geography and social engagement

It seems, therefore, clear that geography has something to say regarding social engagement. There is, in fact, a close relation between the new 'social' definition of third mission and the social-oriented knowledge of geography.

The Third Mission is an opportunity for the geographical discipline to see the recognition of its role of science oriented to social and spatial development, strengthening its relations with the territory where they are still weak. On the other hand, such opportunity turns into a renewed commitment of the role that geography is called to play, redefining the contours of its mission and the criteria of evaluation of its activities (not always clear to the general public) in accordance with the third mission guidelines.<sup>11</sup>

Starting from these considerations, reflection is encouraged on the theoretical and practical role of geographers in the definition of the 'Third Mission'. The legitimacy of territorial involvement and activity for universities is emphasised, as well as the idea that university museums are a natural medium between scientific heritage and the general public, and therefore represent one of the most receptive contexts to territorial involvement and activity.

In order to offer a tool able to guide future debates, Varotto proposed an agenda for Italian geography organised around five strategic goals inspired by the Green Paper: sharing knowledge; multi-scalarity; articulation of scientific outcomes; engagement; and recognition and integrated assessment.

Such an agenda was used by the authors as a responsive tool for developing the Museum of Geography as an integrated formative system. In the following text, Varotto's reflections are reported (R) and later posed as questions (Q) to be addressed and interpreted considering the specificity of the case and context (A).

### Sharing Knowledge

R: The first strategic goal refers to Sharing Knowledge. For geography, this means paying attention to the different meanings of the words 'publish' and 'public'. The issue involves the debate on transparency and free use of research products paid for by public funds. From this point of view, Italian geography is profoundly backward, without even a comprehensive website to share its production and the majority of scientific journals of geographical associations still only accessible in hard copy or by subscription. The exhortation for geographers is to publish less but to publish better, in other words, to make public (for real) the results of the researches in a more effective and pervasive way.

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<sup>11</sup> Varotto, 'Tertium non datur', 639.

*Q: How will the Museum of Geography share its knowledge?*

A: This will be done not only by exhibiting (making public) collections that are not yet public nor published, but also by embracing, in a wider sense, an open access philosophy. This can be translated in publishing catalogues, teaching support materials and scientific productions online, on free-access formats and platforms. But it could also include special attention to providing free access to the Museum for everyone. On a larger scale, this could lead to engagements and contributions in international projects aimed to share knowledge on cultural heritage, for example, the Europeana multi-lingual online repository project ([www.europeana.eu](http://www.europeana.eu)). However, the spirit of the museum should always be directed to encourage different ways of dissemination towards different audiences, as indicated by the Royal Geographical Society guide, *Communicating Geographical Research Beyond the Academy. A Guide for Researchers*.<sup>12</sup>

### Multi-scalarity

R: Multi-scalarity is understood as the ability of universities to connect to the wide range of social ecosystems which can be found in their towns, regions, nations and beyond. This complexity of relations is not adequately recognised and evaluated today. Enhancing international relations or scientific products are considered to have greater impact and of an excellent level, while relations and products at lower scales are thought to be less important. It is generally at the local level that social expectations are higher.

*Q: How could the Museum of Geography meet multi-scalarity?*

A: The Museum of Geography could meet multi-scalarity in three ways. First, the Museum's contents and exhibits should present different geographical scales to support the idea of a discipline which considers multi-scalarity as a necessary method for learning how to create hypothesis and connections between phenomena and places. Second, the Museum should make evident the multi-scalarity of scientific networks, which include local, national and international groups of peers and experts that are involved in researching, teaching and enhancing geography. Finally, multi-scalarity in partnerships should be considered and accomplished. This could include a multi-scale network of institutions, museums, associations or shops that have agreed to sign a specific partnership with the Museum of Geography for enhancing geographical education and dissemination.

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<sup>12</sup> Gardner et al., *Communicating Geographical Research beyond the Academy*.

## Scientific outcomes

R: The third goal considers the articulation of scientific outcomes and it is from a discipline with a strong territorial involvement, such as geography, that a call should go out for a serious consideration of other profiles of activity, not necessarily aimed at publishing a product in classical terms.

*Q: How will the Museum of Geography articulate its own scientific outcomes?*

A: In our vision, the Museum should prepare itself to go beyond the academic walls and find the right communication tools to meet and connect with the city and its communities. Its heritage and spirit could serve as an intercultural medium as well as an artistic one. The Museum should stimulate geographers to recover the traditional role of 'craftsmen' of territorial knowledge<sup>13</sup> by engaging them with local actions able to reveal global issues or elaborating personal representations on social phenomena. The Museum could play an important role in supporting local authorities to promote public and community engagement through a specific 'call for changes' or 'call for different views', to be aggregated and elaborated with scientific cartographic elaborations and presented through theatre or a web documentary. The Museum should take advantage of the geographical language in order to define and promote long-life education projects aimed to address social complexity.

## Engagement

R: 'Engagement' is a central term both in the documents of the Working Group E3M and for cultural organisations today. The process of engagement should reflect the values of inclusiveness, participation and reciprocity in the resolution of public issues of a democratic society. The final goals should therefore aim to prepare educated and engaged citizens and to strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility. Engagement means first of all sharing and extending the boundaries the research activity outside the discipline and the academic world, to avoid the risk of self-referential knowledge reduced to the cultivation of its own backyard.

*Q: How could the Museum of Geography support engagement?*

A: We see three main directions: the first is community engagement, obtained by approaching civil society through constant public debates, organising courses

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<sup>13</sup> Varotto, 'Tertium non datur', 642.

and training opportunities that recognise the needs of the territory and also trying to steer the search paths (for example, projects, PhD candidates, publications) to the concrete needs of the area. The second operates through interactive exhibits and personalised guided tours of the city, province or region. The third opens to specific geographical practices and activities to be held outside the museum aimed to engage and sensitise attendees to geographical issues.

### Recognition and Integrated Assessment

R: Concerning recognition and integrated assessment, geographers are invited to apply the principles of the third mission in their universities, fostering the development and social legitimacy of the discipline. The social relevance of academic activity is not always taken into account by the usual practice of evaluation: the aspect of 'engagement' of research and teaching, so far ignored or marginally considered, must make its way in the official evaluation or bibliometric criteria.

*Q: How could the Museum of Geography interpret a recognition and integrated assessment?*

A: An integrated assessment for the Museum of Geography could involve specific visitor typologies through different strategies, such as focus groups or role games. The evaluation of the Museum of Geography should therefore take into account not only its ability to target different audiences, but also the effectiveness of each engagement action. The legitimacy of the museum is gained through its ability to inform its visitors of the importance of geography not just for the university, but also for their daily lives.

### Conclusion

Reflecting on the possible applications of the agenda for Italian geography to the Museum of Geography has been a motivating exercise. It allowed us to identify the museum's potential in establishing generative and regenerating relations between the university and its territory.

From this perspective, the university museum becomes a third mission incubator through which the university can invest to refine the innovation originating from the synergy between its three missions.

The fundamental components of this incubator might be synthesised in three main pillars or dimensions. The first consists in having a vision, which means to work for a new university commitment that considers the territory's needs and potential as a road map for its own activities. The second is the structure and consists of the ability to think, organise and perform events oriented to dissemination

and social engagement. The third is communication, the ability to adopt diverse communication strategies depending on the aims and the target involved.

We believe that considering these three dimensions will help cultural organisations to direct and strengthen the synergy between them and their local environments. In this way, a university museum, such as the Museum of Geography, will see its role evolving from an experimental incubator to a strategic pivot in enhancing the university's social and cultural engagement.

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