Cultural Valorisation

A comprehensive and pondered perspective for the evaluation of small museums



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"The excellence of every art must consist in the complete accomplishment of its purpose"

– motto displayed at main entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, England), derived from Sir Joshua Reynolds.



Contents

Introduction – Joining the conversation 1

0.1. – A disappointing visit 1

0.2. – It happens more frequently than it should be 2

0.3. – A small museum is not a minor museum 3

0.4. – Internal and external benefits of an evaluation method 6

0.5. – Inquiries that motivate this study 8

0.6. – Structure based on two research questions 8

0.7. – My "why" involves museums 10

PART 1 – Purposes, and their implications in a small museum.....13

Chapter 1 – Small museums: superstars in their field 15

1.1. – Museums: a forum as much as a treasure box 15

1.2. – Museums from different perspectives 21

1.3. – Museums purposes' are their essence 25

1.4. – Small museums: not superstars, but stars in their fields 28

1.4.a. – Small museums as small businesses 29

1.5. – Characterisation of small museums 32

Final words of Chapter 1 33

Chapter 2 – Values, worth and merit in a small museum.....35

2.1. – The nontrivial distinction between 'worth' and 'merit' 35

2.2. – Museum's worthy activities realise values 37

2.2.a. – An approach based in values 37

2.2.b. – Several perspectives of values 39

2.2.c. – Human values are continuous 40

2.2.d. – Four dimensions of values 42

2.2.e. – A technique for what is worth 45

2.3. – Museum's meritorious activities involve accomplishment 48

2.3.a. – Conformity with the purpose 49

2.3.b. – Conformity with the requirements 50

Final words of Chapter 2 50

PART 2 – Small museums as cultural organisations.....53

Chapter 3 – The importance of being in balance.....55

3.1. – Cultural Activities and Support Activities are complementary 55
3.1.a. – Museums are hybrid organisations 55
3.1.b. – Metaphors museums live by 58
3.2. – Balance of identities prevents the threat of 'purpose-drift' 61
3.2.a. – Managerialism may lead to purpose-drift 62
3.2.b. – Bureaupathology may lead to purpose-drift 64
3.2.c. – Marketisation may lead to purpose-drift 66
3.3. – Small museums are more susceptible to 'purpose-drift' 69
3.4. – Management is the art of making decisions 71
Final words of Chapter 3 71

Chapter 4 – The Cultural Activities 73
4.1. – Collections and exhibitions are goods to realise values 73
4.1.a. – Collections and exhibitions are shared-goods 75
4.1.b. – Through co-creation, the collection becomes a shared-good 77
4.2. – Valorisation concerns awareness or change with of values 81
4.2.a. – Valorisation of individuals' cultural capital in museums 82
4.2.b. – Valorisation is a consequence of the visit 83
4.3. – Audiences' engagement may have consequences 85
4.3.a. – Theory of Change and Logic Model 86
4.3.b. – The process of visiting a museum 90
Final words of Chapter 4 93

Chapter 5 – The Support Activities 95
5.1. – Museums are a pool of resources-related activities 96
5.2. – Museums' Support Activities are in four clusters of resources 98
5.2.a. – Collection-related activities 98
5.2.b. – Non-collection-related activities 99
5.2.c. – Finance-related activities 101
5.2.c.1. – Budget 102
5.2.c.2. – Funding 102
5.2.d. – Stakeholders-related activities 108
5.2.d.1. – Internal stakeholders – the producers of content 110
5.2.d.2. – External stakeholders – the co-producers of content 114
5.2.d.3. – Audiences: expert-visitors and amateur-visitors 117
Final words of Chapter 5 122

PART 3 – The Cultural Valorisation Method 125

Chapter 6 – Evaluations may guide the needed balance 127
6.1. – Some essential topics on evaluation 127
6.1.a. – Four fundamental attributes in an evaluation program 128
6.1.b. – Managerialism and bureaupathology are threats for evaluation programmes 130
6.1.c. – Evaluations: at the right moment, for the right audience 131
6.2. – The roles of the evaluators 131
6.3. – Some current relevant evaluation practices in museums 134
6.3.a. – Exhibition development, by Chandler Screven 135
6.3.b. – Evaluating Informal Learning, by Judy Diamond, Jessica Luke and David Uttal 137
6.3.c. – Balanced Scorecard, by Robert Kaplan and David Norton 139

