

# Our Greatest Artefact: the City

## Essays on cities and museums about them

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## City museum, community and temporality: a historical perspective

*Jean-Louis Postula*

### Introduction

Since 1974 ICOM has incorporated into its definition of a museum the essential dimension of service to the society and its development. This dimension can be taken today as the determination of the museum community to contribute concretely to the improvement of the human condition. Undoubtedly, city museums play an important role in this phenomenon.

Two essential features of the definition of a city museum in the early part of the twenty-first century are usually highlighted within the literature: the relationship between the museum and the life of the present, even the future, and the importance given to the community of citizens as part of the discourse of the museum<sup>1</sup>.

This essay is a proposal to have a historical look at the ways in which some city museums of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered these two specific matters. At the moment of their establishment, and during their early years of operation, what was their relationship to temporality – past, present and future – and for whom were they designed? Who, amongst local citizenry, was involved with them?

Three such institutions will be examined (certainly others could have served as well), which appear to represent a variety of methods used in the establishment of city museums. The three (in chronological order) are: the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, conceived in 1866, the Museum of the City of Brussels, in 1884, and the Museum of the City of New York, in 1923.

These reflections are based not only on iconographic documents and historical research concerning these museums, but also on a sample of period sources that shed an intriguing light on our questions in terms of temporality and community. As regards the Museum of Paris, several visitors' guides published during the 1920's and 1930's have been studied; for the Museum of the City

<sup>1</sup> See for example CAMOC's mission statement on its website (<http://camoc.icom.museum/about/index.php>).

of Brussels, a report released in 1884 by the then mayor Charles Buls to the communal council recommending the creation of a city museum; and for the Museum of the City of New York, a speech delivered in 1931 by John Van Pelt, Museum Trustee, to the American Association of Museums annual meeting, concerning the approaching opening of the museum's new premises.

Regarding Brussels and New York, it has to be said that these documents should not be taken as a realistic description of the museums' activities, but rather as an intention, a sort of ideal programme drawn up before the opening of the museum, showing the museal project of their founders.

First, however, an introduction to these three museums will concentrate on the context of their foundation and on describing the institutions as created: what do they look like, and what do they exhibit? It is just as well to admit that the style of exhibitions in these institutions involves a mixed bag of collections, adding up to a kind of chock-full appearance that in general characterizes the museography of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **The Carnavalet Museum of Paris**

The Carnavalet Museum is the earliest museum in Europe devoted to a city. The decision to create a museum for the City of Paris was made in 1866 by the municipal administration, notably under the influence of the Prefect of Paris, the administrator Georges Haussmann. At that very moment Haussmann was engaged in the radical transformations that would so dramatically change the appearance of the capital, pushing the Great Boulevards through overpopulated districts, destroying many old buildings. A large segment of the population opposed these grandiose projects, and at that time there emerged the first of many "preservation movements" to come, based on a realisation of the importance of the city's heritage, and the necessity of conserving it. Somewhat paradoxically, the ruling political class, which had put this heritage at risk by turning neighbourhoods into avenues, also first advocated for a form of protection of historical material, through preservation in a museum environment. It can therefore be observed that the Carnavalet Museum was, at least in part, an effort to legitimate certain policies and to respond to criticisms

of them. As long as there is a museum whose task is to identify and conserve the most significant remnants of the city's past, the large-scale public works projects can be justified, since the process of collection and preservation will go on in conjunction with new construction.

To this end, the City of Paris bought the Hôtel Carnavalet in 1866, a private lodging dating back to the sixteenth century, located in the historic Marais quarter. The objective was to convert it into "a *Museum of the archaeology of Paris* that would collect ancient objects from monumental structures or private dwellings, luxury and everyday items, clothing, tools, arms, etc.<sup>2</sup>". For various reasons, the assembly of the main portion of the collection and the conversion of the hotel took fourteen years. In 1880 visitors were finally able to tour the Carnavalet Museum, the common ancestor of many of today's city museums.

At that time the only part of the museum that is open to the public is a section called "lapidary", consisting of archaeological pieces. Collections grow rapidly because of generous gifts. Besides, a museum guide published in the 1920's speaks of the "fairly strange odds and ends [displayed in] small galleries and dimly lighted rooms."<sup>3</sup> The museum has created rooms devoted to Parisian clothing of different periods, to the history of French Revolution, to topography, including old maps and depictions of the city in ancient times and so on. But Carnavalet's reputation was mainly established by the many luxurious interior decorations set up inside exhibition rooms, restored from private lodgings that were demolished. These are the world's first examples of period-rooms.

