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ICOM - DEMHIST
International Committee for Historic House Museums
Committee's Board and Secretary

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ICOM General Conference – Prague 2022

JEANNE WATSON BURSARY

REPORT

Introduction

The wish to attend the ICOM 2022 general conference in Prague was rooted in the enthusiasm and love that bind me to historical residences preservation and cultural heritage connoisseurship. An ICOM member since my early twenties, I immediately choose to join DEMHIST to be part of an international network, sharing best practices in the house museum field. The Jeanne Watson bursary provided me a valuable opportunity to connect with a wide number of museum professionals from all over the world, sharing global perspectives on present and future challenges in the museum field. Before summarizing the activities I took part in, I would like to express all my gratitude to Yvonne Ploum (DEMHIST chair), Remko Jansonius (DEMHIST secretary), Amilcar Vargas (DEMHIST treasurer), Timna Seligman (DEMHIST vice chair) and the whole DEMHIST team for their generous guidance and efforts. I extend particular thanks to Tiziana Maffei (former president of ICOM Italy) for the support offered to my application and for the knowledge we shared during my three-years employment at the Royal Palace of Caserta.

Panels, conferences, activities (from August 21st to August 26th, 2022)

ICOM pre-conference tours allowed me to enjoy the first day in Prague, discovering the Old Town and the city's historical gardens, while starting to meet colleagues from different countries. On Monday 22nd, during the Opening ceremony – conducted by Alberto Garlandini (ICOM President), Martin Baxa (Minister of Culture of Czech Republic), Gina Ranotière (ICOM Czech Republic President), Zdenek Hrib (Mayor of Prague), Ernesto Ottone (Assistant director UNESCO), Michal Lukes (National Museum Director) and Martina Lehmannova (Managing director of ICOM Prague) – I was impressed by the number of participants filling the ranks of the Congress Centre's main hall. A keynote speech by Margarita Reyes Suarez (Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History) particularly caught my attention, focusing on the relationship between museums and civil society in complex contexts such as megapolis and peripheries. The importance of a wider public engagement was also analysed in the 1st day's main panel. Kaeryna Chuyeva (Vice Minister of Culture, Ukraine) and Nisay Hang (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Cambodia) shared with the audience the challenges of museum management in a context of war crimes and tragedies, deeply connected with our recent history. The potential of ethical narratives was deepened through the

War Childhood Museum Foundation's case, presented by its founder, Jasminko Halilovic. As a mosaic of short memories collected from more than 1.000 people, the modular concept of this replicable museum is presented in different cities around the globe. A temporary War Childhood Museum was also arranged in Prague's Congress Hall.

The afternoon of the first day, I chose to follow a session connected to my professional activities at the Royal Palace of Caserta. In the conference *Collections in storage (prospects and potentials)*, Christopher Lind, François Mairesse and Gael de Guichen presented the results of a survey on museums' depositories started by ICCROM in 2009 and more recently achieved by ICOM. The collected data showed the transversality and the internationalism of difficulties in the management of storage facilities. The conference allowed them to briefly present the program RE-ORG and its best practices. Working on a wide range of collections they presented several case studies. RE-ORG protocol was conceived to allow a deep reorganization of museums' storage depots in a reasonable time frame, with limited resources.

The same day, I was involved in DEMHIST activities, through a rich paper session on *The Power of Historic House Museums*. The session was moderated by Timna Seligman and included a wide range of meaningful speeches presenting some house museums, as places of memory and progress. Sergio Servellon presented the house of the artist and farmer Felix De Boeck, and its renovation (FelixArt Museum, Drogenbos, Brussels). Milja Stijovic shared with the audience the multiple experiences of house museums in Serbia, and the particular case of museums which went back in private hands, thanks to the Law on Registration of Confiscated Property and Compensation (2011), which tried to remedy to World War II confiscations. She shed light on the protection of 118 castles, villas and summer houses owned by the Republic of Serbia, and focused on seven privately owned house museums gathered around the association of the Old Houses of Serbia (2012).

The revolutionary relevance of house museums was also the topic of Linda Norris' speech (ICMEMO), which was dedicated to four Sites of Conscience, connected with the struggles of today's movements for human rights. She concentrated on four houses connected to women and activism in the US, belonged to Pauli Murray, Pear S. Buck, Jane Addams and Harriet Beecher. She particularly shed light on the importance of visitors' engagement, through the possibility to share anti-slavery materials, working on inclusion, equity and change.