6.3.d. – Contingent valuation 141
6.3.e. – Museum Register in the Netherlands 142
6.4. – Rather than 'benchmark', a 'metastandard' perspective 144
6.5.– Metaevaluation is imperative 147
Final words of Chapter 6 147

Chapter 7 – Description of the Cultural Valorisation Method 149

7.1. – Step A – Internal investigation: identification of museum's values 150
7.1.a. – Preliminary considerations 151
7.1.b. – Museum's values are in stakeholders' minds 151
7.1.c. – Construction of the 'values-map' 153
7.2. – Step B – Assessing Cultural Activities 153
7.2.a. – Assessing Expert-visitors 154
7.2.b. – Assessing Amateur-visitors 155
7.2.b.1. – Few words about sample size 157
7.2.b.2. – Few words about tabulation of surveys 158
7.3. – Step C – Assessing Support Activities 159
7.3.a. – Assessing Collection-related activities 160
7.3.b. – Assessing Non-collection-related activities 162
7.3.c. – Assessing Finance-related activities 164
7.3.c.1. – Budget 164
7.3.c.2. – Funding 165
7.3.d. – Assessing Stakeholders-related activities 166
7.4. – Step D – Analysis and pondering the findings 167
7.4.a. – Column A and Column B – List of clusters and findings 169
7.4.b.– Column C – List the activities 170
7.4.c. – Column D and Column E – Grading 'worth' and 'merit' of each pair of 'finding-activity' 171
7.4.d. – Diagram of worth and merit of pairs of 'findings-activities' 172
7.5. – Step E – Internal reporting: findings for Internal stakeholders 173
7.6. – Step F – External reporting: findings for External stakeholders 175
Final words of Chapter 7 176

Chapter 8 – A pilot-case for the Cultural Valorisation Method 177

8.1. – How to know whether the Cultural Valorisation Method works? 177
8.2. – Context of the Scales Museum 179
8.3. – The Cultural Valorisation Method at the Scales Museum 180
8.3.a. – Step A – Investigation on the purposes of the museum 180
8.3.b. – Step B – Investigation of the Cultural Activities 184
8.3.b.1. – Interview with an expert-visitor 184
8.3.b.2. – Survey with amateur-visitors 185
8.3.c. – Step C – Investigation of the Support Activities 199
8.3.c.1. – Collection-related activities 199
8.3.c.2. – Non-collection-related activities 199
8.3.c.3. – Finance-related activities 200
8.3.c.4. – Stakeholders-related activities 201
8.3.d. – Step D – Analysis and pondering 201
8.3.d.1. – Analysis of Scales Museum's Cultural Activities 202
8.3.d.2. – Analysis of Scales Museum's Support Activities – Collection-related 202
8.3.d.3. – Analysis of Scales Museum's Support Activities – Non-collection-related 203
8.3.d.4. – Analysis of the Scales Museum's Support Activities – Finance-related 204

8.3.d.5. – Analysis of the Scales Museum's Support Activities – Stakeholders-related 205
8.3.d.6. – Pondering the findings 206
8.3.e. – Step E – Internal reporting 209
8.3.f. – Step F – External reporting 209
8.4. – Does the Cultural Valorisation Method work? – comments on this metaevaluation 210
Final words of Chapter 8 213

Conclusion – Museums must care of both canvas and chassis 215

References 225

Annexes 243
Annex 1 – Johnson & Johnson's credo 243
Annex 2 – Investigation at Scales Museum 244
Annex 2.a. – Questions prepared for interview with Mr. René Pas 244
Annex 2.b. – Questions prepared for interview with Mr. Han Schwartz 244
Annex 2.c. – Questions prepared for interview with Mrs. Yvette de Vries 244
Annex 2.d. – Questionnaire prepared for survey with amateur-visitors 245

Nederlandse samenvatting 249

English abstract 251

About the author 253



Introduction –
Joining the conversation

0.1. – A disappointing visit

In August 2012, after having signed an exchange agreement between Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR, the Netherlands) and University of São Paulo (USP[1], Brazil), with Prof. Dr. Arjo Klamer I organised the 32 hours course "Values of Culture" for a Masters programme at "Faculty of Economics and Management" (*Faculdade de Economia e Administração* – FEA), at USP in Ribeirão Preto (Brazil).

