

Article

Tangential Heritage Values in Museum Communication

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine aspects of tangentiality connecting heritage tourism goals, on the one hand, and museum architecture, on the other. It does so through the specific angle of communication, understood as a complex process that fluctuates, to a very large extent, at a level external to that of conventional institutional practice. The assumption is that determining factors are in fact tangential in nature and that, contrariwise, mainstream communication remains contextual and transient. This reasoning is illustrated by three museums in the United Arab Emirates, and substantiated by insights on their architectural significance.

Keywords: architecture; tourism communication; externalities; cultural heritage; United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

The process of packaging heritage as an experience for the museum-goer has a quite long tradition and, for the most part, uses simplifications complementary to a specific exhibition. It builds on umbrella preconceptions that appeal to the widest sociocultural audience possible, as it needs to function as a consensual, universal enhancer. This in fact constitutes a radical antithesis of what heritage means as both a concept and a dynamic reality, namely a non-replicable emanation of a given cultural context. Even archaeological, or national, or ethnographic museums, which are by their very nature heavily focused on local uniqueness, make common use of heritage elements tangential to their primary mission. Institutional communication frequently emerges from the impression that heritage values are linear, stable, and can therefore be continuously reused in middle-of-the-road strategies. The iterative essence of heritage poses challenges to utilizing it persistently, and this paper explores the significance of corresponding tangential impacts. The selection of three museums in the same national background provides a common context for comparison and normalization of conclusions.

The precise mechanics of this procedure are oftentimes applied to institutional communication strategies. They routinely build on important upstream premises, latent or effective, with ramifications in the tourism and hospitality sectors. The state-of-the-art on cultural consumer behavior addresses the relationship between heritage content and museum experience in great detail. Much of the most recent research deals with the processing of the visitor experience [1–3]. All this implicates a focus on demand instead of supply, meaning on the factors of attraction, satisfaction, loyalty, and so forth, which again reflect emotional, and hence subjective, dimensions. Present-day analyses delve into the corresponding digital ramifications, yet much of the individual investment in time, effort, and financial commitment may be explained by the tangible, on-site experience only [4]. Central to this question is the concept of mindfulness, supporting the practical model by Moscardo [5], based on avoiding visitor disconnections due to repetition, predictability, and premature commitment to stereotypical assumptions. Part of the heritage communication process is deeply generational, even at the core facet of family values [6], and part is a result of tensions between museum experience and enlightenment [7].



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2. Materials and Methods

The methodological aim of this analysis is to gain heuristic insights into the meaning of sustainable tangential values, by providing an in-depth description of their influence on museum architecture and communication for tourism promotion. A plethora of qualitative, narrative, and mixed research methodologies have been developed in metaphysics and language studies, for instance, among other fields [8–10]. Methodological flexibility may be viewed as exemplary in qualitative studies [11], and, as such, this paper combines outlooks from inductive approaches, namely in the links between sociocultural contexts and messages. In terms of research design, this exercise is partitioned into dissimilar modules that are not fully sequential. A fundamental part of the entire text is conceptual, and explores notions of tangentiality and communication but is not a quantifiable proposition to be tested. The second part is descriptive and focuses on three museums in the UAE, in an attempt to normalize information on necessarily different realities—from organizational, historical, and publicly insightful angles. The aim is to reach a common ground for comparison, in the scope of tangential heritage values, and to conclude with an appraisal of all three examples. An important diagnostic element is based on the narrative research outline of three museum settings. Future studies may benefit from introducing quantitative validations, whereas the present paper is reflective, as it seeks a definitional, ontological meaning for tangential values in heritage communication, not an immediate working hypothesis to be tested. As such, the examples serve an illustrative purpose of what is essential to the text.

Visitor-centered interpretational triggers are key to the absorption of heritage messages, as recognized for a long time now, in terms of semiotics and symbolic representativeness of museum values [12], practical aspects of museum communication [13], visitor care as a means for better learning from exhibitions [14], or the emphasis on leisure, rather than purely educational features, for the convenience of public interpretations of heritage in museum settings [15]. Such dimensions remain central to current museum outreach efforts, and multiple recent authors have pointed at the communicative nature of cultural heritage museums, be it in the context of digital solutions [16–19], sustainability and authenticity [20,21], or ethics [22]. Social media is, of course, a transversal articulator for museums to convey thoughts on heritage qualities relevant to their mission [22–25]. The recent COVID-19 pandemic-induced restrictions stimulated some adaptation in the sector [26,27] and superior acquaintance with certain digital distribution platforms, yet heritage marketing and communication practice [28] has arguably remained fairly stable, despite the standard requirements for cultural heritage consumer segmentation [29] and for prospective behavior modeling for museum visitors [30], which are not in the least connected to the idea of profitability and e-commerce [31]. Multiple digital ramifications are prompting added impacts: for instance, the tangential effects of NFT and VR on the museum experience.

