

MUSEUMS AS LABORATORIES OF SOCIAL HARMONY, TOLERANCE AND COHESION

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Abstract

It is well understood that museums have been transformed from organizations that represent material culture and its conservation, that delivered educational messages with a touch of entertainment, to become keepers of narratives that store memories of relationships between people, and, between people and their material culture and the environment, in ways that influence social life. Narratives in modern museums encourage visitors to think about human interrelationships in society and to expand their understanding to connections and communication made within and across cultures. However, not all museums are so committed. Seeking to create an “aura” of uniqueness, National museums often develop “instant messages” about cultural identity as a way to create national identity to promote the nation’s status in the world.

The objective of this article is to provide answers to the following questions:

1) Whether maximizing profits from economic progress through competitive strategies will create optimal benefits for the whole of society in a way that is better than collaborative participation among stakeholders who seek to find a balance between consumption and wisdom?

2) What priorities do museums need to focus on in order to encourage values related to social harmony, tolerance and cohesion?

3) How can museums evolve to become laboratories of social harmony, tolerance and cohesion?

The study will therefore be divided into three parts: 1) culture as one of the bases of society 2) museums as cultural institutions espousing values of social harmony, tolerance and cohesion and 3) museums as laboratories of social harmony, tolerance and cohesion.

Keywords: Culture, Consumption, Wisdom, Museums, Social harmony/tolerance and cohesion

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research undertaken for a much larger project on Thai perceptions of museums revealed that people were reluctant to visit museums because they did not see them as being related to areas they deemed central to their lives, especially their economic well-being and that of their communities. Economics seemed to be far more important than cultural activities.

Both Karl Marx and Abraham Maslow considered, from different perspectives, the inter-relationship between the material environment and human relationships and both regarded economics (production, resources, basic material needs) as being fundamental to human life and human invention. Thai perceptions would seem to confirm these theoretical views. This paper is part of a research report titled “Thais’ perception towards museums: An investigation of how museums play important roles in cultural heritage conservation and development”. The research paper provides various perspectives about how museums can develop their role as educators by providing experiences.

The purpose of a national museum, such as the British museum, is the study of human societies through time and the material culture of humanity around the world (see Towards 2020 The British museum’s strategy). The reform of Museums in Thailand, in particular the Siam Museum, has focused on the development of learning environments and creative cultural activities with both permanent and temporary exhibitions. (Information about activities to support mission statements may be found at <http://www.ndmi.or.th> and <https://www.facebook.com/museumsiamfan>). Virtual web-based museums provide opportunities for

people in all corners of the world to experience world travel by visiting from anywhere, at any time. However, in spite of their advanced accessibility, at least three possible conflicts still cannot be completely disentangled (Grassmuck 1998). These conflicts are:

- 1) The conflict between providing universal access to unique objects and the desire of people from every culture to declare those objects to be their own cultural material.
- 2) The conflict between a world culture, where collective memories are shared by everyone, and the politics of some countries that involve building their national identity through the material culture presented in their own museums.
- 3) The conflict between superficial learning through digital displays and real learning experienced at the original places.

To fulfil the purpose of a museum as a social institution, to develop problem solving skills for the whole society, museums must adopt the role of a laboratory for social harmony, tolerance and cohesion.

In the introduction to his book *Marx and Modernity: Key Readings and Commentary*, Robert J. Antonio, argues that it is important for scholars who are interested in the evolution of human societies to become acquainted with sociological materialism, described as the traditions and social practices required for decoding cultural meanings. Marx in his nineteenth century work regarded human lives as a product of historical forces that in turn related to the forces of production, to the way material culture was produced (Antonio, 2003: 53). In other words, social interactions are part of a production process whereby human life was strongly determined by the material world. The material world affects humans, their cultures, their beliefs and their

knowledge. It is a symbiotic relationship. Objects have agency, and can create interrelationships between humans as well as humans and their surrounding environment by developing, as Antonio argues, “co-values” that lead to meaning. These co-values can produce social needs that accumulate over a period of time and contribute to what is called “culture”, standard ways of thinking and behaving within society. Material culture then, can be regarded as a repository of memories and traces of historical social relationships and their connections to the forces of production.