The USP Campus in Ribeirão Preto was established in 1942 at the site where a large and wealthy coffee plantation used to be. In 1955, the municipality of Ribeirão Preto renovated the elegant former headquarters of the farm, converting it into the Historical Museum (*Museu Histórico*), to house a collection of all kinds of objects related to and representing life in the richest coffee producing are of the world during the second half of the 19th century.

Few meters away from the Historical Museum, in 1957 the same municipality created the Coffee Museum Colonel Francisco Schmidt (*Museu do Café Coronel Francisco Schmidt*) inside an old shed of the farm, aiming to tell the story of coffee production and consumption of the beverage during its second boom (from circa 1880 to 1930). This single-hall museum (in an area no larger than 250 m^2) houses a variety of agricultural machinery (some completely made of wood), and period-objects such as coffee-machines from the early 20th century, photographs, documents and books.

The Historical Museum and Coffee Museum are surrounded by a picturesque scenery of exuberant local flora. Although located inside the USP Campus, both museums are owned and run by the municipality of Ribeirão Preto that jointly designates them under the umbrella name "Coffee Museum". Together they may be visited in no more than one hour.

In 2012, during a break in our course, we visited the Coffee Museum along with the host from USP, Prof. Dr. João Passador. It was a beautiful, but disappointing visit. Beautiful because aside from the fascination of being at a site that represents the past wealth of the country[2], the artefacts on display were themselves *per se* interesting and attractive.

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[1] University of São Paulo, created in 1934, is the best-ranked Brazilian university, and one of the most prominent in Latin America. It is entirely financed by São Paulo State government.

[2] So important that there are coffee branches, leaves and beans in the Brazilian coat of arms.

However, it was a disappointing visit – or more precisely: unsatisfying, embarrassing and disheartening. Unsatisfying for Prof. Klamer who, besides not being able to read Portuguese (the sole language in the labels and texts, when present), was also unable to understand the importance and use of the objects and machinery which were unfamiliar for a Dutch person. Embarrassing for Prof. Passador who, having not visited the museum for many years (despite his office at the university being so close to the museum), now noted that the museum was no more than a collection of old and dusty objects whose tags were simply filled with names and inventory codes. Disheartening for me who, having lived in the region for some years in my youth and being proud of its history and traditions, intended to delight my foreign supervisor with the achievements and the local history. Furthermore, we were certainly planning to have a coffee at the museum cafe, to celebrate our museum visit, the nice scenery and pleasant weather, our successful course and maybe plan future partnerships. Ultimately… life. But sadly the Coffee Museum did not offer to its visitors a museum cafe!

At that time I had just begun my study of museums and used to wonder about them all the time, ultimately ending up with this doctoral dissertation. I was preoccupied with questions as "are these small places museums?", "how to determine that these small museums are achieving their goals?", and "how do these small museums sustain themselves as organisations?".

Years later, in early 2016, I became disheartened again when I learned that both museums had been shutdown due to the bad maintenance of their buildings. The warm and humid climate promoted the proliferation of termites, which together with heavy rain had led to the collapse of part of the roof, affecting also the wooden floor and few other objects from the collection. In the local press, the director of the museum Daniel Basso explained:

> *"the damage to the roof caused leaks, which contributed to the damage of the lining and the floor, as well as compromising the entire collection due to humidity. We were restoring the historical books that were part of our library. Now they are almost completely lost due humidity."* (Castilho, 2016).

0.2. – It happens more frequently than it should be

The sad situation of the Coffee Museum is not unique in the museum sector. Around the world – not just in developing countries – there are a myriad of similar "mundane causes"[3] that may prevent museums from fulfilling their purposes[4] – whatever motivations they may be.

