

MUSEUM OF THE SEA AND ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY. RETHINKING MUSEUMS IN MILAZZO

CRISTINA ARIZZI

Abstract – Siso is the skeleton of a sperm whale that hangs from the vaulted ceiling of a deconsecrated church in the castle of Milazzo, a coastal city in the North-East of Sicily. Siso was stranded below the cliffs along the Milazzo peninsula in 2017 and its skeleton was rescued and reconstructed by a small group of volunteers in the deconsecrated church that would soon become the site of MUMA, Museo del Mare (<https://www.mumamilazzo.com/site/>). Siso's huge body with its tail helplessly entangled in one of the many illegal fishing nets abandoned in the sea shack, tugged on the local population's conscience and changed their vision of museums, tourism, and ecology. Starting as a private endeavour, MUMA has now established various forms of collaboration with local institutions and offers experiences to visitors that include, but go beyond, digitalisation, virtual and augmented reality. In particular, MUMA identifies as an inspirational and educational site where visitors, children in particular, participate, experience, and undertake a Dantesque path towards a novel awareness of the need to protect the sea and its creatures. MUMA is now a partner of the Chersoneso D'Oro ecomuseum, a community-based heritage project that supports sustainable development and offers tourists with experiential opportunities. The chapter concludes with some reflections on how grassroots realities such as ecomuseums can shape the perception people have of the place where they live or they visit. Such participatory realities encourage further cooperation and foster the improvement and appreciation of the natural environment and historical heritage.

Keywords: museums, museum of the sea, ecomuseum, ecosophy, ecological identity

1. Introduction

This chapter investigates the role of museums in projecting values and framing the identity of a place. The focus is on the case of Milazzo, a small resort at the northern-most point of Sicily's coastline, as a way to reflect on the best practices of creating (and maintaining) such a place's cultural and ecological identity (Clayton, Opatow 2003; Milstein, Castro-Sotomayor 2020) – one that will possibly provide the city with a novel place in the tourism imaginary of Sicily. In fact, despite its numerous natural and architectural attractions, the

potential for tourism in Milazzo has never been fully exploited. Today Milazzo is trying to redeem itself from its reputation as a refinery city, the result of the financial choices made in the early 1960's that favoured industry rather than tourism; it wants to prove its inclination towards a more harmonious coexistence with nature, starting with the sea that is the primary element of its natural environment. This evolution is engrained in an innovative museum driven by a bottom-up impulse to modernization and change. The Museum of the Sea (in Italian *Museo del Mare*, hereafter MUMA), provides the specific case analysed below and offers the opportunity to reflect on the connection between a place and its natural environment, in this case a city and the sea that surrounds it, reflecting on how it forges the values concerning sea preservation and how it can promote proactive behaviour.

MUMA embodies the characteristics of an ecomuseum being an offspring of positive interaction between private initiative and local institutions and is connected in a network with other partners insisting on the territory, such as Area Marina Protetta and the ecomuseum Chersoneso D'Oro. Starting from the specific story of MUMA and the analysis of its website, the chapter intends to reflect on what kind of identity for cities museums will shape and how they will maintain it over time.

2. Place branding, museums and innovation

Places have always promoted the image they want to be identified with through the conceptual, but more often than not through the visual association with local cultural, aesthetic, architectonic, historical peculiarities. Logos and visual images are associated with places and disseminated as a means of place promotion. This type of promotion leads people to respond to place names in the same way as they respond to brand names, with positive or negative associations generated by the symbols or visuals that accompany the place name. Thus, the process of place branding refers to diverse attempts at enhancing the brand image of a place in ways that are believed to make the place famous (Anholt 2010). Place marketing and place branding are considered emergent scientific domains; however, despite existing since the 1970s, they still suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity and theoretical foundation, with conflicting definitions that make the identification of the subject matter somewhat confused (Vuignier 2017). However, investigation on place marketing and place branding has generated intense dissemination of best practices resulting in a positive impact on the development of places in terms of tourism. Thanks to place branding, in fact, a distinct positive identity of a place (Qazimi 2014), be it a city, region, or country, is clearly and effectively communicated, thus enhancing the reputation of a place, making it memorable

and distinguishable from its competitors. Apart from visitors and potential investors, place branding also appeals to local residents, fostering community pride and possibly creating job opportunities. Unique local attributes, cultural heritage, and economic opportunities are emphasised creating a cohesive image of the place that resonates globally. Effective place branding can boost tourism, attract talent, and drive economic growth by positioning the place as a desirable and vibrant destination.

