

Tamara Nikolić Đerić, Jorijn Neyrinck,
Eveline Seghers and Evdokia Tsakiridis,
*Museums and intangible cultural
heritage. Towards a third space in the
heritage sector: a companion to discover
transformative heritage practices for the 21st
century,*

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Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is an important and integral component of heritage. It has been recognised and written about for some time in both academic and museological texts. This publication is the outcome of the 2017–2020 Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project (IMP), a collaboration between museum practitioners and academics that explored the approaches, interactions and practices for safeguarding ICH together with museums in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and France. Using real-life examples with which the authors were familiar, interspersed with perspectives from leading theorists, this publication aims to offer a toolkit for capacity building to explore and safeguard the third space in the heritage sector – intangible cultural heritage – and to encourage an understanding of different methods and approaches as inspiration for future collaboration.

In a time of transformational societal change, issues such as decolonising collections and debates

on participatory heritage and, more recently, access to community cultural heritage are met with a growing awareness of different forms and experiences of heritage that are often overlooked. ICH gives people a sense of identity and community, is a mainspring of cultural diversity and contributes to sustainable development. Discussion on museums and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage acknowledges the formative 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and inclusion of ICH in the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition in 2007.

The authors state that now is the time to reconceptualise the museum for the future, considering its plurality of visions and responsibilities. To assist with this understanding of the third space, of the collision between histories that constitute it, and of the present histories, the book provides useful and inspiring examples of good practices and insights, and of the why and the how. It is

organised as an atlas of exploration around this diverse, holistic and integrated approach to this intersection.

Section 1, 'The WHY and HOW of this book', looks at the role of heritage 'in a time of transformation', defines intangible cultural heritage, speaks of museums and of safeguarding ICH, and outlines the aims of the IMP. It then describes how the book can be used.

Section 2, 'Key concepts shared', examines the heritage discourse (always fascinating to a heritage practitioner) using quotes from museum workers such as 'museums are not neutral' and 'heritage is a discourse'. It looks at participation and offers steps, or 'takeaways', on how to start working towards participatory processes that address ICH. These steps include recognising the importance of making people feel 'at home' in the museum, engaging them in an ongoing dialogue that is predicated on equity, and involving people in their own heritage. The importance of respectful and ethical engagement, and of thinking outside the 'museum' or 'community' box to safeguard ICH, is advocated. The social role of museums in contributing to community wellbeing and social inclusion is acknowledged with a reminder for museums to continue to explore innovative strategies in their practice in order to support society to meet unprecedented challenges. Such prescient words!

The recognition that not only instruments, objects and artefacts but also cultural spaces contain ICH is worth revisiting. One academic asks rhetorically whether *all* values are intangible – whether *all* heritage is intangible. The authors ask that we look deeper, higher and wider, and do so critically, to make up our own minds. Diversity is discussed in terms of the challenges of larger conurbations of superdiversity, where there are no minorities or majorities and where museums can be the 'contact zones' for social inclusion and community empowerment.

Sustainable development, and the question of why the substantial place and role of culture and cultural heritage is missing in the key areas of environment, society and economy, forms the seventh chapter of this section. Takeaways suggest ways in which to promote ICH in museums as a driver of sustainability and a contributor to reconciliation and social cohesion.

Section 3, 'Inspiring intersections: towards a third space', advocates for creativity and innovation when

safeguarding the strong ties of ICH as a living heritage. The notion of a 'liquid' museum with soft powers, embracing world views and operating in complex networks nationally and internationally, is discussed as part of the still current ICOM debate on a new museum definition. Linking museum functions and ICH, this section looks at the role of conservation and interpretation of objects in safeguarding ICH. Capacity building is discussed by a practitioner who advocates for oral history courses that are practically based.


Section 4, 'Risky opportunities', advocates using the 2003 UNESCO Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage as a tool to limit the risks of collaborative work, such as the potential for loss of meaning and decontextualization, for commercialisation, and for the loss of that much contested and evolving notion, authenticity. A reference framework is provided for key texts and networks in the 21st century.

The authors are well-chosen, experienced heritage professionals and ICH practitioners. They include a comparative anthropologist who coordinates the UNESCO-accredited ICH NGO Forum, an ethnographer, a cultural heritage law expert, the museums and society coordinator at ICOM International, an academic and UNESCO Chair on Critical Heritage Studies, and a museologist and storyteller. The case studies are from living collections with an active engagement with the community in preserving and presenting folk traditions such as puppet making in Palermo, Sicily, the shrimp-fishing industry in Oostduinkerke, Belgium, and authentic Rotterdam heritage in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The methodologies described could be easily transferred to other community museums.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project is co-funded by the Creative Europe program of the European Union and addresses the program's priorities of capacity building and transnational mobility. IMP was made possible with the support of the Flemish Government and the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

This considered and collaborative publication is both timely and relevant. It promotes the importance of safeguarding ICH, and of using it to better understand cultural heritage, by offering workable strategies and examples of good professional practice to address the principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on ICH. It

can be read as a whole, addressing methodologies and practice, or dipped into as a reference as the need occurs. Although the case studies are from 2017–2020 and are Europe-centric, the subjects and strategies are globally applicable and locally viable. Given the challenges posed by current geopolitics to cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage, this is a readable and useful reference work that can be added to as and when required. An inspiring practice handbook for these interesting times. Recommended reading.

This publication is available as a free downloadable link at <https://www.ichandmuseums.eu/en/imp-toolkit/search/download/book-museums-and-intangible-cultural-heritage>. 

ENDNOTE

1. Another timely example is Chapter 5, 'The neutrality problem', in Laura Raicovich's *Culture strike: art and museums in an age of protest*. New York: Verso (2021).