The lack of proper venue care may be a threat to museums and exhibitions. In 2002 the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) opened a branch gallery at the Schiphol

[3] Ranging from a lack of suitable maintenance of the building to shortage of financial resources; or from vandalism, and robbing to looting.

[4] Throughout this study, the topic of "museums purposes" will be central.
See Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion. In the presentation of the method in Chapter 7, I dedicate Section 7.1. to the identification of the museum's purpose.

Airport to display a selection of ten original Golden-Age paintings, aiming to attract visitors to its main venue in the heart of Amsterdam and increase the revenue from the museum shop. However, just as it happened at the Coffee Museum, on January 25th 2008, a leak started at the gallery due to heavy rains and a renovation of the lounge on the upper level, forcing the museum staff to close it to prevent damage to the collection (Bailey, 2018). Could this situation have been avoided?

The safety and security of the collection may also be a threat to a museum. A decade after the 2003 invasion that deposed Saddam Hussein's regime, having faced a myriad of theft incidents, Iraq's National Museum (Baghdad, Iraq) reopened seven of its 23 wings in 2013. "*The museum is now displaying some of the stolen antiquities that were recovered and restored. From a historical perspective and in terms of restoration, it's a very good thing*" (Dziadosz, 2014). Yes, but what about the unrecovered collection? Could this situation have been avoided?

Reduction in public funding may also be a threat to museums. According to the Museum Association 2017 Report, in the UK 64% of museums in Wales reported a cut to public subsidies (all revenue funding from sources such as the government, local authorities or higher education institutions), compared to 50% in Scotland, 43% in Northern Ireland and 21% in England, leading to the Museum Association stating that "*at least 64 museums in the UK have closed since 2010, with 15 museum closures in 2016 alone. The majority of closures are the result of reduced public funding*" (Museum Association, 2017). The director of the Museum Association, Sharon Heal stated:

> "*Museums are at the heart of their communities and are a crucial part of the civic realm. They can help us understand our place in a rapidly changing world and play a unique role in connecting the past with the present. But in order for them to deliver the life-changing opportunities that they provide they need sustained public funding.* […] *We have seen an increase in museum closures over the past year and there's a danger that some areas of the country are going to be left without these vital community resources*" (Sullivan, 2017).

As in the Coffee Museum, could these three examples also have been avoided? Maybe. What is missing? This study will investigate some causes that could have helped these museums in their difficulties. But I will add a characteristic of the Coffee Museum that is seldom remembered: size.

0.3. – A small museum is not a minor museum

When I mention the word 'museum', what comes to your mind? Perhaps an image of some of the world's greatest museums will appear: Musée du Louvre (Paris, France), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City, USA), or the British Museum (London, England), accounting for 7.4, 7.0 and 6.4 million visitors in 2016, respectively. Or maybe exhibitions such as the one that received the most visitors in 2016: 'Post-Impressionist

Masterpieces' (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) which attracted 9,700 visitors per day while it was open in 2016[5] (The Art Newspaper, 2017).

When we discuss the problems that affect the museum sector, the cases that may come to mind may be the along the lines of the difficulties that occurred with two large Dutch ethnographical museums: Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam) and the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam), which faced financial constraints after the Dutch government announced the cut of subsidies in 2012, or the alleged conflict of interest that forced the director of the modern art Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam) to resign her position in 2018.

However, the fanfare that plays loudly for the large museums will probably play softly for small museums. After all, the grand masterpieces of art, history, science, nature, technology, and objects that may be part of an exquisite collection are more likely to be in large museums, while small museums are usually specialised – it is precisely at this point that lies their charm. While well-known large museums such as the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) and Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam) attract the most attention, visitation and resources, lesser-known small museums may also provide unforgettable moments and bring unique stories for all kinds of audiences.

Examples of small museums are diverse. If we examine small Dutch museums, some were created to display a collection of specialised objects, like the Amsterdam Pipe Museum, the Museum of Bags and Purses (Amsterdam), or the Chess Museum (Rotterdam); museums created to celebrate specific historical events such as the Museum Het Prinsenhof (Delft) or the Historisch Museum Den Briel (Brielle); museums created to celebrate the birthplace, living or death of an eminent person: Vincent van GoghHuis (Zundert), Comenius Museum (Naarden), or Anne Frank Museum (Amsterdam); museums connected to associations, such as the Freemasonry Museum (The Hague), the Cheese Museum (Alkmaar), or the Cheese Museum (Gouda). Finally, many cities have local historical museums and most universities have technical museums.