According to Maslow (Isarapakdee, 2016: 67), humans trend to satisfy five levels of needs (as shown in figure 1) in order to enjoy a fulfilling life. One of the questions raised by Maslow’s work is whether or not the optimal point between the level of need and the capacity to fulfill that need can be reached in every single situation. In Maslow’s theory, according to Isarapakdee, culture is a means of describing the collective needs of communities and of society at large, but what strategies would be required to identify the balance between needs and human fulfillment? It is commonly thought that economics provides conceptual tools for organizing human

needs by describing the relationship between consumption and production, including efficient resource management. In economic terms, production generally is related to consumption and as we know, production can sometimes exceed what is needed for living. This excess can be utilized to build social value through images and symbols; in other words, consumption is connected to the way products become signs/symbols (of wealth, status, success and so forth). Therefore, paradoxically, excess production results in a failure to balance natural resources and needs (often with the overuse and depletion of natural resources) but at the same time, excess becomes a symbol of ‘success’ (Supasil, 2014: 32). The visible example of this situation are the impacts on eco-systems from pollution and the results of extravagant consumption (like waste and resource over-use). In short, consumption stimulates the need for excess production without any concern about the overuse of natural and cultural resources. Ironically, this same overuse creates deep problems that then require solutions because not only is human survival at stake but, obviously, culture as well.

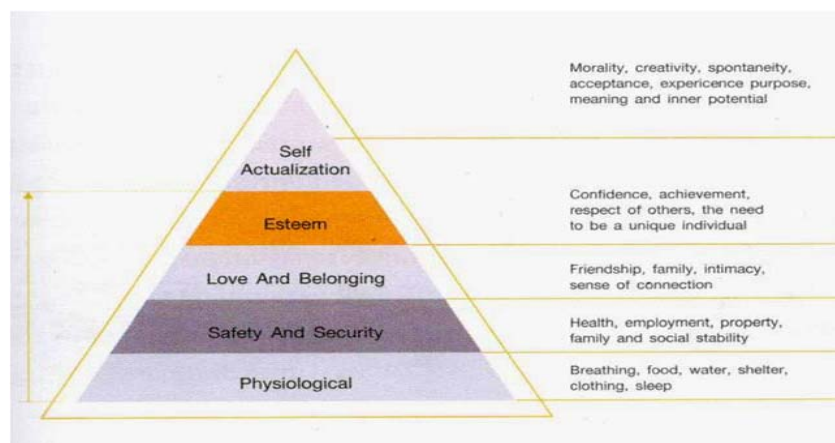


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Source: Branding 4.0: From Human Spirit to Your Spirit, p.67

One such strategy for survival was that advocated by E.F. Schumacher, a German economist who was interested in Buddhist economics and the idea of freedom from excess consumption. According to his book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, the degree of development, especially sufficient development, originates from the idea of human development arising from people being educated to have a clear sense of their reasons for living (Schumacher 1973, 81). Education, in his context, is the most essential resource for social development, for a balanced and stable economic system, that in turn is based on the scientific revolution and strong cultural roots that encourage values of living sufficiently, productively, and harmoniously between themselves and the environment. From this perspective, the purpose of consumption is for satisfying social needs and for education that grows from life experiences. These ideas can be translated to the museum sector. For instance, audiences at museums are both consumers of the museums' messages and they connect their own life experience with the narratives of the museums. Meaning making is collaborative, not just unidirectional (Antonio, 2003: 53). In the spirit of Schumacher, effective museums must have the capability to generate ideas about life values for their audiences in a way that transmits both material heritage and their meanings (intangible values). At the same time, applying Schumacher's ideas, audiences will become inheritors who accumulate knowledge and develop critical thinking, enabling the development of their own wisdom. This ideal museum concept carries within it an image of cultural inheritance and education that reinforces and continues the process of

adaptation in accordance with changes experienced through the visitor's life journey. In this context, it is necessary for museums to expand their mission from education, conservation, and entertainment to become a laboratory of social harmony, tolerance, and cohesion. Such a shift requires a very different perception of heritage and its role in spreading social benefits throughout society, social benefits that will sustain an economic system that efficiently utilizes human and natural resources.

