

Heritage and Rural Tourism from Municipal Museums: Perspectives for Local Development

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Abstract:

Municipal museums represent essential cultural institutions that connect heritage with the community and stimulate local development. Beyond their traditional functions of conservation and education, they hold significant potential to become strategic actors in rural tourism by engaging with community projects that integrate cultural, productive, and sustainable practices. This perspective opens the possibility for museums to serve as meeting spaces where heritage, identity, and local economy converge, fostering income diversification and the strengthening of community values. The study aims to analyze the genesis, evolution, and current situation of these institutions, in order to identify their methodological limitations and propose improvement actions that contribute to enhanced heritage management through the incorporation of rural tourism as a means of self-financing and local development. A qualitative approach was employed, based on documentary analysis, complemented by semi-structured interviews with community stakeholders and a comparative review of experiences in heritage management and rural tourism. In this way, municipal museums, through adequate articulation with rural initiatives, can significantly contribute to improving the quality of life of the population and consolidating the territory as an alternative tourism destination.

Keywords:

heritage management, municipal museums, rural tourism, local development

I. Introduction

Within postmodernity, the museum, due to its utility and social dimension, became a necessary institution within any socio-cultural strategy serving society. As a place to share values and traditions, it creates a space for human beings to encounter their history, culture, and reality. Its role in disseminating heritage values was consolidated when new theoretical perspectives were introduced and diverse functions were assigned to serve as a reference for knowledge acquisition (ICOMOS, 2005, 2008; Tilden, 2007).

This change of perspective was influenced by different armed conflicts that destroyed countless heritage values. The catastrophe of World War II, in particular, generated the need to revise the closed vision that had prevailed until then regarding the functions of museums as repositories of objects of high heritage value. Traditional museum management is synthesized in three basic aspects: conservation, research, and dissemination (Ham, 1992; Risk, 1982; Morales & Ham, 2008).

An opportunity to be seized is that, within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, several of its objectives highlight the possibility of linking museums with sustainable development,

especially in relation to quality education, the reduction of inequalities, and the promotion of sustainable communities. Hence, alternatives are sought to guarantee their permanence and social relevance (UNESCO, 2021; Pérez Anzardo et al., 2021).

In Cuba, museums originated from private collecting in the 19th century, based on the gathering of utilitarian, religious, and artistic objects. Today, there are more than 300 institutions of this type, of which about 160 are municipal museums. The initiative for the latter emerged from the promulgation of Law No. 23 in May 1979 (CNPC, 2009). Thus, establishments appeared whose purpose was to address the ideological and cultural advancement of the people, reflecting the particularities of each municipality in relation to the arts, local history, archaeology, and natural sciences.

These establishments, subordinated to the Ministry of Culture, scarce in resources and staffed with personnel poorly trained in heritage management, were defined by Marta Arjona as small institutions that, in addition to exhibiting materials related to regional history, constituted centers of research and cultural promotion. In the 8th Congress of the Party and in the Guidelines of Economic and Social Policy, reference is made to the need to strengthen cultural institutions as actors of local development, although without specifying mechanisms of self-financing or strategies for linking with rural tourism (Communist Party of Cuba, 2021; Pérez Anzardo et al., 2025).

The National Museum System Law of 2009 repealed the aforementioned Law 23 of 1979 and revised numerous methodological instructions, standards, and work procedures (CNPC, 2009). However, today, while Cuban society suffers a profound moral and economic collapse, municipal museums remain as empty buildings and their impact on the community is increasingly diminished. Moreover, nothing has been stipulated regarding their freedom to self-finance, nor the possibility of diversifying their activity through the integration of rural tourism linked to the community (Pérez Anzardo et al., 2022; Pérez & Cardet, 2022).

Municipal museums suffer notable economic hardships and constitute “object museums.” They experience a crisis due to the minimal interpretation of the memory they safeguard, which affects their institutional identity and visitor attendance. They debate between remaining as inactive institutions or being closed in the near future. Gladys Collazo (Granma, 2015) pointed out that there are centers that have been open for 20 years with the same scripts, lacking attractiveness despite the value of their collections.

Open interviews conducted with public officials from the municipalities of Antilla, Rafael Freyre, and Gibara, as well as with museum workers in these localities of the province of Holguín, confirmed that these institutions have lagged behind in theory and methodology for bringing the public closer to heritage. Among the main limitations, already declared by several authors (Mateos Mateos, 2013a, 2013b; Silvestre, Patiño, & Hernández, 2000; Torres Moré, 2006; Pérez Anzardo, Batista Batista, & Leyva Ávila, 2023; Pérez Anzardo, Infante Estrabao, & Hechavarría Laffita, 2023), the following stand out:

1. Absolute dependence, like all institutions of the Ministry of Culture, on the budgets of this Ministry and the guidelines it generates.
2. Poor technical preparation of staff, who also lack motivation and fluctuate constantly due to low salaries.
3. Theoretical-methodological isolation, reflected in their scarce connection with global museology perspectives, such as Heritage Interpretation.