In small museums, guides may be able to present to the audiences a more intimate and distinctive look into nuances and details than large museums – even ground-breaking technologies like Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality will have limitations in these museums, in particular due to a scarcity of resources to produce and maintain them. In small museums, what audiences lose in terms of grandiosity, splendour and fame, they gain from being welcomed in a relaxed, intimate, and perhaps a tailored visit with a human touch.

Although relevant for a number of reasons, small museums receive little attention also from important associations. The ICOM (International Council of Museums), an entity that has formal relations with the UNESCO (United Nations Economic and Social Council), is the only organisation of museums and museum-professionals with a global scope. It has 30 international committees that bring together experts of museum matters to act as global think-tanks, defining professional standards, sharing scientific information, establishing partnerships with other organisations, and developing

[5] Opened during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games that took place in the city, maybe influencing the high visitation number.

recommendations for its members. At ICOM, no committee or publication deals specifically with the issues of small museums.

In its turn, AAL (American Alliance of Museums), the North-American counterpart to ICOM, has the group SMAC (Small Museum Administrators Committee), which has the responsibility to:

> *"promote the significant role of small museums as educational centers, repositories of our national cultural heritage, and organizations committed to quality of life for their communities"* (SMAC-AAM, 2018).

According to AAM:

> *"By any measure, the vast majority of the nation's museums are small, with fewer than five staff. Small museums also make up the majority of Alliance members. Whether a historic home or a children's museum, these institutions are vital to their communities"* (Alliance, 2018).

The "vast majority" indeed. The president of the Italian 'National Association of Small Museums' (*Associazione Nazionale Piccoli Musei* – APM) Giancarlo Dall'Ara states that more than 90% of Italian museums are small. In the Netherlands the situation is similar. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* – CBS), 68% of Dutch museums may be considered small (CBS, 2017). As expected, although higher in number, small museums have smaller visitation. The same Bureau reports that in 2016 from a total of 694 museums, solely 10% of them received more than 100,000 visitors[6] [7], while 19% (25,000 to 10,000 visitors), 32% (10,000 to 2,500 visitors), and 17% received less than 2,500 visitors in 2016 (CBS, 2017).

Small museums are in larger numbers, but since they shine a dimmer light and speak with weaker voices, they become neglected even in academic literature. In the specialised universe of museum studies, most treat them similarly to large museums, in all their complexities and relevance. However, although small museums face similar problems to large museums concerning the conservation of the collection, venue maintenance, shortage of financial resources, and engagement of the staff (and volunteers), they are different:

> *"A small museum is not a shrunken version of a large one, and it is not a minor museum, but a different way of understanding the museum: more rooted in the territory, with a strong link with the local community, more welcoming, more relational – it is a matter of atmosphere and details."* (Dall'Ara, 2016, p. 2).

If small museums have idiosyncrasies that distinguish them from other kinds of organisations (including the large museums), how can a professional be prepared to run them, ensuring their artistic and cultural relevance, concomitantly being able to guarantee

[6] Rijksmuseum alone received 2.2 million visitors in 2016.

[7] An increment of 34% from 2015.

their organisational sustainability[8], i.e., the museum's perpetuation? Above that, if this museum managers are usually not fully prepared[9], what tools could they use to assist their decision-making?

0.4. – Internal and external benefits of an evaluation method

Various disciplines may be combined to address this single issue: turn small museums into solid and sustainable organisations while achieving their purposes – whatever they might be. The discipline that indicates the direction for decision-making, the accomplishment of these purposes, the correction of procedures (if necessary) is 'evaluation'[10].

An assessment method designed for museums might have helped the Coffee Museum and Rijksmuseum gallery at Schiphol Airport to anticipate the incidents that led to the closure of their exhibitions, or helped Iraq's National Museum to better protect their collection, or even to make museums in the UK careful about their sources of income[11].