As instances of the diverse resources an area offers, museums play a significant role in the complex process of place branding. Museums act as cultural and historical vehicles that help define the identity and uniqueness of a place. Apart from showcasing local art, history, and heritage, museums serve as iconic landmarks, contributing to the overall narrative and image that a place aims to project through its branding efforts. In this perspective, the function and identity of museums need to be rethought: traditionally filled with exhibitions and artifacts, museums are undergoing an evolution as regards their offer that has expanded to include diverse multimodal and sensorial exhibitions (e.g. Cortez 2023; Ostman *et al.* 2023). The implementation of a museum's offer thanks to virtual and augmented reality (Baradaran Rahimi *et al.* 2022) has led to hybrid museums that combine physical artifacts and virtual and augmented reality displays that change how museums are perceived and improve audience experiences.

Moreover, the very essence of museums is challenged by the new practice of ecomuseums (Davis 2011; Reina 2014), i.e., a community-driven heritage project that aids sustainable development (Davis 2007). Only indirectly is the prefix “eco” referred to the preservation of the natural environment; instead, it refers to the local nature of the private initiative which, in practice, however, very often works to conserve natural and cultural heritage. The concept of ecomuseums is based on the integration of cultural and natural heritage, emphasizing community involvement, and advancing sustainable development. In her definition of ecomuseums, Stokrocki (1996) emphasises the difference in perception between ecomuseums and traditional museums: “Usually we think of a museum as a storehouse of arts objects, a temple of goods, and culture in a box. [...] the ecomuseum is a communal place of integral relationships – one of organisms living in harmony with their past, present and future environment. This concept of a community learning centre mediates transitions in a culture at a time of rapid change. Its mission is to protect human dignity and to link generations” (Stokrocki 1996, p. 35).

According to De Varine (1978) ecomuseums are an opportunity to run with new ideas; they are foremost a community with an objective: the development of the community itself. Ecomuseums are dynamic in that they have the potential of designing real actions, changing society and improving

landscapes. They blend general involvement and shared responsibilities: public officers, volunteers and other local actors all play a vital role in an ecomuseum.

The ecomuseum paradigm is flexible by nature, which allows it to adapt to local needs and the individual nature of places (Davis 2024). It is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for a sustainable development [...] based on a community agreement (Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop, Trento, Italy, May 2004). Ecomuseums can be a mediator of a landscape, of natural and geological resources, with their neighbourhood (Canavese *et al.* 2018, p. 45).

One of the possible functions of ecomuseums is to make people aware of the importance for human beings of living in harmony with the other animals and natural species sharing the same territory. In one of the pioneer studies on this subject, Thomashow (1995, p. 3) talked about “ecological identity” in terms of “the way people construe themselves in relationship to the earth”. Thus, MUMA presents itself as a promoter of ecological wisdom, or ecosophy (Naess 1973). The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess introduced the ideas of ecosophy and “deep ecology”; compared to ecology, deep ecology aims to ask deeper questions relating to value theory. Ecosophy involves “a shift from science to wisdom” (Session 1995, p. 27). The term ecosophy is a combination of the Greek words *oikos*, which means household, and *sophia*, which means wisdom. According to Leversque (2016, p. 512), from the ecosophical perspective, our *oikos* is the Earth, as the place that we inhabit. Naess (1973, p. 99) talked on ecosophy in terms of a philosophy of ecological harmony. Xiang (2014, p. 67) creates the term ecophronesis considering that ecosophy is connected with a special type of wisdom (*-sophia*) projected towards action, what the ancient Greeks called *-phronesis*. In Xiang’s view, Ecophronesis refers to the wisdom that supports practical action aiming at good, combining theoretical knowledge and practical life, in that phronesis is the capacity to deliberate referring to the best practices men can realise.