4. Insufficient strategies to turn heritage assets into tourist attractions. In fact, their management for self-financing and converting local heritage into a source of income for the community is nonexistent.
5. Strong dependence and control by political power, as centers of non-formal political education linked to schools, although cracks in this relationship reveal inter-institutional distancing at all levels and difficulties in outdated organizational structures and material issues.

The few visitors are mere passive spectators of their heritage, and in general, workers have little sense of belonging, with the exception of some who have been in the profession for years. This has caused the public not to understand the essence, mission, social identity, and particularities of the museum institution, as a preliminary step to being able to appreciate what it treasures. Consequently, the general objective of this research lies in the analysis of the genesis, evolution, current situation, and methodological limitations of municipal museums, so that through improvement actions, heritage management may incorporate rural tourism as a means of self-financing and socio-cultural development.

The very existence of these institutions in each territory is a potentiality for generating development if territorial models are recognized and prioritized, and if local capacities are allowed to be raised to face their own strategies of internal organization in the management of integral development. Cuba must seek the sustainable advancement of society, and municipal museums cannot remain on the sidelines of this reality: they face needs to which they must respond as cultural entities, and they must promote, through their heritage management work, the socio-cultural and economic regeneration of territories through the exploitation of their own traditions and history.

II. Research Methods

A qualitative approach was employed, combining the use of theoretical and empirical methods with the purpose of achieving a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon under study. Among the theoretical methods, analysis and synthesis, abstraction and concretion, as well as induction and deduction stand out, all of which facilitated the conceptual construction and the establishment of relationships between the observed trends and the regularities of the heritage management process. Within the empirical methods, semi-structured interviews, group work, analysis of normative documents, and direct observation were used, allowing the collection of information from different perspectives and the comparison of official regulations with the reality of museum institutions. All these procedures made it possible to reveal methodological trends and limitations, establish connections with the phenomenon under study, and reach conclusions that guide the incorporation of rural tourism as a means of self-financing and socio-cultural development in municipal museums.

III. Results and Discussion

For the municipal museum to extend beyond the mere offer of leisure and cultural consumption to visitors, and to become a source of heritage education capable of contributing to knowledge, the preservation of historical memory, the strengthening of identity values, and economic profitability, it must transform a wide range of elements of both content and form. It is necessary for the museum to open itself to change and adopt—without losing its identity and while preserving the particularities of its heritage—models and perspectives that exist worldwide and have proven their functionality (Pérez Anzardo, Ortega, Pérez, & Campdesuñer, 2022).

3.1 Municipal Museums Transformed into Integral Community Museums

During the 1960s, museology acquired the status of a social science at the service of the community and, subject to continuous innovations, gave rise to what is known as New Museology—a renewing movement that sought to overcome the old theory that distanced itself from the institutional objectives of all museum creation (Varine, 1984/1996). This new movement began with a meeting held in Chile in 1972, where emphasis was placed on recognizing the museum as a potential instrument of development.

According to Hugues de Varine, a scholar of the subject, New Museology emerged as a discipline that advocated abolishing the distance between the public and the museum's content, promoting an open dialogue between both, restoring perception to some, and ensuring enjoyment for others. A key year for this innovative museological current was 1984, when it became institutionalized as a movement, and the following year the International Movement for New Museology (MINOM) was founded in Portugal. Also in 1984, the Declaration of Oaxtepec was issued in Mexico, highlighting the need for community participation in both heritage and museums, the use of museums as tools for development, and the inseparable relationship between territory, heritage, and community (ICOMOS, 2005, 2008).

Currently, according to Spanish scholar Óscar Navajas (2015), New Museology is understood as a continuously evolving strategy whose methodological parameters are based on the need for ongoing dialogue and active participation among different actors, both direct (museology professionals) and indirect (specialists from other disciplines, government, political organizations, educators, and citizens themselves).

The museum is the building, and its sphere of action is the community in which it is located, since it is the community that creates and determines the heritage that the museum will later safeguard. Community awareness is required to foster a sense of belonging to its heritage and museum, both as tools for socio-cultural and economic development. This approach implies a multidisciplinary perspective, where various sciences converge, and heritage is considered in its entirety, going beyond mere collections displayed in showcases (Mateos Mateos, 2013a, 2013b).

The instrument of New Museology is the Integral Community Museum, which the European Network of Ecomuseums defines as a dynamic process based on an agreement with the community, enabling it to preserve, interpret, and value its heritage in the service of sustainable development. Today, there are hundreds of such museums worldwide, nearly 200 in Europe (Torres Moré, 2006).

Hugues de Varine (1984/1996), who introduced the concept, presented the essential objectives of this new museum:

1. To constitute the image of its territory.
2. To serve as a mirror of the population.
3. To contribute to the durable and sustainable development of the community.

This scholar emphasized the differences between traditional museums and the new proposal: the former have focused on the collection, the building, and the visitor; while the latter are oriented toward heritage (tangible and intangible, natural and cultural), the territory (the physical space and a broad network of environmental and socio-cultural components), and the community (its integral development). Hence, rural tourism can be integrated as a strategy for self-financing and local development (Pérez Anzardo et al., 2023).

