

SCHOOL MUSEUMS IN THE STATE OF OAXACA, MEXICO

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Introduction

The literature concerning museums often mention the educational departments of museums but rarely discusses adapting museums to schools and their educational needs and curricula, or classroom displays as a museological consideration. At a time when traditional methods of education are being questioned, and the importance of visual information and the selection of information are increasing, such discussions and considerations equally become important.

Anthropology museums are often mentioned, but seldom if ever, does the literature discuss doing an anthropological study of the effect of a museum on a given community. Today, socio-economic studies are done which assess the economic feasibility of constructing or expanding a museum, its economic benefits to its surrounding community, and the community, and the community's ability to support it. At present, it appears that a lesser priority is whether people want or need a museum, and if so, what kind.

We must concern ourselves not only with business and financial aspects of a museum, but also with its ability and responsibility to serve the people who support it. A major thought in planning or revamping a museum should be the use which people can make of its materials and operations. The collections, displays, activities, and schedule of the museum must be geared to the people and attuned to their interests, concerns, and needs. All this requires serious socio-economic and anthropological studies of the communities and regions, to be used as a constant reference when planning educational functions and museographic displays. The com-

bination of anthropology, education and museology provides an exciting approach to treating such a complex concern, involving the socio-economic conditions in which people live.

This article deals with small museums in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico, located in schools or dedicated to school curriculum, in regions where the people do not have ready access to larger city museums, art galleries, theatres, libraries, or other cultural institutions or educational facilities. Specifically, it deals with the "Programa de Museos Escolares", founded by the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

The Programme's objectives are to complement the school curriculum, to encourage a respect for the national heritage, and to eventually establish a school museum in every school in the country.

Mexico's programme of school museums is unique and deserves to be systematically examined for educators, anthropologists, and museum personnel, so that the study may provide a model for the evaluation of the interaction of school-community integration in developing countries.

Considerations of Location for Development of School Museums

The general location and the specific locations of the school museums affect their development and functioning. It will be useful to give some idea of the conditions that were encountered in Oaxaca during the study period, and under which the pupils, teachers and community people work and live, and that affect school attendance, as well as the general education level. The conditions that affect school attendance will equally affect the attendance of school museums. They should be taken into consideration during the planning of school museums and their activities, so that they are developed to encourage continual participation of all school age children, as well as other community members.

The general location of the school museums studied is the State of Oaxaca, one of the poorer States of Mexico. According to the 1970 census, its population is 2,015,425, with an annual growth rate of 1.6% for the 1970-1978 period, as compared with the national rate of 3.4%. One reason for the difference in the rate, is the tendency of the people (mainly

the men) to emigrate to the cities or to the United States and even Canada, in search of work, which the State of Oaxaca does not have the economic means to offer them.

Another extremely important reason is the general low level of health and the high mortality rate. A 1972 FAO ('Food and Agriculture Organization') report, noted a nutritional inadequacy for the State of Oaxaca. People in Oaxaca receive only 19% of the normal requirements for animal protein, 50% of animal fats, and 50% of vitamins A and C, that they need. Children's growth is also seriously affected. In the same study, it was observed that 60% of the children and adolescents measured between the ages of five and eighteen, had skeletal growth of less than their chronological age. "It is supposed, that the intellectual efficiency of these children will like-wise be affected by these factors of poverty." (Varese 1979: 30).

The factors influencing poverty are diverse, including poor diet, scarcity of medical attention, living conditions which for the most part do not have elementary hygiene or adequate sanitation, and 70% of the population live in dispersed or semi-dispersed communities of under 1,000 inhabitants, causing communication problems.

The Programme attempts to locate the individual school museums in such small, semi-dispersed communities. However, the health and communication difficulties of these settlements often hinder their establishment and development. In reality, the individual school museums have been mainly promoted and established along highways or in towns which have ready access to a highway and to Oaxaca City. The *promotores* have not yet worked in the regions of the State which are distant from the Central Valleys, nor for that matter, have school museums been promoted or established in the towns and villages located at a distance from Oaxaca City or that would necessitate difficult travelling or overnight stays.