2.Culture is Foundational to Society

Although 'culture' is notoriously difficult to define, on one level it can be regarded as an accumulation of collective needs at a point in time ('needs' being widely understood to include communication, as well as materiality, imagination, traditions, customs, beliefs and so forth). A key dimension of culture is the collection of norms that govern behavior and perceptions in society. 'Culture' then implies a practical model for social life. In order to live what is deemed a 'normal' peaceful life, 'culture' replicates and encourages ethical mannerisms that can be described, according to Brahmaganabhorn(1996), as having three main characteristics: 1)the capacity for communication, 2)'content' and 'forms'consistent with nature/environment so that society gains the maximum benefits and 3)values of cultural heritageregarded as foundational so that the wisdom of past cultures can be linked to the present and to creative futures(Brahmagunabhorn1996: 19-27). All aspects of culture, and all cultures, have the capacity to evolve and underscore learning strategies that raise awareness about the collective values of life. In the 21st century,

faced with innumerable problems at a global and national level, for many it is imperative that the whole of society develop high motivation for defining priority issues that potentially improve the situation. The UN Millennium Goals and the recent UN Sustainability Goals are an example of this type of priority setting. These processes encompass many aspects: visible material progress (like poverty alleviation and infrastructure development); an understanding of both the capacity and the limits of the scientific and technological revolution, especially when science and technology cannot satisfy all human needs or solve all problems, or meet all desires; and how culture, especially material culture, can provide intangible spiritual values for life improvement (Brahmagunabhorn 1996: 19-27). Therefore, the study of culture as a foundational dimension of society can involve understanding the structure of material culture from the perspective of at least two human's needs: 1) accumulated consumption can be considered as a cultural entity (and like all cultural norms can be challenged and changed) and 2) the need for collective wisdom when it comes to solutions for removing the obstacles to lives guided by harmony, tolerance and cohesion. But perhaps the greatest obstacle to a museum as a laboratory for harmony, tolerance and cohesion is an environment of global capitalism and global finance.

Christopher Schaefer, in an article entitled "Income Inequalities and the Health of Societies: From the U.S. to Thailand" from the book *Essays on Thailand's Economy and Society* (2013), explored the principles of free-market trade. He argued that people mostly manage their passions and desires by responding to their personal interests, concerns and anxieties. In the current economic climate

the dominant way of dealing with personal situations is often considered to be acquiring financial power. But such an approach does not necessarily lead to satisfactory personal outcomes because global forces like discriminatory trade practices that seek to harvest the maximum return on investment affect financial power. For the power and financial elites, the highest return on investment is believed to influence and to be of benefit to the whole of society. This perception from the 'top' is a far cry from that of lives lived at the 'bottom'. Since the 1980s there has been a widespread belief that competitive economic systems are the ideal way to distribute the gains of productivity to all of society. Progress and development, in this ideology, is measured by the volume of consumption of both products and services. The optimal indicator of progress is seen to be an increase in Gross National Product (GDP). It was in this context that 'consumer culture' took root as a concept. Consciously and unconsciously, social activities with the mission of stimulating the economy are identified as the main purpose of life in a material world (Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 2013: 306). The principles of free-market trade lead to an expansion of consumption culture and the associated belief that basic needs and social needs can be satisfied (Penpinan, 2007: 4). Material culture, a product of consumption culture is considered, in this thinking, to be a social product. This results in very particular views about materiality:

1) That materiality lies at the heart of human relationships; that human relationships are the cumulative effect of valuing materials that satisfy basic needs (foods, clothes, habitats, medicines) and satisfy social needs based on the semiotics of products (their symbolic

value). This aggregate, it is argued, gradually generates social norms.

2) It is capitalism that produces the products for satisfying both basic demands/needs and the excess that produces wealth, status, power, and so forth.

3) Marketing strategies motivated by a culture of consumption manipulate excess to be perceived as a basic demand/need. But there is a price to be paid: people seem to lose the ability to analyze product values; they can no longer recognize the real purpose of product and service consumption and cannot determine whether consumption is for basic needs or social needs. The two merge in consumer culture (Penpinan, 2007: 4).

The Starbucks phenomenon in Thailand provides an interesting example (see Figure 2). Does this popular brand in Thailand deliver the best coffee and the best quality of food or is it distributing the semiotics of a first class coffee experience? Starbucks is a good example of brand identity and how the consumption of the brand is more important than the product, as it is the brand that supposedly gives status and identity to those who are seen to be consuming the product. This example shows how social norms can reconstitute so-called luxury products (unnecessary products) as basic products (necessary products) in consumer culture. In short, commodity culture aims to stimulate consumption as a means of gaining social benefits in the form of status, identity and power where the consumption of the sign (Starbucks or any other brand) is the crucial thing (Penpinan, 2007: 21-22).