Integral Community Museums are not governed by inviolable canons for their activity. Each maintains its own particularities, based on local socio-cultural characteristics. Each museum is a unique identity through which it projects itself. It is linked to the locality and the formation of a territorial cultural identity, rooted in the idea of raising awareness and achieving citizen participation to increase the well-being and development of the community in which it is located, managing its particular traits, mechanisms, difficulties, and the context of everyday life to achieve its purposes.

These museums enjoy a much more independent status than traditional museums and have greater freedom in securing their own forms of financing. They also possess greater organizational freedom and autonomy to implement the means they deem necessary to achieve their objectives. These institutions are strategies designed to link the heritage they safeguard to the community, highlight the institution through the memory it preserves, and bring the public closer as protagonists rather than mere spectators.

3.2 Improvement Actions for the Heritage Management of Municipal Museums Linked to Rural Tourism for Local Development

Given the current perspective that threatens to lead municipal museums to disappearance, it is essential to transform them into cultural complexes capable of promoting, safeguarding, and disseminating heritage assets. These museums must engage in management strategies that generate wealth and prosperity for the community, inspired by the principles of Integral Community Museums but adapted to Cuban local conditions.

In this process, the pursuit of economic and social profitability is fundamental, accompanied by a legislative framework that recognizes inhabitants as holders of their culture and grants them the right to democratically manage their heritage as a common good. Likewise, the potential for commercialization of the community's intangible heritage (traditional activities, local festivals, natural sites) can be linked to rural tourism and other market strategies, always under conservation policies that prevent the commodification of cultural identity.

Institutional autonomy is another key aspect: museums must have the capacity to reinvest the benefits obtained in internal improvements, such as infrastructure modernization, salary enhancement, acquisition of new pieces, hiring of specialists, and financing of conservation projects. Within this framework and according to their competencies, these entities can define local cultural heritage planning, establish relationships with public and private territorial agents, and materialize strategies into concrete actions for local development centered on cultural and natural heritage.

Tourism programs associated with heritage offer additional benefits: they foster the training of local guides, strengthen the community's capacity to interpret its cultural values, and stimulate entrepreneurial initiative. This generates opportunities for local commerce, project creation, the emergence of small private businesses, and the consolidation of social cohesion. In addition, they encourage supra-municipal cooperation and integration into regional or provincial spaces.

The diversification of funding sources and the incorporation of new technologies will allow the renewal of the municipal economy, the creation of jobs, the generation of foreign currency, and the consolidation of more decentralized and autonomous forms of management. The enhancement of heritage, managed by municipal museums, will contribute to establishing the relationship between heritage and identity, heritage and society, and heritage and economy,

improving the population's quality of life and offering employment prospects that curb youth migration.

Municipal museums must transform into dynamic institutions that articulate heritage with the cultural and productive practices of rural communities. To this end, actions are proposed that combine practical and strategic dimensions, ensuring both execution and sustainability:

1. Design heritage routes that include museum visits and tours of rural communities, integrating craft workshops and agricultural practices; requiring local cultural heritage planning articulated with public and private agents.
2. Organize temporary exhibitions in the museum on local festivals, rural music, and cultivation techniques; with the corresponding institutional autonomy that allows reinvestment of profits in infrastructure and equipment.
3. Create heritage interpretation programs with local guides who narrate ancestral stories and knowledge, accompanied by community training and policies that recognize inhabitants as managers of their culture.
4. Establish agreements with rural producers so that the museum serves as a point of sale for handicrafts and traditional foods, in accordance with legislation linking heritage commercialization to rural tourism under conservation policies.
5. Incorporate museum spaces to teach traditional trades (carpentry, ceramics, typical cuisine) in order to diversify funding sources and foster new forms of decentralized management.
6. Promote community festivals organized in coordination with the museum, stimulating entrepreneurial initiative and the creation of small private businesses linked to rural tourism.
7. Implement educational tourism projects with schools and universities, strengthening the relationship between heritage and identity, and heritage and society, in such a way as to prevent youth migration.
8. Develop digital platforms to disseminate the museum's heritage and tourism offerings and those of its locality, in line with innovation policies and institutional autonomy.

Ultimately, these improvement actions demonstrate that municipal museums can cease to be opaque and decadent institutions and instead become promoters of balanced integral development, linking heritage with rural tourism as a means of self-financing, social cohesion, and community prosperity.

IV. Conclusion

Municipal museums, in their current state of precariousness and limited connection with the community, face the risk of disappearing if they are not transformed into dynamic institutions capable of articulating heritage with the cultural and productive practices of the rural environment. The analysis carried out highlights both their methodological and organizational limitations, as well as the potential they possess to become engines of local development. The integration of the principles of Integral Community Museums and the linkage with rural tourism offer a viable path to overcome institutional dependence, diversify sources of financing, and strengthen cultural identity. However, gaps remain regarding real autonomy, the technical preparation of staff, and the need for clear policies that guarantee the sustainability of these actions. In this sense, municipal museums can cease to be opaque and decadent spaces and instead become promoters of balanced integral development, generating social cohesion, economic opportunities, and community prosperity through the enhancement of their heritage.

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