Another important consideration is the school system. Based on the 1970 census figures, 51.2% of the total school age population in the State of Oaxaca, do not receive any school instruction. The remaining 48.8% is broken-down accordingly: 41.5% attend Primary school (grades 1-6); 2.3% attend Secondary (grades 7-9); 0.8% attend Preparatory (gra-

des 10-12); and 0.6% attend Community College or University.

The greatest number of pupils are at the Primary school level, at which level there is a high percentage of drop-out, due to family and work demands on the pupils, and failure rate, because of the system of final examinations, crowded classrooms and general poor school conditions.

The majority of Secondary school age youth do not participate in the educational system. Of those who attend, 50% go to industrial or agricultural technology schools. At this level, there is an increase in the drop-out rate (25%), as a result of the social and economic pressures on the poor families to incorporate their young people into their subsistence economy.

We are dealing with a rural, agricultural population in the State of Oaxaca (80% of the population economically active are engaged in agriculture according to the 1970 census), whose traditional education consists of children gradually learning from family members their future adult roles and responsibilities. There arises a conflict between the formal school schedule, with its demands, and the family need for the children to increasingly become economic assets within the family complex and agricultural cycle. Besides working the lands and tending the animals, many children accompany their parents to the weekly market to buy and sell, or accompany them throughout the market circuit as travelling vendors (*viajeros*).

The people of the State of Oaxaca have a restricted and limited education because of health factors and socio-economic conditions. These limiting factors dictate that the majority of the children must perform an active role in the subsistence of their families. Coupled with this, is the school system itself, which regulates the learning and minimizes the possibility of continued study, by means of the set curriculum, schedule and examinations.

In short, one half of the Oaxacan population does not even attend, let alone finish Primary school, thereby remaining totally or functionally illiterate (41.5% in 1974).

What is needed is an alternative mode of learning for these children (and adults). One that will take into consideration their traditional education, both in content and method,

as well as being oriented to their time schedule. A school museum has the opportunity to offer an alternative to the educational system, by keeping in mind the traditional education and opening its doors to the entire community, during hours convenient for everyone.

Evaluation of School Museum in Oaxaca

Surveyed were 47 of the 54 school museums or towns in which the 'Programme of School Museums' was operating in Oaxaca, at the time of the study (January to June, 1979). Based on the observations made and the information derived from informal interviews with pupils, teachers, community people and the *promotores*, during visits to the locals, there were 30 school museums in an "incomplete" state, 3 school museums were being "renovated", and 1 school museum featured a door that was impossible to open. Therefore, we are dealing with 34 museums of the 54 which are officially listed or mentioned in meetings and reports.

This high percentage of non-operating school museums suggests that the Programme in general and the Oaxacan staff specifically, are not aware of local conditions and priorities that affect the operability of a school museum, or take them into consideration when promoting a school museum in a given locale.

In the majority of cases, the schools' and the communities' other needs and priorities eliminate the possibility of dedicated space, funds, and human resources - labour and time, to organize and establish a school museum. Usually when another need took priority, or when a crisis arose, the resources (not only those promised to a school museum, but also those intended for other community projects) were re-allocated to solve the problem. For example, not only was a school museum re-assigned to store beans, but in one school a part of a classroom was assigned to storage use, and schools are an accepted educational element in all communities. Only in communities where there was a greater degree of pupil and community participation, was there an attempt to maintain the resources necessary for the school museum to develop and continue.

The large number of non-operating school museums also suggests that the Programme is imposed from above, as opposed to being derived from and supported by the communities themselves. That is, the Programme's *promotores* arrive in an area to persuade the governmental and educational authorities and the individual schools and communities, what a useful educational tool a school museum is, without inquiring what the schools and communities perceive as being important for the children's and the adults' educational advancement.

There appears to be a relationship between community-school participation (organizational level — contribution of labour, time, and material, and use) in the school museum, and the successful functioning of a school museum in the school and community. In the main, the number of pupils entering their school museum, either on their own or being taken inside for a class, was low. Also in the majority of cases, the level of community participation, based on the number of community people working on the school museum committee (organization and decision making), and by the number of community people entering the school museum (use), was minimal. The school museums that experienced a greater degree of active school — community participation figured among the functioning ones, ie. open and useable (accessible).