Figure 2) Starbucks Coffee Shop at Patoonam on November 27, 2016:

Photo by Thitiporn Meesil

However, acquiring maximum financial benefit cannot, obviously, be an absolute solution for either human life or non-human life. Production that creates an imbalance between natural resource utilization and the desire for infinite consumption fashions a type of 'abnormal' living for all planetary life. While one group of humans appears intent on innovation to increase the capacity for production without limits, another group satisfies their conscious or unconscious needs by consuming technologies without any critical thinking about the necessity for sufficient consumption. Advanced technological economies have, in some cases, used the instruments for increasing financial authority, and simultaneously have provided an obstacle for increasing the capability for the improvement of the lives of others. They have actually decreased the quality of life for vast numbers of people who nevertheless work assiduously for the life values to which they are committed. Technological/scientific benefits are not, obviously, universally equally distributed. In brief, the purpose of technology has not always been the optimization of life

experiences and from the perspective of developing countries (for example), often seems to be for building the image of the modern high-tech state as being superior. Financial power, then, diminishes the freedoms of what vast numbers of the world's population would regard as 'normal peaceful living'. At the same time, financial power and the continuous accumulation of financial gain can be considered as a type of imprisonment of the wealth seekers into a cycle of never-satisfied passions and needs. To put this in the perspective of a museum, material culture, issued trace human development through time, providing a touchstone for memories of national or communal symbolic significance. Displays that potentially provide clues to the quality of life improvement also bear witness to the way material culture has been exploited by the few over the many, has been 'captured' for financial gain through accumulation, has produced competition and all sorts of conflicts. Museums have never shied away from revealing the way material culture is valued in society and often reveal the hierarchies of value and the categorization that so often determine value. Indeed some museums, like art museums, display only highly valued objects, art of great historical importance or with enormous artistic and monetary value. Art museums are a paragon of accumulated wealth, prestige and power through the ownership of material culture.

Advanced communication technologies contained both absolute values (as a device for rapid and effective communication over long distances) and supportive values (as an image that motivates and accelerates demand in a consumption culture. As figure 3 illustrates, the mobile phone is the perfect example, both a technological tool and an accessory, a must-



Figure 3) Progression of communication instrument displaying in Bangkok National Museum before renovation of Siwamokkhaphiman Royal Hall
Photo taken by Thitiporn Meesil on March 29, 2015

have possession not just for communication but also a symbol of status and belonging. Solutions of life improvement probably require both the tool and the symbol, but these can get out of balance. If societies/cultures are to be sustained then one way of achieving this balance is to increase the awareness of interpersonal relationships and needs, plus an understanding of the environmental costs. But all this also requires knowledge: an understanding of the connections between science, infrastructure development for better lives, spiritual values and traditional practices as well as know-how. The development of a 'culture of wisdom' has never been more urgent than at the present moment. There is a need for the ability to discern and evaluate from all sources of knowledge, whether life experiences, or from research, or from traditional sources. Part of the process of

gaining ‘wisdom’ involves recognizing that change is ever-present and that culture is dynamic, as is the natural environment.

It is noticeable that development of only one side, material consumption, may not provide solutions for life improvement in every dimension. Alternatively, the focus on interrelationships between humans as well as coherence between humans and nature should be the main consideration in world culture: research that describes the connection of scientific knowledge such as infrastructure development for convenient living and spiritual enlightenment such as psychological awakening from traditional practices in diverse cultures. This connection can be derived from the development of a wise culture by promoting the ability to extract and evaluate phenomena occurring in society and learning from life experiences to understand that culture is dynamic with an adjustment to changing environments. If culture is the foundation of society, then culture will be crucial for achieving social harmony, tolerance, and cohesion.

3.The Museums as ‘cultural institutions’

The current global perspective is that museums in their traditional role were and are houses of material culture and material conservation, underpinned by various values (historical, scientific, research-oriented, education-oriented and in some cases religious values, aesthetic values and so forth). In the traditional view, conservation has always been a priority for museums. Similarly, it has been accepted that the knowledge generated from a display/exhibition would be transmitted to the viewing public via education programs that include the semiotics of objects as a mode of interpretation and experience.

