

Heritage and museum as pillars of the post-covid19 policy

Open letter to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Sophie Wilmès, to the Minister-Presidents of the regions, Mr. Jan Jambon, Mr. Elio Di Rupo and Mr. Rudi Vervoort, to the Minister-Presidents of the communities, Mr. Jan Jambon, Mr. Pierre-Yves Jeholet and Mr. Oliver Paasch, to the members of parliament, to the mayors and to all the Belgian politicians.

Heritage - tangible or intangible, movable or immovable – is more than just a leisure activity. It gives communities and individuals a sense of identity and meaning. Heritage is essential for the wellbeing of both individuals and communities because it functions as a medium for the expression of values, community building and structure in our relations with others. This is mainly due to its symbolic value and its aesthetic dimension.

Heritage is also a synonym for an inclusive social development. By making heritage accessible, for instance through learning programs and many activities, we share a sense of togetherness and mutual respect while pursuing a common goal. Heritage has the potential to strengthen the cohesion of a community and to diminish the inequality.

Heritage also has an important economic role and was recently acknowledged by the United Nations as an instrument for sustainable development through the creation of local employment opportunities in the fields of tourism, conservation, building, catering and artistic production.

Heritage sites and museums both fulfil the role of ambassador of cultural heritage in its many forms.

Numerous international organisations have acknowledged heritage in all its diversity, as a key factor in the strengthening of social resilience of individuals and communities in the aftermath of traumatic events, such as wars, natural disasters and pandemics. Among these organisations are ICOMOS, ICCROM, ICOM, UNESCO, the UN and the World Bank Group. Museums and heritage sites play a special role in these situations. They empower affected individuals and communities in order to rebuild and even reinvent themselves in the future. To accomplish this, heritage sites and museums can embrace local economic initiatives, promote the creation of self-help networks and focus on the symbolic power of heritage in the life of us all.

We cannot compare events such as wars, earthquakes or hurricanes, which destroy the daily life and infrastructure of entire nations. However, this current pandemic not only leads to isolation, it also divides families and communities, causing loneliness, devastating human loss and sorrow.

Covid-19 resonates in our daily lives through the media and forces many countries to take precautions such as quarantines and the cancellation of many activities. It questions our certainties and will probably change our way of life and the way we interact with each other in the future.

Museums and heritage sites have taken up their social role in these times through virtual tours and making their collections digitally accessible. This way, they retain and strengthen their connection with their visitors and keep them busy during this quarantine.

However, physical accessibility of museums and heritage sites has never before been this important. That is, of course, taking into account the necessary safety precautions. Coming into contact with culture is necessary for the self-development of individuals. Only then can we write a common history and see ourselves in the future.

Individual uncertainty and the loss of social contacts may either lead to isolation, or to a kind of resurrection. Whether museum or heritage professionals or politicians, let's all focus on the social revival by opening up the museums and heritage sites. And let us take all the necessary precautions in order to protect not only visitors and staff, but also the heritage and the museums.

Museums, heritage sites and their staff are ready to face this challenge and will serve Belgium and its inhabitants, in the spirit of our national motto.

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