Visitors are invited to travel back in time in an atmosphere that has its own completeness, although the groupings are usually recreated from pieces of furniture that were drawn from a number of different sources.

It is interesting to note that most city museums that were founded in the

<sup>2</sup> *Paris Guide par les principaux écrivains et artistes de la France. Première partie : La science - l'art, Brussels, Leipzig, Livourne and London, 1867, p. 524.*

<sup>3</sup> *BOUCHER François, Dorbec Prosper and Robiquet Jean, Guide du Musée Carnavalet, Paris, Frazier-Soye, n.d. [c. 1925], p. IX.*

Figure 1:  
The Carnavalet Museum  
of Paris, around 1925.  
From *Guide du  
Musée Carnavalet,  
Paris, Frazier-Soye,  
n.d. [1927], pl. IV.*



following decades took the Carnavalet Museum as a model to follow. Such is, at any rate, the case with the museums of Brussels and New York.

### The Museum of the City of Brussels

In 1884, a large donation, including works of art and a sum of money earmarked for the purchase of some significant old paintings was given to the City of Brussels by a wealthy collector. The mayor of Brussels, Charles Buls, was known for his support of universal education, education for the masses. He had always believed that museums had an essential social role to play, by the side of parents and the school system. Some years before, he had promoted the



Figure 2:  
The Museum of the City of  
Brussels, in 1887.  
From *Le patriote illustré,  
Brussels, 1887*  
(Brussels City Archives).

project of a popular museum intended for “the instruction of the ignorant<sup>4</sup>”, but that project had failed to materialise. Now Buls proposed to use the donation as the beginning of another kind of museum; he submitted a report to the communal council that spoke of “the great interest the City [would have] in establishing a communal historical museum upon the model of what has been done in Munich, Frankfurt, and Paris<sup>5</sup>”. The museum was opened in 1887, on the third floor of the Maison du Roi (King’s House) in Brussels’ Grand-Place. The King’s House was a large neo-Gothic monumental structure that had been recently rebuilt across from the City Hall.

<sup>4</sup> *Buls Charles, Un projet de musée populaire, Brussels: Muquardt, 1874, 5*

<sup>5</sup> « *Legs Wilson* », in *Ville de Bruxelles, Bulletin communal, Compte rendu des séances, 1884, t. I, 185.*

At that time one could see there, “just piled up<sup>6</sup>” in Buls’ words, many pieces “belonging to the history of Brussels, or objects made in Brussels<sup>7</sup>”, such as tapestries, pottery, ironwork and stained glass, very old depictions of the city, paintings and drawings of celebrations or other noteworthy events, portraits, and sculptures that had been part of various monuments in Brussels.

### **The Museum of the City of New York**

The third museum is a somewhat more recent creation than the other two: the Museum of the City of New York, organised in 1923. The museum, which is a private institution not owned by the City, is the product of the desire on the part of members of the wealthy elite of the city that there should be a museum devoted to New York City and its Boroughs, a subject which did not particularly interest the powerful New York Historical Society, which was more concerned with American history in general. This is “the first attempt, on such a scale in America, to create a museum devoted solely to the life of a city<sup>8</sup>”.

Between 1923 and 1932 the museum is located in Gracie Mansion (today the official residence of the Mayor of New York) and presents exhibitions at various locations within the city. Its collections are then a hodgepodge of furniture, prints and models, and it is not immediately successful. Quite quickly it is decided that the museum needs to be housed in a larger space that would allow the collection to be more professionally managed and benefit from the latest techniques in museum curation. In 1932 the museum reopens in a new and modern building on Fifth Avenue, along Central Park.

There, the visual history of the physical development of New York and the evolution of its landscapes is presented to a great extent through photographs and printed images, with in addition a large number of dioramas and models that quickly become favourites with visitors.

<sup>6</sup> *Ville de Bruxelles, Bulletin communal, Compte rendu des séances, 1887, t. I, 242.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ville de Bruxelles, op. cit., 1884, t. I, 185.*

<sup>8</sup> *Van Pelt John, « The museum as a guide to the life of a city », in The Museum News, vol. IX, n° 12, Washington, The American Association of Museums, 1931, 8.*



Figure 3: The Museum of the City of New York. ©Jean-Louis Postula.

### The relationship between time, history and the museum

It is apparent in the literature that long before the emergence of the expression “city museum” which has become common among museum community, museums devoted to cities have always tried to define and categorize themselves.