Evaluation methods may help organisations' staff to improve their internal activities (promoting achievements and correcting failures). Besides, they are also essential to demonstrate organisational achievements to external audiences[12]. In a playful way, the scholar on evaluation Michael Quinn Patton summarised the spirit of the discipline by adapting an idea, first presented by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler:

> "*What gets measured gets done.*
>
> *If you don't measure results, you can't tell success from failure. If you can't see success, you can't learn from it. If you can't see success, you can't reward it.*
>
> *If you can't reward success, you're probably rewarding failure. If you can't recognize failure, you can't correct it.*
>
> *If you can demonstrate results, you can win public support*" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, in Patton, 2008, p. 22).

The judgement of success is based on assessments according to agreed methods and standards, but these judgements may or may not relate to each museum's purpose. The challenge for museums is to find their own reference, proposing perspectives and developing methods to account for their idiosyncrasies, differentiating them from other kinds of organisations. While presenting her method to evaluate the performing arts, Suzanne Callahan concludes:

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[8] The term 'sustainability' has being used extensively by environmentalists. However, in this dissertation I will apply it as defined at the Oxford Dictionary: *"Able to be maintained at a certain rate or level"*. For this study it will denote "organisational sustainability".

[9] See Section 3.3. for comments on 'museum manager'.

[10] See Section 6.1. for a discussion of evaluation as a discipline.

[11] See Section 5.2.c. for sources of income.

[12] See Section 5.2.d. for museums' stakeholders.

> *"the issue is no longer 'if' we are going to evaluate, but 'how' we are going to do it"* (Callahan, 2008, p. 12).

As the acquisition of financial resources may be problematic, evaluations may help. In a situation when the economy falters, with more applicants for subsidies or grants and fewer resources available, funders struggle to make fair decisions. Evaluations become a way to justify funding decisions – after all, funders also have to explain their decisions and demonstrate results.

Museums perform evaluations[13]. However, these methods typically either focus on the efficiency of exhibitions and informal learning (without referring to other aspects of the museum as organisation), or they are an adaptation of corporate methods (without accounting for the purposes of the museum).

But allocation of resources may also be problematic. As resources are often scarce[14], there is not enough money for these organisations to do all the things they need or desire to do, but even if there were enough money, it is unclear whether these organisations are doing the right thing. Evaluations may help in this matter too.

> "*When linked early on with thoughtful planning, evaluation can empower staff to think more effectively about current and future programs. In doing* [so], *evaluations shifts from a burdensome and sometimes intimidating requirements of funders to* [become] *a useful tool for shaping and learning about programs. Once informed, you can take control of the evaluation process, rather than feeling that the process controls you*" (Callahan, 2008, p. 8-9).

Evaluation programmes are positive pursuits. Successful evaluation programmes bring to the organisation and its supporters the satisfaction of knowing (with a certain level of confidence) which elements are strong and which require improvements. *"Evaluation is a vital component of the continuing health of organisation"* (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007, p. xxv). When combined with thoughtful planning, assessment provides a process for a cultural organisation to articulate the value of its programs. But from where are evaluations derived?

The root of the discipline 'evaluation' is 'value'[15]. Evaluation involves making value judgments, thus they are not "value-free" (or by consequence, "judgments-free"). Evaluation should not be confused with 'measurement' – a common misunderstanding: measurements are assessment according to agreed standards (e.g., metre, second, gram), while evaluations are assessments referring to values, that might change across individuals, society or time period. Deborah Fournier points out:

> *"it is the value feature that distinguishes evaluation from other types of inquiry, such as basic science research, clinical epidemiology, investigative journalism, or public polling"* (Fournier, 2005, p. 139-140).

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[13] See Section 6.3. for some current methods.

[14] See Section 5.1. for museums resources.

[15] In this study I invest some pages characterising notions of values, as they are essential for the understanding of museums.

In this sense, to provide valuable information for museum staff to reward achievements and correct failures, and to demonstrate properly to external stakeholders about the museum's accomplishments and gain their support, evaluations need to be grounded in some defensible set of guiding principles, ideals or perspectives, and should determine the evaluand's (i.e., the museum) standing toward these values. The chase for these principles motivates this study.

