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Many thanks to the VSG for awarding me a bursary of £500, covering most of my travel costs, and to IWM for allowing me the time to attend the **2014 Annual ICOM - CECA & the 13th ICOM - UMAC Conference in Alexandria, Egypt.**

The conference was a joint meeting between CECA and UMAC, two international ICOM committees.



Background Information

ICOM is the **International Council of Museums** and the only international organization representing museums and museum professionals. Since 1946, ICOM has assisted members of the museum community in their mission to preserve, conserve and share cultural heritage. ICOM also takes advice from institutional partners to achieve its objectives. The organization has more than 32,000 members and is made up of National Committees, which represent 136 countries and territories, and 31 International Committees, which bring together experts and act as global think tanks on museum, and more generally, heritage, matters.

For more information on ICOM UK, visit <http://uk.icom.museum/about-us/>

CECA - International Committee for Education and Cultural Action

CECUM gathers museum educators and other museum professionals with an interest in education and culture, who work in research, management, interpretation, exhibitions, programmes, media and evaluation. The committee aims at exchanging information and ideas about museum education at an international level, ensuring that museum education is part of the policy, decisions and programmes of ICOM, advocating the educational purpose of museums around the world and promoting high professional standards in museum education.

UMAC - International Committee for University Museums and Collections

UMAC is a forum for all those working in, or associated with, academic museums, galleries and collections (including herbaria and botanical gardens). UMAC is concerned with the role of collections within higher education institutions and the communities they serve. UMAC communicates with its members and when required, advises ICOM and other professional bodies on matters within its jurisdiction.

The conference

The theme of the conference was *Squaring the Circle? Research, Museum, Public: a common engagement towards effective communication*. It included a number of papers and presentations, posters, the committee's AGM, as well as visits to museums and heritage sites in Alexandria.

The conference itself took place in the Library of Alexandria www.bibalex.org, which houses millions of books and an internet archive; specialized libraries and reading spaces for thousands;

several academic centres; four museums on antiquities, manuscripts, art and the history of science; fifteen permanent exhibitions and four art galleries for temporary shows; a science centre; a planetarium, a cultural panorama; the Virtual Immersive Science and Technology Applications system (VISTA) and a conference centre.

The conference discussed issues on museum learning, the core functions of museums, the intersecting roles of researchers, curators and educators and public engagement.

Things that I have taken away

The conference programme and presentations will soon be online, alongside the *CECA Best Practice* reports. <http://network.icom.museum/ceca/>.

Instead of duplicating this, I will focus on some things that I have taken away from the experience.

Five key issues

1. Teenagers – adolescents – young people

They were called different names but colleagues around the world seem to anguish over getting them to museums. There were questions about young people, ideas on how to get them involved and engaged in their own learning and development and examples of learning programmes.

2. Social inequalities

The social responsibility of museums and how participatory programmes can start addressing social inequalities was also discussed. I found especially interesting the presentation on the challenges in “a violent and unequal Mexico”.

3. Contemporary relevance

The need of making programmes relevant to a contemporary audience was repeatedly mentioned. Contemporary relevance seemed to be particularly important for those working with academics and facilitating the public engagement of their research.

4. Collaborative partnerships

Partnerships of all shapes and kinds and their benefits were cited. One example was how the History Museum in Berlin worked with a university department to research preschoolers' engagement with the museum collections and used the results of the research to train and up-skill kindergarten teachers.

5. Fear of distraction - conservation and preservation

There were discussions around the distraction and looting of cultural heritage and the need to preserve and conserve monuments from natural disasters and conflicts. These were particularly poignant being in Egypt.

Five practical ideas

6. Doing a joint conference is useful

In some previous ICOM-CECA conferences, I had felt that like-minded people were agreeing over issues and were congratulating each other on their work with the public.

This time and for the first time, I thought that our views and discussions were more meaningful because they were shared with a mixed group that included colleagues with no expertise in public engagement. Our assumptions were challenged, our beliefs were questioned and there were colleagues from UMAC that wanted to hear how we can open up museums and profoundly engage with our wider communities.

7. Small can be good

This was a relatively small conference of around 150 participants, which meant that we had the opportunity to talk to everyone that we wanted to during breaks. As is often the case, most engaging discussions took place between sessions or over lunch.

8. Managing the registration

The registration was like a conveyor belt and that was very efficient. On the first day, we moved from person to person not only registering, getting the conference bag and the necessary vouchers, but also uploading our presentation and signing up for museum visits. Having more people doing one thing speeded the process for us all.