The school museums that function have a certain degree of support (labour and permission to operate on a trial basis as an experiment to increase the chances of advancement for their children) from the community, and acceptance by the school staff (as an educational possibility to complement their classes and to stimulate the pupils to study their lessons, encouraged by collecting, handling activities and visual displays). They demonstrate a greater willingness than the norm to experiment with a new educational alternative and to take on an extra work load, since the time demands on teachers are considerable.

COMMENTS

We have to consider a school museum not as a unit separate from the school and from the community, but rather as a unit greatly affected by the school situation (poor, rich,



Foto 1. Machuilxóchitl — pupils visiting their school museum after school hours.

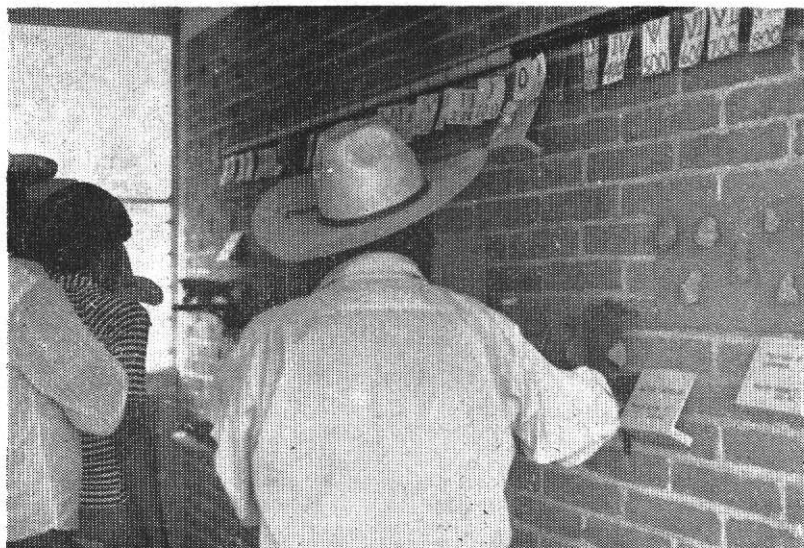


Foto 2. San Pablo Huitzo — parent visiting school museum.

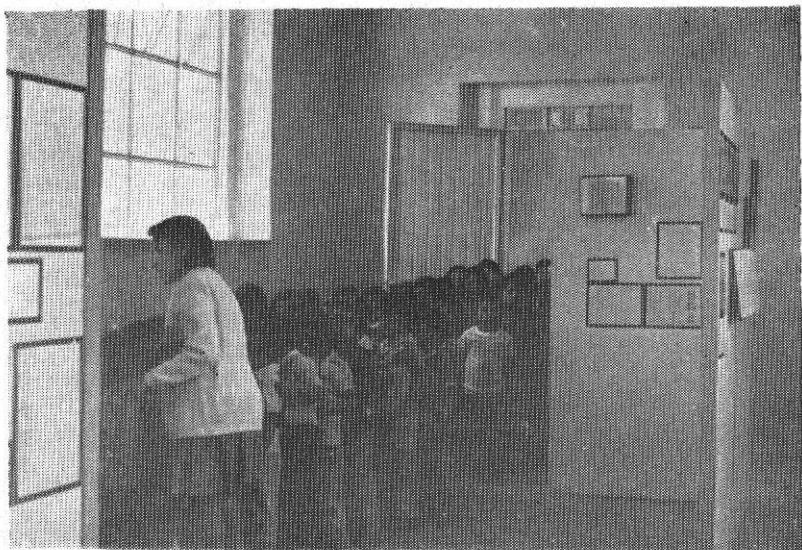


Foto 3. San Agustín Yatareni — a grade one teacher directing her pupils through the Temporary Exhibition mounted in their Primary school.