Whatever it is called, ecosophy or ecophronesis, an outlook that considers harmony between humans and nature as a primary value is embodied by MUMA and the ecomuseum it is part of. What this outlook prompts is the need to act by doing the right things in ecological practice. How is it possible to understand and communicate what the right things to do are? How can the right thing be done? In this sense, activities connected to ecomuseums are grounded in the territory and include actions to undertake beyond the walls of the museum. The ecosophy and related activities are communicated through multimodal vehicles, including a website that uses discursive multimodal strategies (Baldry *et al.* 2020) to pave the way for dissemination of values and best practices.

3. From reality to website and back

Milazzo has been inhabited since the Neolithic period. Its history has been influenced by the many civilisations that have controlled the area, including Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, not to mention several French and Spanish dynasties. This historical heritage is still visible in local archaeological sites, of which the Castle, built around 1000 AD, is probably the most important witness. MUMA is located in one of the most ancient parts of the Castle.

The analysis of the MUMA website entails the exploration of discursive multimodal strategies used to sculpture an ecologically-oriented place identity and channel a new ecosophy that has the power to change the local population's outlook towards the environment in which they live. In this sense it is strategic to determine not just the goals of the museum but also its target, and assess whether it is limited to tourists or whether also includes local inhabitants.

The story of MUMA started in 2017, when a young male sperm whale that was swimming around the Aeolian islands swam into a drifting illegal fishing net, which became entangled in his tail and caused his death, despite many efforts to free him. The currents drove his body towards the rocky coast of the Cape of Milazzo. This unprecedented event weighed on the conscience of many inhabitants, including a sea biologist, Carmelo Isgrò, who would later become the founder and director of MUMA. He thought that what happened to the sperm whale had to become a loud and clear warning about human actions resulting in sea pollution endangering marine species. He gave the sperm whale a name, Siso, a voice, and a second life. After defleshing the whale bones, Isgrò launched a crowdfunding campaign to collect the money for a museum of the sea which could raise awareness about illegal fishing and plastic as sea pollution; in fact, a huge amount of plastic was found in the sperm whale's stomach. The whole procedure took more than two years and the museum was inaugurated in 2019, in an ancient deconsecrated church in the Castle. The city municipality provided the location. Figure 1 shows when the body of the sperm whale was stranded on shore and its final location in MUMA.

MUMA is an atypical museum, that intends to blend disciplines and discourses to communicate its founding values at different levels and with different strategies. The museum's mission relates to: the protection of the marine environment; a reduction in the anthropogenic impact on nature, and the creation of a new ecological identity. It is a dynamic museum that integrates permanent and temporary exhibitions and provides space for many cultural events of a different nature, including photography exhibitions, readings, the setting for photography shoots and much else.



Figure 1
Death and exhibition of Siso - the Sperm Whale.

The website offers a virtual tour of the museum exploring 3D space; it moves along the visiting paths but providing the chance to stop and watch explanatory videos at important points in the museum marked with blue or red spots. Some videos are produced by and for MUMA; others are taken from YouTube, some of them are educational; others offer experiences such as simulations, such as the one in Figure 2 which invites visitors to empathise with sea creatures stuck in a plastic bag.

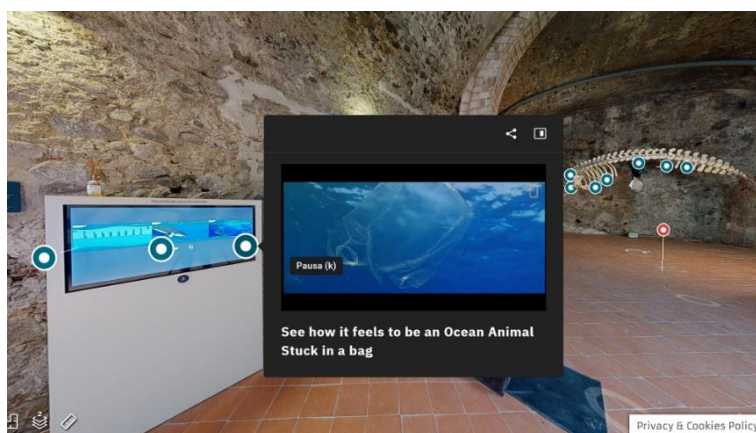


Figure 2:
Virtual tour of the MUMA.