While online communication practice has incrementally upgraded museum interaction with multiple new publics, it constitutes a specific catalyst for driving consumer traffic [32] into physical, rather than merely digital, locations. Indeed, communication with the visitor is processed through a setting, to no small degree the very architectural and geographical one the museum operates in. As such, elements are shared and decoded by different interpretive communities [33] for whom meaning varies, as they become critical examples of tangential value. In other words, they do not determine museological quality in a strict sense, despite offering a structural interface to the visitor. The primary assignment to museum communication is, precisely, a translational one [34], with complex epistemological implications at the level of communication theory [35], but it entails, for this paper, the assumption that concepts such as embodiment, cognition, and sensorial processes are necessary for an observer to capture specific meanings from an architectural expression.

Tangential heritage values are taken as peripheral, transitory, asymmetrical, and nevertheless communal, a fundamental definer of heritage. Such values, applied to museum communication, can therefore only be passively acquired and depend on circumstances ex-

traneous to the institution. The communicational tangents referred to in this paper consist of strands that are either not permanent, not fully controlled, or external, but that at some point intersect with formatted institutional messages. They are not necessarily aligned with, and are hence tangential to, the mainstream museum product, which they affect to some extent. Typical examples are concurrent promotional activities by tourism boards, the travel and hospitality industries, or consumer feedback on public message forums related to a destination the heritage museum operates in. Other tangential values emanate from the very nature of heritage, which is a societal construct to be commodified for popularization, and therefore potentially subject to cultural appropriation, factual inaccuracy, and lack of perceived authenticity. This indeed remains at the center of the complex articulations between regional or national cultural trademarks and the individual communication strategies of museums, often leading to a crisscross of volatile message interpretations.

3. Discussion

This very factor may become mutually beneficial in the case of two strong, established cultural brands, especially in the scope of sustainable communication. A fine example is that of the Louvre Abu Dhabi as an institution with a representative identity, and its fusion with the cultural heritage landscape of the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The museum brand identity integrates a wider project on Saadiyat Island, where multiple foci of interest have been constructed as part of a Cultural District, conceptualized by authoritative names, including Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, and Norman Foster. The Louvre itself (Figure 1) was designed by Jean Nouvel, and is instrumental in defining a distinctiveness for Saadiyat [36], together with other museological megaprojects such as the Manarat Al Saadiyat art and culture center, or the upcoming Guggenheim, Natural History, and Zayed National museums, in addition to the Art Gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi. Of essence is the Louvre's integration not only in this immediate cultural setting but also in the wider territory, as a reference for heritage tourism [37]. The building project itself had been hailed as an advancement towards the architectural concurrence of aesthetics, structure, and environmental awareness that would please multiple constituents [38]. In particular, the immaterial drivers of the museum are noteworthy, as they provide stakeholders with an idiosyncratic reference on pride, identity, entrepreneurial disposition, uniqueness, and other constructs necessary to consolidate any social fabric. One study [39] reveals the Louvre AD does boost a sense of optimism among fundamental players such as local art professionals.



Figure 1. Louvre Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island (courtesy Louvre AD/Hufton + Crow).

The urban cosmopolitanism recognized in Abu Dhabi as a heritage destination finds itself crystalized in the universal values of the Louvre Abu Dhabi [40]. Globalization has reinjected strategic expediency, either perceived or substantial, in the projection of cultural diplomacy, as a core facilitator for wider foreign policies. In this context, the Louvre Abu Dhabi has been properly identified as useful to the interests of the French Republic [41], and integrates a French export tradition of cultural preeminence and universalism, albeit not without controversy, even in the case of the Louvre AD [42]. It is, however, true that no special museum-going proclivity exists among the French, who are less prone to spend time at cultural and art exhibitions than some other Europeans; what matters is that such numbers do not affect the diplomatic branding efforts epitomized by the Louvre Abu Dhabi, through very specific Franco-Arabic communication layers [43]. Some have identified tensions between the bureaucratic and administrative nature of government-based initiatives, on the one hand, and the need for flexibility in the management and communication strategy of a superstar museum such as the Louvre AD, heavily intellectualized by a body of French public servants, appointees, or consultants, on the other [44]. From an administrative standpoint, the cultural tourism branding of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi captures Saadiyat as a component of wider visual and rational messages, aimed at welcoming the contemporary traveler [45]. The theory behind connecting municipal or territorial branding, local heritage, and museum communication is straightforward, in a certain sense [46]; the practical applications are, however, not, and in addition originate conflicting outputs by inconsistent stakeholder resourcefulness. Simply put, not all economic players syntonize their individual messages when it comes to using heritage in the promotion of products and services, which causes negative impacts on the perceived quality of cultural tourism. In these contexts, museums can operate as authoritative normalizers for countering the dispersion of information.