0.5. – Inquiries that motivate this study

The purposes of museums vary. A key issue that motivates this study is the quest of 'whether a museum is succeeding in realise its own purpose' – the answer may be positive or negative. If a museum is achieving the desired result, the following question is 'is this success sustainable in the long run?', and 'what could be improved?'.

Museums' Internal stakeholders (i.e., the staff) operate the organisation, thus they must be motivated and engaged – the question is: 'are they?'. Museums' External stakeholders ought to be well informed about the realisations and achievements to provide public support (and maybe become donors) – the question returns: 'are they?'.

But in the uneasy scenario when a museum is not achieving the designed purpose, some questions are 'why is it not achieving it?', 'what should be changed?', 'what needs to be improved?', or sometimes even 'what should be terminated?'

The Coffee Museum, the Rijksmuseum gallery at Schiphol Airport, and the museums in the UK are examples where museums had to close some rooms (or the entire venue) due to physical or financial issues – we must ask, as professional organisations, 'how did they reach this point without prevention?', and 'how can we be sure that museums, although achieving their goals, will not face the same issues in the future?'

To reach conclusions, an important issue is 'who determines the achievement?'. If there are external assessors, 'who they are?', 'how they reached these judgements?', 'which methods and perspectives they used?'. After all, assessors may have the power to influence decisions, and biased analyses based on inappropriate mindsets may do more harm than good to the museum.

Assessments are complex endeavours. If well conducted with a proper method, it may bring substantial benefits to the organisation. However, if developed carelessly, an evaluation method may damage the relationship among the internal stakeholders and the museum's image with the external stakeholders. In this sense, a proper evaluation method is essential.

0.6. – Structure based on two research questions

This study has two clear audiences: academic and professional. For the academic audience I aim to problematise and propose perspectives that will contribute to the scholarly debate on cultural economics and cultural management in general, and museum management in

particular, studying small museums. Here I am raising questions that I could not find answers for in the literature, as Arjo Klamer suggests:

> *"Try to raise problems, as we academics are used to do, and the non-academic will just want to know your solution. The difference is that we want to help the conversation going, and for that you need problems and issues, whereas they want closure"* (Klamer, 1996, p. 20).

The professional audience may also benefit from this study. Here I aim to contribute to the understanding of small museums as organisations, proposing a framework that may assist museum managers to make decisions towards organisational sustainability. My contribution for the academic debate and museums practices should be the aftermath of the overlapping of museum sector's needs and my previous studies, professional background (and personal interests).

In this sense, the research question of this Ph.D. dissertation is:

How to evaluate a small museum?

I conclude this Ph.D. dissertation proposing an evaluation method to address this rather practical and operational question. However, before it will be necessary to review small museums in their idiosyncrasies, to understand their characteristics in a comprehensive manner. For the chapters where I focus on the description and characterisation of small museums, it will be useful the following second research question:

How to understand a small museum as a cultural organisation?

This study is divided in three parts:

'Part 1 – Purposes and their implications in a small museum' is mainly theoretical. Here I investigate aspects that characterise museums in general and small museums in particular, and differentiate them from other forms of organisation. Part 1 is divided into two chapters:

- Chapter 1 discusses the purposes of museums, how scholars understand them, and the main features that distinguish large and small museums. Finally, I propose a characterisation of small museums.
- Chapter 2 analyses the small museum's production, and proposes a perspective to discuss the quality of the museum. In this chapter I propose that quality be based on production's 'worth' and 'merit'

'Part 2 – Small museums as organisations' is mainly analytical. Here I will systematically analyse the various aspects of a museum as an organisation. Part 2 is divided into three chapters:

- Chapter 3 focuses on the main proposition of this study – museums are hybrid organisations, i.e., internally, they present two profiles of activities, and the realisation of their purposes depend on the balance of these two internal identities.
- Chapter 4 discusses the activities related to the very purpose of the museum: the valorisation of culture[16].
- Chapter 5 describes small museums as organisations, divided into four parts. This chapter focuses on the elements that make a museum operational.