While technology functions as a vehicle for communication and dissemination of values, other discursive strategies are used to involve users. The first is personalisation (Fairclough 1995). The whole museum is created around personalised content, in which Isgrò and other volunteers are in constant contact with users, speaking directly to them in the videos, where they look straight into the camera to create engagement. Also, addressing users with imperative forms (e.g., *become a volunteer* [diventa volontario]) using

possessive adjectives as “your” and “our” (e.g., *your free time* [il tuo tempo libero], *our sea* [il nostro mare]) make users feel included and involved in MUMA’s mission (Figure 3). The emotional appeal created by the experiences offered by the involving virtual tours and videos enhance the persuasive power of the communication.

Another communicative strategy that is pervasive in the website is nomination (Reisigl, Wodak 2009), that is the discursive representation of social actors, objects, phenomena using labels that identify them. The whole museum is grounded on nomination, i.e., on the identification of the sperm whale with a name, Siso. Having a real name, the sperm whale is no longer one of the many sea creatures that have died because of heinous human actions, but becomes a specific creature, with an identity and a story. The terms chosen for nomination can frame an issue in a particular light, guiding the audience’s perception and interpretation. In this case, the name given to the sperm whale is the nickname of one of the volunteers who died in a motorbike accident the day after helping to move the sperm whale’s skeleton to its final destination. Attributing an identity to the sperm whale and associating him to another tragic death of a young man who was well-known in Milazzo has made all the difference.



Figure 3
Example of personalisation as a discursive strategy.

The website introduces the ecosophy of MUMA on the home page, where MUMA is presented as a “spiritual journey”. The map of the museum (Figure 4) shows the befitting location in a deconsecrated church where the reconstructed skeleton hangs in the holiest part, where the altar was located, invoking the perception of the sacredness of sea and the sacrifice of its creatures because of human misbehaviour. However, the role of visitors is not limited to the passive attitude of those who contemplate the destruction wrought by human actions; instead, visitors are given agency as they are invited to undertake a spiritual path to acquire awareness of the destruction taking place at sea and redeem themselves.



Figure 4
Map and spiritual path.

Leaving the central hall, the museum route takes visitors on a personal growth journey: reproducing the pattern of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the path starts in Hell. Visitors follow a route that guides them through a staircase to the basement and find themselves immersed in the destruction that humans have caused to nature. In an ontological metaphor (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), going down is connotated with negative meanings and represents bad, evil, destruction. The descent is accompanied by visuals showing whale hunting, which is still illegally practiced in some parts of the world, sea turtles killed by or caught in fishing nets, but above all, the descent occurs in an environment filled with plastic waste. The plastic positioned in the exhibition is only 3% of the plastic collected by volunteers in one of the most iconic beaches in Milazzo in a single season. To make the metaphorical journey even more dramatic, the descent is illuminated with red lighting, a colour that symbolises danger, which adds extra pathos to the visualisation of the impact of uncontrolled human behaviour on marine life (Figure 5). Thanks to a virtual tour, the website offers the corresponding experience with the possibility of accessing extra virtual material, e.g. a video with an explanation of the experience.



Figure 5
Spiritual path to Hell, in reality (left) and through a virtual tour (right).

The spiritual journey continues in Purgatory, the next infotainment room where visitors can reflect on the anthropogenic impact on nature. The objective of this room is learning, and the specific target is younger generations; in fact most of the books about the sea in the reading area are designed for different reading levels; educational videos are continuously shown and several practical activities are offered, including looking at the skin of a shark under a microscope (Figure 6). All activities imply interaction. Even though the content is mostly targeted at children, the simplicity of the message reaches adults' conscience as well; information about how long plastic takes to decompose is meant for everyone. It is in Purgatory that visitors gain awareness about the production of plastic, its anthropogenic impact and the drawbacks on sea life. Visitors leave Purgatory with a new mindset, having learnt about the endangered beauties of nature, which will encourage them to act and respect the environment.