Most of these institutions consider themselves to be primarily historical museums. The Carnavalet Museum is described as a “gallery of local history” whose purpose is to “gather together the thousand and one remembrances that make the history of Paris one of the most captivating parts of History in general<sup>9</sup>”. As for the Museum of the City of Brussels, it is simply described as a “municipal historical museum<sup>10</sup>”.

Not all museums accept this classification as historical. Van Pelt, author in 1931 of a text describing the project and the missions of the Museum of the City of New York, said that the museum “is no more historical than the art museum or the museum of natural history – perhaps less so. [...] All museums are museums of history, if we accept the definition which makes history apply to the future as well as the present and the past. [...] It is the museum of a city and its value should be sociological.<sup>11</sup>”

As we can see, the concept of history is involved in the self-definition of the three institutions, even if only to allow them to take their distance from it. However, “history” does not mean the same thing to all these museums, and different kinds of temporality are used to display the city.

In Paris the mission of the museum is clearly directed toward the past. Visitors’ guides explain that “a distance of at least a half-century is appropriate in order to assume a historical perspective, and the museum is prepared to continue presenting the history of Paris, always under these conditions of a certain

<sup>9</sup> Boucher François, Dorbec Prosper and Robiquet Jean, *op. cit.*, p. VII.

<sup>10</sup> Ville de Bruxelles, *op. cit.*, 1884, t. I, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Van Pelt John, *op. cit.*, 8.

distance in time and always with the same care to vividly bring the past to life<sup>12</sup>”. Thus, toward the end of the 1920’s, the museum only presented events up to the year 1870. In 1926, an American visitor wrote, “It could never become a museum of the Paris of today<sup>13</sup>”.

The Brussels museum is intended to fulfil a similar mission, to gather things that can give visitors a good idea of the richness of the past of the city. But it adds a supplementary interest in the present of Brussels, offering educational material with regard to industrial and artisanal production. The museum places specimens of local production in its exhibits. “The durable if not immortal nature of the city<sup>14</sup>”, thought Mayor Buls, should be reflected in the museum. In Brussels, the line of the past is traced all the way up to the present.

As for the Museum of the City of New York, it presents itself as “devoted to an exposition of what the city is and was<sup>15</sup>”, but does not wish to be a historical museum. From the beginning, the museum intended to use the past as an opportunity to talk about the issues facing New York today. Van Pelt gives the following example: “While it may be interesting to tell New Yorkers how the Indians were done out of a valuable island for a song [...], it is far more vital to teach the children of today the remedies for congested municipal districts<sup>16</sup>”. The museum has a mission to help its visitors grasp in concrete terms the issues that affect the city most directly, so that solutions to problems can be more intelligently sought.

In addition, Van Pelt says that “there are future problems that should be provided for in any city and that may be forecast by the museum.” The example

<sup>12</sup> Dorbec Prosper, *L’histoire de Paris au Musée Carnavalet, Paris, Rieder, 1929, 90.*

<sup>13</sup> Page Max, *The creative destruction of Manhattan 1900-1940, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press (Historical studies of urban American), 1999, 161.*

<sup>14</sup> Ville de Bruxelles, *op. cit.*, 1884, t. I, 185.

<sup>15</sup> « New York City museum to open next month », in *The Museum News, vol. IX, n° 12, Washington, The American Association of Museums, 1931, 1.*

<sup>16</sup> Van Pelt John, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

he takes is that of aviation, an industry that was expanding rapidly at that time, and whose future expansion could have been predicted with some certainty. According to Van Pelt the museum has a role to play in urban planning and forecasting of trends, especially as concerns a reflection on the location of eventual new airports serving the city. However, he does not explain exactly how the museum is supposed to accomplish this task aimed at the future. But it remains true to say that the Museum of the City of New York was intended from its inception to be “more than a mirror to the past<sup>17</sup>”.

### Who is the museum intended for?

Documents published by the museums reveal, sometimes subconsciously, the figure of a typical visitor to whom the museum addresses itself. This is still true today; but only visitor surveys, obviously unknown in Europe and barely known in America during the time periods we are considering, would allow one to confirm the success of a museum by checking the match between actual visitors and the kind of visitor the museum was attempting to attract<sup>18</sup>.