In Thailand there has always been a suspicion surrounding the birth of museums in the Kingdom, a suspicion that lingers in certain published perspectives (both textbooks and scholarly articles). What fuels this suspicion? A well-known narrative of the origins of Thai museums declared them to be a part of the national development strategies of King Rama IV. In this view museums were established for the display of national identity; they were instruments of nationalism. In the reign of King Rama V, museums were regarded as institutions that supported the King’s policy of educational revolution (Office of National Museums, 2004: 28). Museums from this perspective were symbolic of cultural adaptation to ‘world culture’ with Western culture the ‘center of the world’. But, of course, the world has never had just one ‘culture’. Thongchai Winitchakul has expressed the view that the launch of museums in Thailand was not just about the stated mission of cultural adaption (to Western cultural ideals) but to the Monarchy’s deep desire for encouraging modernization by manipulating the ‘luxury image’ of royalty (Winitchakul, 2003: 10). From this perspective, museum displays from the beginning were adjusted according to Western social norms, including the articulation of a consumption culture (Winitchakul, 2003: 25-28). Since then Thai museums and the image they project has become dynamic and has followed global trends, largely because these trends have suited successive governments particularly at the level of National Museums.

The current phenomenon of museums being considered as houses of narratives about human life in general and human lives in particular has meant museums have gradually imported a sense of being a ‘spiritual habitat’.

In other words, museums are seen as the cultural soul of the nation, interpreting human interrelationships and the connection between people and nature (Arinze, 1999: 1). If visiting museums is a social activity and museums express themselves through educational activities, then there is always the potential for museums to be agents of self-understanding, of societal understandings, of cultural understandings and so forth. Indeed, museums have an iconic role in this regard and so also, potentially, they can provide an education for life improvement. At present, museums tend to focus on 'identity presentation' (what is it to be Thai?) for consumption. But they could do so much more. Are they agents of life-long learning? Can they be? Can they present and encourage social progress? Can they generate social practices? Can they perpetually generate the values of an enlightened life? It is perhaps ironic that these questions should be posed because Thailand has until recently followed (Western) museology and these questions are normative in Western praxis, especially in the Anglo-speaking world. Now Thailand lags behind in this regard.

In Thailand, however, there are forces that prohibit the idea of the museum as an institution of lifelong learning. Consumption culture continues unabated with materialism, with satisfying perceived needs and desires being the primary goal. Most messages in museums stimulate the subconscious desire for consumption. As a result, museums in this context can express cultural heritage as only a minor role, secondary to the forces of economic production and consumption, or worse, expresses cultural heritage as something to be consumed. This is contradictory to the aims of cultural heritage protection and conservation and the safeguarding of traditions (tangible and

intangible) for their own sake, because they are of themselves life affirming.

One of the interviewees for the wider research project who had no interest in visiting museums, expressed the opinion that museums had never freed themselves from the trap of consumption culture.

"I couldn't find any absolute benefits from visiting museums. Our daily life is the best museum for me. Think about present phenomena! Are there any places without display culture? I don't think so. Look at how every shop in the mall displays its products. They generate "needs" even though we don't really need those products. Even in restaurants. Have you ever asked yourself if you go to restaurants because you need food or you do you want to be surrounded by a wonderful environment to stimulate your appetite? For me, some decorations in a coffee shop are just like those in a museum. Not only is there stimulation from the product collection display, they also motivate consumption by sample tastings and the smell of the products: very effective provocation. Do you really think education is the main mission of a museum? Let me ask you something? What is the real meaning of education? What is the reason for being educated? Are we really educated when we go to a museum? Why can't students tell us what they learn from a museum? Do you think the exhibitions in museums really display the "soul of the nation"? Then, what is Thai identity? What is the clear explanation of identity? What if they present only what they want you to learn? Believe me,

‘world culture’ is not what museums tell you. Go travel and learn from the real world.”

Interviewed on December 16, 2015: Male aged over 60 years in front of TK Park, Central World



Figure 4) New Year Collection at Starbucks, Central world
Photo taken by Thitiporn Meesil on November 29, 2016

The interviewee clearly supports the perception that everyday access to consumption culture can satisfy social needs better than messages from a museum. Museums are failing to (1) compete with consumption cultural norms, (2) failing in their stated education mission and communication strategies and (3) failing to connect to the life-experiences of their visitors. The more dynamic a society, the more adjustment and improvement will be needed for social progress. Museums, then, as a cultural institution should serve society as social change laboratories where the causes and

effects of social development can be found in order to generate wisdom through education where three possible factors could be considered 1) the diverse capabilities of individuals 2) respect through participation and interaction with different social groups and 3) faith in a culture of wisdom (Institute of Culture and Arts, 2010: 57).