Inclusion was also the subject of Bo Shung Chen's speech on the New Taipei City Tamsui Historical Museum. He focused on visitors with disabilities and on the removal of physical barriers. The arrangement of barrier-free spaces was developed in parallel with the organization of customized services, including 360° and 3D visits from remote.

In the evening, the Opening Party took place at the National Technical Museum and the National Museum of Agriculture. It was a wonderful occasion to share a festive moment with colleagues and friends, discovering the local kitchen and some Czech artistic traditions, such as an amazing circus performance and a cymbalom concert.

The second day started with a touching keynote speech by Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, founder of Fridays for Future Uganda, on climate change, natural disasters and a wide range of environmental concerns which call for the implementation of more effective actions from global institutions, such as museums. She mentioned the East African Crude Oil Pipeline project and the collective responsibilities we have for the future of our planet and next generations. It was an inspiring speech which made me wonder how such subjects will be faced by ICOM in the next years, especially during the General Conference 2025 in Dubai.

Sustainability was the main theme of the whole morning. The day continued with a panel discussion on *Museums and resilience*, with Ondrej Dostal, Sebastien Soubiran and Mordecai Ogada, which shared with the audience an interesting reflection on African culture and its perception in Europe.

The following roundtable focused on the ICOM strategic plan (2022-2028) providing an opportunity to discuss the future of ICOM and how to translate the plan's vision and objectives into concrete actions with a precise timeline. Many questions were asked pointing out the qualities and the difficulties of such an ambitious plan, and its application in a fragmented context, with national and transnational specificities.

The morning continued with a session about *Museums and leadership*, moderated by Carol Ann Scott (ICOM executive board). With a bit of a talk show attitude, Hilary Carty (Clare Leadership Executive Director) discussed the digital and business challenges faced by museum directors nowadays, sharing her thoughts with Lonnie G. Bunch III (Smithsonian Institution 14th secretary). The same topic was more deeply discussed in the last panel of the morning, with Antje Schmidt (Head of Digital strategies, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg), Elizabeth Merritt (American Alliance of Museums), Andrés Roldán (Director of Parque Explora, Medellín, Colombia) and Marek Prokúpek (Kedge Arts School). The first two speakers presented their research on museums and new technologies. Mr Prokúpek shared the results of a survey on museums funding, which constituted the basis for defining some innovative funding strategies. He underlined the importance of shifting in the composition of the funding mix, improving collaborations and partnerships for a more sustainable finance. Mr Roldán's speech particularly attracted my attention. With a politically engaged attitude, he presented the case of Parque Explora scientific museum and the difficulties it faced during the pandemic, especially as a frame for 2021 protests in Medellín.

The afternoon started with an Expert Session entitled *Resilience of Historic House Museums and their Collections to Risks posed by Climate Change, Environmental Disasters, and Conflict Zones*, organized by DEMHIST together with ICOM-CC, DRMC, ICMS, ICTOP, INTERCOM and ICOM JAPAN. The chairs Katharine Seymour and Yvonne Ploum discussed risks to historic buildings and their collections, focusing on preventive conservation and risk management plans, together with Takeyuki Okubo, Achal Pandya, Remko Jansonius, Yuji Kurihara, Stacy Bowe and Liz Kirby. Takeyuki Okubo presented the Japanese project for protecting historic district of traditional wooden buildings in Kyoto from fires, mainly due to earthquakes. The project consisted of the creation of a huge emergency plan shared with the local population, including a list of priorities and the creation of a powerful fire extinguishing system. In Japan, as Yuji Kurihara showed to the audience, similar projects are carried by the Cultural Heritage Disaster Risk Management Center, which reunite 25 different organizations.

Achal Pandya showed to the public the damages caused by floods in Jaipur and the solutions adopted to prevent such situations in future. Remko Jansonius showed the "hurricane plan" developed at Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Florida, which included a detailed prevention, response, and recovery plan. Later in the afternoon, during a session chaired by António Ponte, he had the occasion to go deeper in the subject, together with his colleague Rebecca Peterson. Among the solutions implemented by Vizcaya's team they showed to the audience the "tiger dam", a huge barrier filled by sea water, which allowed to isolate the mansion, protecting it from rising water and its debris. They also realized 3D copies of the statues most exposed to risks, in order to replace and easily repair them.