Catalogues from the Carnavalet Museum are not precise enough to permit a detailed analysis of such an ideal visitor. In the prefaces of some guide books, mention is made of “the modest establishment known in the past, which many Parisians no doubt still remember<sup>19</sup>”. No mention is made of foreign visitors, which would have allowed us to know if the museum was targeting a particular category of the public, tourists or city residents. On another hand, the level of erudition of visitors seems to have been a determining criterion. The curator of the museum in 1929 wrote that the public came to Carnavalet in search of “things whose nature was such as to fill with memories the Parisian atmosphere that was familiar to them, to come in contact with the men of past eras, and to relive with them, by a kind of direct contact the days they had lived through

<sup>17</sup>Baragwanath Albert, *More than a mirror to the past, The first fifty years of the Museum of the City of New York*, New York, Museum of the City of New York, 1973.

<sup>18</sup>See Gottesdiener Hana (dir.), “Études de public, Années 30”, *Publics et Musées*, n° 8, Lyon, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1995.

<sup>19</sup>Boucher François, DORBEC Prosper and ROBIQUET Jean, *op. cit.*, p. IX.

themselves<sup>20</sup>”. The museum does not exactly aim at the man in the street, but rather to educated persons of means, who already know something about the history represented by the exhibition and who will feel at home walking through the refined decor and the luxurious environment of the museum. The museum thus manifests an elitist character that is rather typical of museums of that period.

In his address in 1884, Mayor Buls spoke of a precise objective: the future museum would “spark the curiosity of foreign visitors, who may already have visited the Royal Museum. [...] If we can attract and hold the interest of foreign visitors, we will have made an excellent bargain<sup>21</sup>”. The Museum of the City of Brussels is thus envisioned as an addition to the tourist attractions of the city, and an investment the city hopes will pay off. We do not hear much in the speech Charles Buls gives about creating a museum for residents of Brussels. Still, as we noted earlier, the Mayor was always convinced of the social importance of museums, and of the notion that they need not be reserved for scholars or the rich. The project he promoted, which was in large measure carried out, was that of a museum for ordinary people, as well.

The Museum of the City of New York offered a third different approach, mentioning both tourists and residents in its mission statements: “... our great work will be to help New Yorkers and New York’s visitors to understand New York.” Nonetheless, “the museum’s principal opportunity and chief duty is to improve the life of [...] the city dwellers<sup>22</sup>”. Tourists are welcome, but the museum exists primarily for New Yorkers, in order not only to educate but to stimulate feelings of pride in the city. Thus programmes specifically designed for immigrants are created, in order “to give to these newcomers and to their children some knowledge of and pride in the history of New York, to stimulate love for our City and help to make good citizens,<sup>23</sup>” as James Speyer, the museum director, wrote in 1930.

<sup>20</sup>Dorbec Prosper, *op. cit.*, 1929, 6.

<sup>21</sup>Ville de Bruxelles, *op. cit.*, 1884, t. I, 185.

<sup>22</sup>Van Pelt John, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup>Page Max, *op. cit.*, 162.

Another feature of the ideal museum described by John Van Pelt in 1931 was its desire to build bridges between different social categories, between rich and poor. He suggested developing branches of the main museum: “one such branch might be a squalid flat in a readily accessible slum [...] and another should be the residence of a wealthy and cultured man, [...] in order to show the prosperous and the less fortunate how the other half lives<sup>24</sup>”. This was his idea for getting different social groups who don’t often have the occasion to communicate to know each other better; it shows that the museum intended to belong to all New Yorkers, and not just to a financial or intellectual elite.

### Conclusion

Through these three examples of museums, taken at a precise moment in their history, their conception, or their first years of operation, we have tried to show that cities can be musealised from various points of view and in connection with various museological approaches: historical museums, sociological museums, museums that collect remnants of the past, that depict the present of a city, or that project its future. Some museums were for the masses, and some for the elite. Some museums were intended to display a city for the benefit of visitors, and some were intended to reinforce a sense of a city’s identity for the benefit of the civic feeling of its citizens.

Museums, as institutions, are creatures of their time and belong to a determinate cultural context. The three institutions described, as well as the category of city museums, have all evolved a great deal since their creation, visually and conceptually. They have a different appearance because of the general movement of museum development since the Second World War, their tendency to form a world-wide network of sorts, and continuing changes in approaches to museology and museography.

The current emphasis on the city museum’s active role in society can be seen as the last stage of a long thought process related to the development of the missions assigned to city museums since they began to be established. A city

<sup>24</sup> Van Pelt John, *op. cit.*, 8.

museum of 1880 is not the same as one in 1930, still less the same as one in 2010. However, each of the city museums of the past generations, given the means available at a given time, has contributed in its own way to a form of social interaction and to the improvement of the urban condition.

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