4. The Museum as a Laboratory of Social Harmony, Tolerance and Cohesion

As a laboratory for researching the causes and effects of social change, it would be unavoidable that the major museum mission would focus on two elements, 1) basic knowledge development with the aims of discovering self-esteem, social responsibility awareness (arising from integrated human relationships), and the potential for personal progress through economic sufficiency and, 2) specific knowledge reinforcement for developing occupational skills, health care education, and cultural norms in the appreciation of the arts and cultural heritage (Institute of Culture and Arts, 2010: 76). The possible paths, to achieve the desired outcomes from both elements will be an understanding of the learners’ nature, of the nature of society, and the nature of education. Firstly, the learner’s nature can be expressed as three primary components as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Nature of learners inspired by basic knowledge development (Institute of Culture and Arts, 2010: 77)

Physical Development	Psychological Development	Wisdom Development
Learners need basic knowledge about physical health care, from good quality food consumption, proper exercise, and proper hygiene.	Learners need self awareness and social practices to achieve emotional intelligence.	Learners need to learn from both personal experience and the experiences of others for wisdom and enlightenment. These experiences can be about science, arts, culture, and morality.

Secondly, understanding the nature of society, involves and an understanding of the basic needs of diverse cultures within the nation and how these individual needs can be harmonized with world cultures (for example global ecological sustainability; respect for all cultures). In the other words, the nature of society provides an approach for producing visitors' experiences that induce an awareness of social responsibilities. The expected outcomes of a museum's operation will then be social participation and the seeking of solutions to current social problems (Institute of Culture and Arts, 2010: 78).

Consequently, the educational function of a museum can be re-designed and developed beyond cognitive learning about human interrelationships. Moral and ethical norms should be considered due to the fact that moral and ethical practices impact social issues like peaceful coexistence between humans and the natural environment. This need not be an abstraction or some ideal. The pursuit of harmony within cultural diversity can be developed through personal experiences and educational collaborations rather than through an emphasis on identity. In addition to the normal creative strategies of the museum (such as experiential opportunities, the sharing of emotions, discovering meanings about life, the stimulation of learning, and shared memories exhibitions through display culture), museums need to design content aimed at creating a culture of wisdom by motivating visitors to connect personal experiences with the narratives from the display so as to engender social harmony/tolerance and cohesion. Such approaches involve 1) the self-actualization of learners, 2) social responsibilities developed from understanding of the social environment and participation in eliminating social problems,

3) a culture of wisdom generated from cognitive intelligence, and 4) freedom from the trap of excessive consumption by a 'spiritual' education arising from an analysis of experiences. In short, museums are institutions that can activate intentional education; museums can become laboratories of social harmony, tolerance and cohesion. (Institute of Culture and Arts, 2010: 79-84). A sample of a powerful display for the connection of personal experiences with narratives to encourage social harmony, tolerance and cohesion is the short movie "Opportunity" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub4DT46sm2w>. Another public display through social media from Siam Museum, for learning about healing the gap of differences in society, is shown in the national knowledge center short movie at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhxRuVqURJU>.

5. CONCLUSION

Material culture can seemingly satisfy the infinity of needs and desires for consumption. However endless, mindless, consumption without an awareness of the logical outcome leads to the excessive use of natural resources and disequilibrium in ecosystems. Museums conceived as a laboratory of social harmony, tolerance and cohesion have a primary responsibility to inspire visitors to achieve a balance between psychological and physical satisfaction. The desire for life improvement will then generate social norms for social benefits. For this reason, display culture, with its ability to build connections between personal daily life experiences and knowledge from interpretation, will be an effective educational media for accomplishing social

outcomes. It is essential that museums encourage audiences to engage with material culture in inventive ways that ensure participation and ultimately a culture of wisdom that counters mindless consumption. The prospective outcomes of learning will be skills for daily life management and dynamic social adjustment. In conclusion, museums as social laboratories require the participation of all stakeholders in society so that everyone gains an understanding of the causes and effects of problems facing people locally and globally. The laboratory therefore provides continuous research in the art of education for social harmony, tolerance and cohesion, for the connections made between the experiences of the self and the awareness that arises from shared experiences between people from different cultures.

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