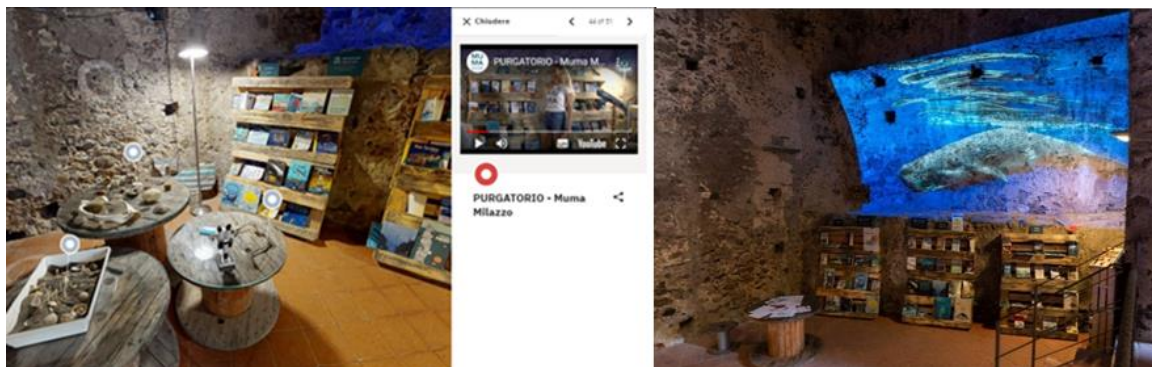


Figure 6
Spiritual path through Purgatory.

The last room in the spiritual path, Heaven, is dedicated to art. In Heaven visitors gain hope for the future and turn the knowledge acquired in Purgatory into proactive behaviour, being aware that we can only protect the things that we understand, appreciate and love. The end of the journey, Heaven, is

designed as a gateway to real life, where this ecological wisdom will inform future positive behaviour.

4. Conclusions

Moving beyond the concept of museums as limited spaces that treasure antiques and instruct visitors about past cultures and civilisations, processes of innovation have started that aim to make museums more meaningful and successful in contributing to the cultural development of their catchment area. They have implemented the traditional offer with more appealing and entertaining innovations. In fact, Covid-19 mobility restrictions obliged museums to accelerate a previously-begun drive towards modernisation, blending education with entertainment mostly based on a digital multimedia offering that reshaped museums' identity. This process makes museums more appealing and thus conducive to the implementation of the local (cultural) economy. This was the case with MUMA which was inaugurated in 2019, just months before being compelled to close to visitors. Website and multimodal communication were essential in making the museum live on. MUMA was able to reinforce its position in Milazzo thanks to its rich virtual offer that is continuously updated even in the post-Covid-19 era in which physical visits are again possible. The digitalised offer presented through institutional websites and social media has been accompanied by the offer of *in loco* experiences of virtual and augmented reality that engage visitors.

On the other hand, the evolution of museums leads to the construction of wide, dynamic and inclusive networks of enterprises involving the local population in fostering values and culture connected with the area. MUMA is also included in the ecomuseum "Chersoneso D'Oro", one of these private and public enterprise networks that incorporate a variety of sites and experiences within a specific geographical area. The participatory approach of MUMA and ecomuseums in general ensure that the local population feels committed to the ecosophy promoted by these museums. They participate as shareholders and are involved in the decision-making process, raising awareness of the cultural heritage and sharing responsibilities for the enactment of good practices about place management and promotion. A museum like MUMA responds to the community's need for a repository, a meeting place, exhibition areas, educational facilities, resource integration, problem-solving, and environmental protection and appreciation. Visitors, be they local people or tourists, enjoy the experience and are enriched by the ecological wisdom they acquire, turning into responsible guardians of the sea and marine creatures.

MUMA has provided a good example of positive action based on commitment, collaboration, and construction of an alternative identity for the

city itself. Indeed it seems that Milazzo is following a path similar to the spiritual journey offered by MUMA. Milazzo has already passed through Hell – represented by its conception as a refinery city, and is now going through its Purgatory, constructing its new ecological identity and acquiring awareness that only through knowledge and love can the territory be protected. Thus, the future mission for Milazzo is to implement the functions of its ecomuseum and their entrenchment in society as only through participation can a new identity of the place be achieved and truly felt by people. And this is the first essential step for any place branding strategy.

Cristina Arizzi's Bio: Cristina Arizzi is Assistant Professor of English language and translation at the Department of Humanities at the University of Catania, Ragusa Campus. Her research interests have led her to explore the blending of critical discourse analysis and multimodal/multisemiotic studies with a focus on American political discourse. She has published several papers on social networks and political campaigns, resemiotisation, genre evolution and hybridization, and a recent volume on American presidential genres.

Email address: cristina.arizzi@unict.it

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