The sessions ended with a presentation by the training program managers Stacy Bowe and Liz Kirby, who showed to the public the initiatives of the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative. All the speeches shed light on the importance of mutual collaboration and training as essential steps for risk prevention, and for an efficient reaction to disasters.

Similar topics were deepened in the afternoon DEMHIST session, chaired by António Ponte. Emma Coburn focused on Collections Emergency Response, through the case of the Watts gallery's fire at Limnerslease. Martin Roubicek, chief security officer of the Jewish Museum in Prague, defined the term of "soft target" in the museum field, describing its origins, and defining the soft target protection as a stand-alone security discipline. The last two speeches were clearly off topic, but still interesting. Iveta Černá showed the restoration of Villa Tugendhat in Brno, by architect Van de Rohe. Sing-Da Huang presented the National Taiwan museum, with its four branches and their technological skills.

The whole Wednesday was dedicated to the ICOM Extraordinary General Assembly and to the 37th Ordinary ICOM General Assembly. The first was convened on the occasion of votes associated with amendments of ICOM's Statutes. The second, chaired by Carol Ann Scott (ICOM Executive Board), focused on the Code of Conduct and the Strategic Plan. A few speeches on museums and new technologies opened the day, with the participation of several experts such as Sebastian Robert Chan (Director & CEO at ACMI in Melbourne), Nanet Beumer (Rijksmuseum), Sarah Kenderdine (ICOM Switzerland) and Lāth Carlson (Dubai Future Foundation, Executive Director – MOTF). The most meaningful moment was the presentation of the new museum definition, which was also discussed in a roundtable chaired by Bruno Brulon Soares (Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) and Lauran Bonilla-Merchav (Universidad de Costa Rica). The day ended with an amazing Flag Relay Ceremony, at the National Museum of Prague, where I spent a wonderful moment discovering the collections, and their new scenography, accompanied by a tasty buffet and an astonishing concert.

The last two days offered me a perfect occasion to immerse in DEMHIST world through the off-site meeting, and to get closer with new colleagues in Brno. Maria Szadkowska (DEMHIST councilor) welcomed us at the Study and Documentation Centre Norbertov where she presented to the audience the Centre for Monuments of Modern Architecture, part of the Prague City Museum. Her speech was a perfect introduction to the visit of two house museums: Villa Rothmayer (1929) and Villa Müller (1928). It was a real pleasure to discover the buildings and their gardens, together with several experts and house museums lovers from Portugal, USA, Italy, Japan, Belgium, Mexico, and so on. The variety of our provenances contributed to the richness of the visit, which was admirably conducted by professional guides. I experienced a similarly amazing professional context in Brno. On Friday 26th, together with almost 300 participants, I reached the second city of the Czech Republic with an historical train, part of the National Technical Museum's collections. Here, I participated in a visit of the Špilberk fortress (the Prison of the Nations) and the Museum of Romani culture, which specialized in the most important Czech ethnical minority.

The ICOM general conference 2022 was an ideal opportunity to continue learning and to share competences with more experienced colleagues from all over the world. With its international dimension and its missions, the conference contributed to the development of my curatorial and academic profile. I had the occasion to participate in a wide range of sessions, visits and roundtables, personally connecting with DEMHIST members and other colleagues, building a new global perspective for my professional pathway.

Fellow's short bio

After a Master's degree at the École du Louvre, Alice S. Legé obtained her PhD in Art History in June 2020, with a thesis on the residences and the collections of the Cahen d'Anvers family (supervisors Ph. Sénéchal, Univ. Amiens / G. Agosti, Univ. Milan). Lecturer at the University of Rome 3 (History of Architecture), she is member of the Research Network on Racism and Antisemitism (RRA) and affiliated researcher of the Jewish Country Houses project at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on the relationship between residences and collections, historical gardens and Jewish patronage in the nineteenth century. She also has an established publishing history about Renaissance Medals. Two advanced training courses in cultural management (Luiss Business School and Gallerie d'Italia Academy) and one in computer science for heritage preservation (Polytechnic University of Milan) complete her technical skills. In the last years she collaborated with the Louvre Museum, the Spada Gallery in Rome, the French National Centre for Scientific Research and the Royal Palace of Caserta. Here and elsewhere, she worked with an international network of colleagues and patrons, participating in preventive conservation actions and exhibition projects. As a free-lance curator, she specialized in collection management and inventories check.