

Review: Teresa Blanch Bofill, La gestió dels museus i el patrimoni en les polítiques culturals a Catalunya (1980-2018)

PhD thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2018.

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Abstract

In this paper, the author analyzes critically and comprehensively what have been the models of management and financing of museums and cultural heritage in Catalonia during the last forty years. She also poses a series of reflections on the current state of the sector and the strategic policies that are being designed today to relocate and adapt it to the social, economic and technological changes that it will face in the XXI century.

Review

Teresa Blanch is a well-known archaeologist in Catalonia, with a long and solid professional career, especially in the field of heritage and local museums, to which is added a close and uninterrupted connection with the university as a teacher and tireless promoter of the insertion of our students in the job market. This path has been crowned now, one may say, with her doctoral thesis, entitled 'La gestió dels museus i el patrimoni en les polítiques culturals a Catalunya (1980-2018)' (The Management of Museums and Heritage in the Cultural Policies in Catalonia) and defended at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona on November 29th, 2018.

In this paper, the author analyzes critically and comprehensively what have been the models of management and financing of museums and cultural heritage in Catalonia during the last forty years. She also poses a series of reflections on the current state of the sector and the strategic policies that are being designed today to relocate and adapt it to the social, economic and technological changes that it will face in the XXI century. In addition to a balance of what has been done, in which the achievements and shortcomings of the cultural policies of our country in times of democracy are pointed out, the thesis is particularly aimed at understanding the complicated situation in which museums and heritage in Catalonia are today, especially following the economic crisis that began in 2008. The thesis also establishes the basic premises from which the restructuration of the sector in the coming years must be discussed and promoted if social and cultural values of heritage are to be preserved in a world increasingly oriented to put the rule of profit above absolutely everything.

This is important research, the result of a thorough study of specialized bibliography and a firsthand knowledge of the object of study. The wide experience of the author as a museum specialist and manager of the local cultural heritage since the eighties has certainly helped, and also the fact that much of the data and arguments of the thesis were obtained from semi-structured interviews with seven leading museum professionals in Catalonia and a number of informal interviews with other experts and responsible for public administration. All these were made between

2013 and 2016 within the framework of various meetings and specialized conferences.

The work starts formulating four hypotheses (plus two subhypotheses derived from the former ones) on the main challenges that the management of museums and heritage in Catalonia will face in the coming decades (all extensible, largely, to the rest of Spain and, in my opinion, to a contemptible little part of Europe). These hypotheses are discussed in the extensive concluding chapter, while the body of the thesis describes in detail the aspects of cultural policy (Chapter II) and management and financing (Chapter III) that endorse and support them. The work also includes a first chapter of a general nature on the transition from classical museology to new museology, and is complete with a series of documentary annexes.

The most important reflections of Teresa Blanch in terms of topicality are based on one unappealable fact: the progressive decline in the last decade of the public resources for cultural heritage (a trend that does not give signals of reversing in the near future) and the urgent need to seek alternative sources of funding and more efficient forms of management, as well as designing more effective strategies to attract and keep new and old visitors. Among the various initiatives promoted by public administrations to cope with this difficult situation, which puts at risk specially the survival of a lot of heritage equipment and elements of municipal agency (which are the majority in our country), the author detects three main lines of action, all closely interrelated: the promotion of new management models based on the public-private binomial (outsourcing, crowdfunding, signing contracts, program with measurable targets, etc.), a more direct and explicit link of the heritage sector with the sector of tourism, and the deployment of networks of cooperation between museums that have thematic affinities and shared territory.

In all the actions and instruments of cultural policy that have been or are being put in place to realize these guidelines (such as the creation of the Catalan Institute of Cultural Companies and the Agency Catalana de Patrimoni Cultural, aimed at encouraging and facilitate public-private cooperation, the creation, by the Generalitat, a platform called Visitmuseum, which aims to internationalize the Catalan heritage and make it more profitable economically, and the growing tendency to place many tourist offices within local museums), Blanch is positive facts and generally good intentions, but also many ambiguities, contradictions and, above all, ignorance (or misunderstanding) of assets and the alarming *reality* that museum professionals know. The model of shared management is indeed an opportunity to rethink and improve this reality, but to make it feasible museums should be provided with more autonomy and less obstacles regarding direct management. Outsourcing services will be positive as long as they remain complementary and not substitutional of public governance. They should focus on improving services rather than reducing expenditure, and must not be accompanied by precarious working conditions for the workers of private companies. The participation of professionals of heritage in the tourism market is necessary and even desirable, but it must be active (led by museum curators themselves) and it cannot encourage the marketing of the assets to the detriment of conservation and research. It should absolutely avoid the trivialization of heritage resources. The proposal from the Catalan Government to activate thematic and territorial networks is positive, but the already started initiatives are still very inadequate, they lack resources and planned strategies and need to have the participation and consensus of all stakeholders.

These are only some of the main ideas, perspectives and proposals with which Teresa Blanch believes the current rethinking should articulated on the part of the regional administration of the museum sector and heritage in Catalonia, whose latest synthesis is the new Plan of Museums 2030, still pending approval. The persistence of the debate is necessary, and its enrichment is urgent. It is not only the conservation and appreciation of our cultural heritage that is at stake (and that of our institutions that are depositories of those), but also the preservation and dignity of a profession that today still feels little known, rarely heard of and very unprotected on an employment level.

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