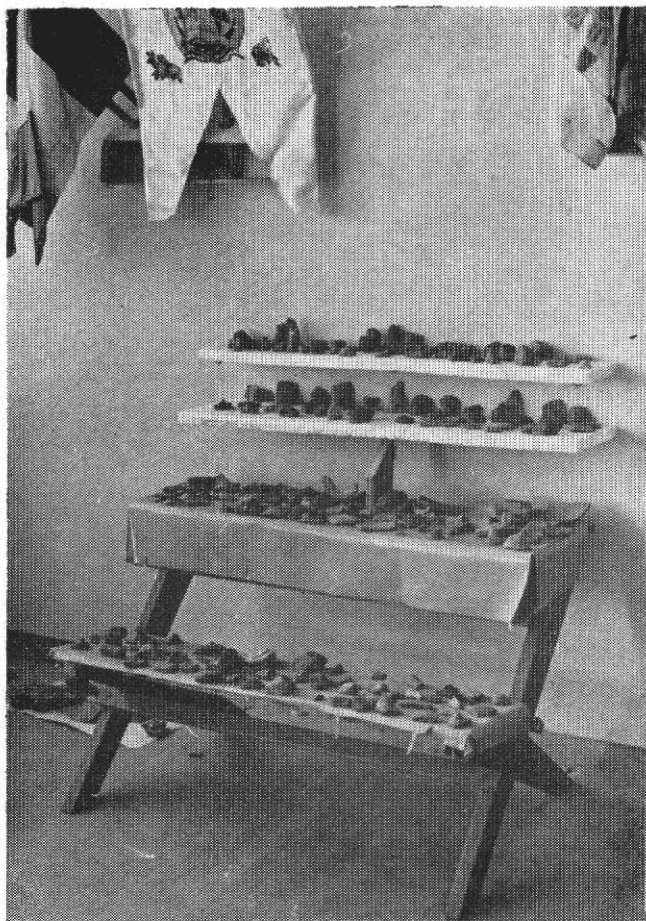


Foto 4. Animas Trujano — a typical arrangement of precolumbian ceramic heads and pot sherds observed in several of the school museums.

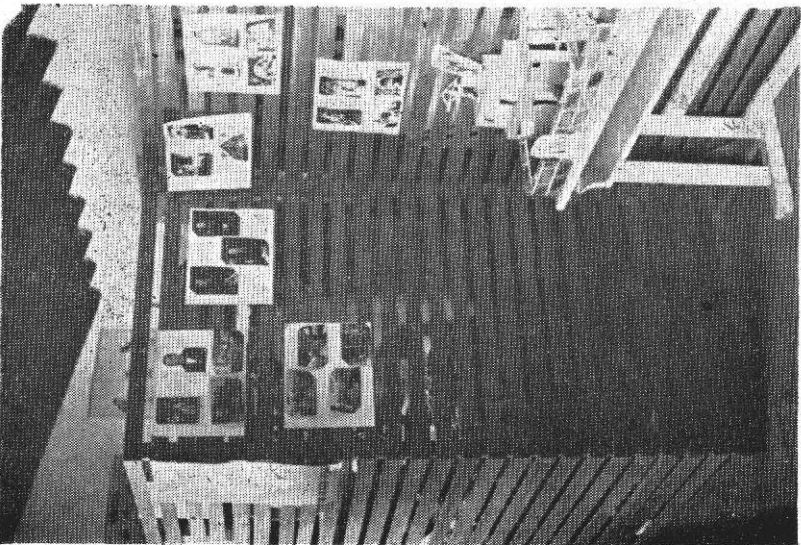


Foto 5. Animas Trujano — the use of *carrizo* (ditch reed), which is locally grown, to make display panels.