9. Time is relevant

Timings were not always kept: sessions started later, finished later, rooms were changed and the programme was not always followed. This flexibility enabled us to make requests (e.g. visit the museums in the Library) and shape the programme accordingly. Accepting that things will *eventually* happen helped me enjoy the uncertainty.

10. Presenting the “posters” can be tricky

Posters, presenting an idea or a project, are usually displayed in common area and their authors are around to answer questions. For the first time, we had five minutes oral presentations of the various posters. Even though the rationale behind it was good (put a face to a name - seek the person during the conference and ask them about their poster), it did not work in practice. Five minutes was too long for introducing the person, but not long enough to hear about their project. Colleagues tried to do too much, sessions ran over time and attendees did not gain a lot.

Five notes on museums

11. Plans for new museums in Egypt

Egypt holds many treasures from the Pharaonic, Hellenistic, Roman, Coptic, and Islamic periods and there are plans from the Minister of Antiquities for the redevelopment of four major museums: the Museum of Islamic Art, the Grand Egyptian Museum, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization and the Graeco-Roman Museum of Civilization. The plans for these museums are ambitious; they include research and conservation spaces, as well Pompey's Pillars spaces for public engagement and income generation.

12. Museum colleagues in Alexandria

I was touched by the passion of museum colleagues in Alexandria. Against difficult situations and without much support they keep the museum and the public programmes alive. One of the university professors gets a salary for her teaching and runs the university museum “voluntarily”. Another museum educator buys materials for children’s workshop from her personal money because, as she told me: “the museum does not have any money and I love children – I want them to have nice things”.



National Museum of Alexandria

13. Guided tours



Pompey's Pillar

I have mixed feelings about guided tours. They can be fabulous under certain circumstances and unbearable under others. Splitting museum professionals that speak different languages into large groups and rushing them through museums and archaeological sites did not really work. A brief introduction, availability to answer questions, some written information and free time to explore would have been better.

14. K. Cavafy Museum

After the poet's death (1933), his library was saved but it was sixty years later that his apartment became a museum. There is one member of staff that welcomes visitors and is open and happy to share stories about Cavafy, his oeuvre, the old times of Alexandria and to turn on the audiovisual exhibits. Cavafy lived between the red-light Attarin neighbourhood and the bustling commercial centre of a city recognised then as the crossroads of civilizations – a "capital of memories".

15. Horns (not a museum but a cultural experience)

The sound that dominated my visit was that of the car horn. Egyptians use their horn ubiquitously. They honked when they wanted you to pass. They honked when they wanted you to stop. They honked to warn you, to reprimand you, to greet you, to tease you. They honked in the day. They honked in the middle of the night. They even honked when the muezzin was calling for prayer. Nobody seemed to mind, not even the donkeys and horses that co-existed with cars, buses and trams. If I ever go to Egypt again, I will definitely keep a bicycle horn at hand.

A pleasant surprise



The Greek Block



Averofio, the Secondary School

During the gala dinner, the children of the Greek diaspora danced traditional dances from the Peloponnese, Macedonia and the Dodecanese. There are only sixty-four school-age children in the community and they were incredible. All the participants were touched. We cheered and we clapped and I had the opportunity to meet the head teacher of the Averofio, the Greek secondary

school. During my days off, after the conference, I visited the school and met students and other people from the community. The experience was humbling and enabled me to develop a different connection with the city.

Epilogue



On the way to the fort Qaitbay

Is it safe to go to Egypt?

This was a question that was asked amongst potential participants around the world weeks and days before the conference. Personally, my excitement of last spring, when I started organizing my attendance to the conference, had withered away. This was partly due to a demanding summer, the general unease about travelling to Egypt at this moment in time and the fact that a couple of days before leaving my personal e-mail account was hacked, which resulted to my passport details being “stolen”.

I am very glad I went and very thankful to VSG for their financial help of £500 and to IWM for the time. I am also glad I stayed a little longer.

Alexandria was both welcoming and unwelcoming. On the one hand, the people were hospitable, easy to talk to, willing to help and proud of their city. On the other hand, I was not treated with much respect or kindness as an “unveiled” unaccompanied woman. It was difficult to have conversations regarding religion and dangerous to wear a pendant of the Virgin Mary, a cross or a Jewish cap.

Is it safe to go to Egypt? I do not know, you need to go there to find out for yourself.