'Part 3 – the Cultural Valorisation Method' is propositional, dealing with the assessment of museums, and the introduction of an evaluation method. It is divided in three chapters:

- Chapter 6 where I extract the main concepts from the literature on evaluation that may be useful in an assessment method designed specifically for museums.
- Chapter 7 where I address the operational 'how-question', describing the seven steps of the Cultural Valorisation Method. The following chapter is a consequence of the description of the method.
- Chapter 8 where I describe its usability – in the summer of 2017 I applied the method in one thematic small museum in Naarden (the Netherlands). In this chapter I describe the case and the insights from its implementation.

0.7. – My "why" involves museums

This study has personal motivations. The sorrowful situation of the Coffee Museum affected me deeply – as a teenager I lived in Ribeirão Preto (Brazil) for three years, being engaged in the region's traditions and the importance of its history. The museum represented all that. So its demise seemed to me a devaluation of part of my past.

My passion for museums however goes back to even before that the Coffee Museum incident. During my childhood our family lived in the capital of the state, São Paulo, close to another historical museum – in this case the large and influential Paulista Museum. On Sunday mornings we often visited this museum and the surrounding French style gardens – I still have sweet memories of those moments: the beauty and allure of the objects, and the atmosphere of mystery and discovery of the museum. From those experiences I may trace back my passion for museums. Over the years my interest in museums expanded from a childish curiosity to a more mature and rational understanding of their aesthetic attractiveness and meanings, their educational approaches and also their emotional or even spiritual moments that motivate me to visit them.

I could have steered my professional career towards the cultural sector, but life took me in another direction. After my Bachelors degree in geology, in 1992 I was hired by the world's largest mining corporation to work in functions completely unrelated to the arts and culture. The training process as soon as I joined was an eight-month long MBA, when for the first time I became aware of disciplines such as economics and management. For 12

[16] Hence the name of the method I am proposing in this study: Cultural Valorisation.

years I worked for this firm, always feeling that something was missing – some of my values were not fulfilled. During my years as geologist, besides my regular duties I became Lead Assessor of standard quality assurance ISO 9000 and ISO 14000 series, which was a corporate trend during the 1990's and remains a mindset that influenced the development of this study.

After having lived away from São Paulo for many years, in 2002 I was back in the city feeling compelled to finally realise my cultural values. Acknowledging that I am not an artist, I asked for advice from Mrs. Pierina Camargo a close relative who works as chief museologist of a monographic[17] art museum – she suggested that I may offer to work as a volunteer in her museum, developing a task related to my expertise. So, I started to volunteer at the Lasar Segall Museum as fundraiser.

For four years I worked at the museum a couple of evenings every week, after having worked the whole day in my regular job. My feeling was that after many hours in "hell", I would spend a few hours in "heaven". I liked everything about the museum: the art, the culture, the atmosphere, the aura and in particular, the staff. In the museum personnel, I saw great passion for their work and commitment to the values of the organisation in a way that I had never seen before. What a lovely and interesting place it was!

A famous aphorism popularly attributed to Mark Twain, "*the two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why*"[18] describes my situation – volunteering at Lasar Segall Museum I found my 'why'. That was the opportunity for a fresh start, so I decided to pursue a new career that would combine most of my previous studies with my passion for the arts, culture and museums, in the most radical way.

Hence in May 2007, I left my family and my country heading to Bologna (Italy) for the two-years Masters course in Management and Innovation of Cultural and Artistic Organisations – GIOCA, at the University of Bologna. In 2009, I contacted an inspiring author Prof. Dr. Arjo Klamer from Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands) to co-supervise my Masters Thesis, where I investigated forms of collaboration among museums. Later he accepted me as an external researcher in a partnership that led to this dissertation, where I continue my study on museums.

One of the benefits of having a diverse background as mine is to realise why and how various disciplines may be combined. My life's quest is to combine this "patchwork of backgrounds" to the benefit of the cultural sector, in particular for museums. As part of my journey, this study is my contribution for organisations operating in the arts and culture.

[17] A museum specialised in the oeuvre of a single artist.

[18] Authorship of the quotation is uncertain.