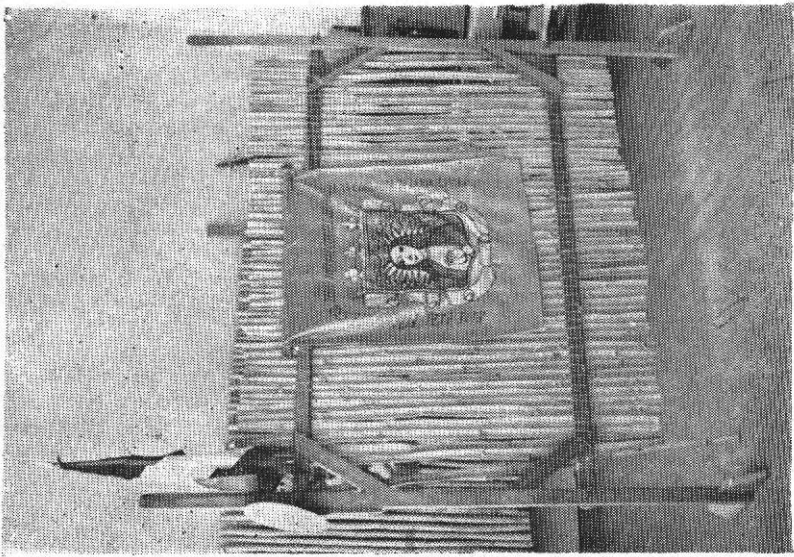


Foto 6. San Francisco Lahigolo — the use of pieces of wood from discarded desks and other furniture, to make display panels and shelves.

small, urban, available facilities, teachers and parents; interest and support...) and by the community (its needs, interest, economic ability to support...).

Possibly a school museum is not immediately needed in a particular school or community. For example, another classroom or teacher training, school equipment (usually teachers have to acquire their own chalk, paper, etc., not to speak of larger pieces of equipment or didactic materials), or some facility would be more important. Some schools do not have washrooms, running water, much less storage areas, Co-op stores (*tiendas co-operativas*), workshops, extra books if not a library. All of these things are very important or fundamental, and should be considered before discussing the feasibility of putting aside funds and space to establish a school museum. As for the community, the time, effort and monies could well be put to more useful purpose to benefit the people and the community at large, such as providing storage areas, running water, sewage and irrigation systems.

A school museum is not nor should be a *mere place*, defined in physical terms of dimensions, but rather it should be an educational philosophy, mentality, methodology, operable in schools. That is, even in schools which can not afford to set aside a room or to construct an edifice especially for a school museum, the concept of a school museum could still be incorporated into the curriculum and could modify the way in which the pupils are taught.

A school museum should indeed complement the study plan, by presenting to the pupils (and teachers) material and projects which they normally only see in two-dimensional lessons in their school text books. However, it could be a viable alternative to the traditional, conventional school system. The pupils could be encouraged to participate in their community and to become apart of the real, contemporary world around them. Instead of putting them in an artificial world of blackboards, chalk, desks and notebooks, and forcing them to be taught "at", the pupils would "learn with" their teachers and fellow community members directly from the natural and socio-economic world in which they actually live. (Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, Margaret Mead.)

A school museum has the potential to 'go beyond four walls', in the sense of occupying the entire community and

countryside, and of being available to the pupils and teachers alike. This means that the school museum is the community at large, the socio-economic environment in which the pupils live. This would avoid forcing them merely to exist in a school atmosphere which is usually divorced from their real world.

In the work required to create and to improve the school museums, we have to take into consideration the whole community and the school system, in which they are functioning.

We must consider ways and means, economically and socially feasible, by which to improve the individual school—teaching—learning methods, teacher training, lesson content, facilities (workshops, libraries, audio-visual aids...) as well as the national school system in general (emphasis on real/liberal education; increase of respect for the teaching profession). Also, we must consider ways to improve the children's health, diet and ability to remain in school, along with the communities' standards of living and socio-economic political situation.

We can not divorce the school museum from its surroundings and from the people whom it is intended to serve. We must include projects, themes, and activities that touch upon the local and regional context and conditions, in order to make the pupils more aware of them and to help prepare them to solve the problems. In short, we must create an atmosphere which will *stimulate* the pupils' minds and interest, which will encourage them to observe and to participate in the life of their communities, and to have projects and activities that will help them develop an ability to think openly and creatively so that they can discover solutions and alternatives to the problematic conditions—economic, social, political, agricultural—of their communities and regions. In this improved climate, they would be able to investigate co-operatives, better means to obtain water, or to transport goods to and from market, or to enter the national market system, agricultural alternatives in crops and farming techniques, ways to rid crops, animals and humans of damaging insects and diseases.

TABLE I

SCHOOL MUSEUMS LISTED ACCORDING TO DISTRICT,
ARRANGED IN DESCENDING NUMBER PER DISTRICT

<i>Number</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Town</i>
1	Etla (19)	San Sebastián Etla
2		San Agustín Etla
3		Guadalupe Hidalgo
4		Guadalupe Etla
5		San Juan del Estado
6		Santo Domingo Barrio Bajo
7		San Lorenzo Cacaotepec
8		Santo Degollado
9		Matadamas
10		San Pablo Etla
11		Soledad Etla
12		Nazareno Etla
13		Santiago Etla
14		Magdalena Apazco
15		San Isidro Etla
16		San Andrés Zautla
17		San Pablo Huitzo
18		San Francisco Telixtlahuaca
19		Reyes
20	Centro (14)	Oaxaca de Juárez
21		Oaxaca de Juárez
22		Trinidad de Viguera
23		Cuillapan
24		Animas Trujano
25		San Antonio de la Cal
26	Centro	Bartolo Coyotepec
27		San Agustín de las Juntas
28		Donaji
29		San Agustín Yatarení
30		Guendulain
31		Tlalixtác de Cabrera
32	Ocotlán (6)	Dolores
33		Oaxaca de Juárez
34		San Antonio C. V.
35		Ocotlán de Morelos
36		San Juan Chilateca
37		Santa Catarina Minas
38	Nochixtlán (6)	La Noria de Ortiz
39		Santa Lucía Ocotlán
40		Yanhuitlán
41		San Juan Sayultepec
42		Santiago Tillo
43		El Cortijo
44	Tlacolula (4)	Nochixtlán
45		Magdalena Jaltepec
46		Díaz Ordaz
47		Macuilxóchitl
48	Zaachila (2)	San Francisco Lahigolo
49		Tlacolula de Matamoros
50	Teposcolula (2)	Villa de Zaachila
51		Trinidad de Zaachila
52	Ejutla (1)	Teotongo
53		Tejupan
54		Ejutla de Crespo

SUMMARY

Being drafted into a specialized programme or institution will not lead to recognition of and respect for culture, or the part of the people. This can only be achieved when all participate in discovering that culture for themselves. If indeed one of the intents of founding the "Programa de Museos Escolares", was to teach people respect for the national, cultural artifacts and heritage, present direction will never accomplish the aim. Such understanding and respect comes from the whole populace, not through an institutionalized programme such as "Programa de Museos Escolares y Locales". A popular movement is necessary, not a little corner in a school, dedicated to pot sherds that everyone sees daily in their fields or along their roads, with the occasional non-descript explanatory label. Such a 'popular' awareness would entail more than respect for cultural objects and national heritage, but rather a critical awareness of the external society and its effects and control over the people and communities.

The Programme does not appear to achieving its goals/objectives. It may be advisable to make a more indepth anthropological, socio-economic study of all the areas involved, and to ascertain the local conditions and resources. Then, put them into play toward a more effective operation of the Programme and the individual school museums, as well as use local material, customs, styles, technology. For example, build a school museum utilizing the local architectural style, but modifying it to take into consideration sound museographic principles. That is, to make available real, professional museographic advice, but allow the people to decide the technology and style in the construction of their school museum, as well as content and use of it.

Not only should we pose the question of why the Programme is not achieving the stated objectives, but whether or not the objectives are even valid. Do they really consider the well-being of the communities, or take into consideration the local peoples' opinions, wishes and customs? Everyone wants to continue to pertain to his/her culture, and not to be completely melted into a cultural oneness. This means learning to respect other traditions, and being respected in turn.

SUMARIO

Este artículo intenta dar una perspectiva de los pequeños museos localizados en las escuelas primarias y que se basan en el plan escolar de estudios. Particularmente nos referimos al Estado de Oaxaca, a aquellas regiones donde la gente no tiene fácil acceso a otras fuentes de consulta, como son: museos, galerías, bibliotecas, instituciones culturales u otro tipo de servicios educacionales. Nos enfocamos especialmente en el Programa de Museos Escolares del INAH, cuyos objetivos son: primero, complementar el plan básico de estudios, y después, fomentar el respeto por el patrimonio nacional.

Este programa de museos escolares en México es muy singular y merece ser estudiado sistemáticamente a fin de proporcionar un modelo para la interacción de escuelas y comunidades de países y regiones en vías de desarrollo.

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