Given that the Cultural District is managed by the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism, strategic communication appears well integrated. Social media presence in particular is in line with that of other major museum-city ties worldwide, based on the principle of capturing and maintaining multiple publics. Best digital practices of this sort are indeed universal and include consumer engagement, visitor loyalty, and group interaction. Data for the Louvre Abu Dhabi indicate a steady growth on different platforms [47] and relate to a second iconic example of communicative sophistication in the museum landscape of the UAE. The Museum of the Future (Figure 2) constitutes a comparatively recent exhibition space in Dubai and serves as a cultural hub for innovation addressing future challenges. Its museological framework operates in a physical environment, a location, and a building with characteristically marketable features, within a prominent urban setting. This goes back to the primal assumption of architectural communication being key to other layers of outreach. It forces one to recognize dialogues between museum architecture, museography, and a societal undertaking that, in passing, may incorporate commercial or entrepreneurial dimensions, as long as the communication of heritage authenticity remains at credible levels. At the very core of its mission, the Museum of the Future is comparable to other institutions that focus on potential world scenarios and partly communicate through shapes, images, built structures, and various non-verbal methods, as is the case with the Futurium, the Museum of Tomorrow, or the Museum of Climate [48].

The Museum of the Future, through its managerial body, the Dubai Future Foundation, explicitly partakes in pursuing national post-oil diversification strategies [49], and operates as a platform for exhibitions on artificial intelligence, development of humanity, and climate change, in a perspective of social integration. In fact, the building itself represents a public cultural and educational statement akin to other architectural projects in the Gulf area [50]. Fairly different in architecture, purpose, and history is the Al Ain national museum (Figure 3), located in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, by and large at similar driving times from the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It is not the only national museum in the UAE, but one of the oldest ones, conceived and established between the very late 1960s and the early 1970s [51]. It develops in a specific heritage context of restored forts

and other traditional public buildings [52], as a vital element of the UNESCO-classified Cultural Sites, inscribed on the World Heritage list. Its implantation, adjacent to the Sultan fort and the main oasis, needs, therefore, to be perceived in the context of longstanding settlement dynamics, additionally confirmed by a recent archaeological excavation at the museum car park [53]. The entire complex is currently undergoing a major rehabilitation, for which the museum is temporarily closed, and the resulting makeover is to retain the physicality of the area, as one of the representational nodes of settlement, directly tied to the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, and thus to the formation of the United Arab Emirates. The renovation could even be optimized as a part of the narrative on architectural sustainability, by furthering the message of historical site continuity. Effectively communicating this heritage uniqueness has been achieved through the integrated channels of the emirate's Department of Culture and Tourism, mentioned above. It closely associates with a much wider exertion, positioning the city of Al Ain in a clear-cut tourism landscape through the creation of a brand identity [54].



Figure 2. Museum of the Future (courtesy Dubai Future Foundation).

The three museums naturally cater to different market segments, and perform in their precise urban tissue, meaning that supplementary resources in hospitality, transportation, public services, natural landscape, and climate, to point out only a few evident factors, condition any communication enterprise. An incitement they do have in common is the governmental incentive to sharply increase the employment quality of the sector and form resilient public-private partnerships, as outlined in the National Strategy for the Cultural and Creative Industries. This overarching policy goes hand in hand with local outreach micromanagement. Communication will therefore need to rely on societal concepts that extravasate the collections, and pick up on often rapidly fluctuating, consumer-ready messages, to which architectural distinctiveness is key. Not all effects are expectedly commodified or even saleable, though, given the public nature of financially sustainable yet still not-for-profit institutions. Much of the museum experience is not strictly content-based, either. Subjective messages offered by the architectural configurations of each of the three examples mentioned above relate to societal values and their induced influences on identity, the common good, and wellness. The principle has lain at the core of the Museum of the Future's architectural planning, which was considered integral to the notion

of city well-being and health [55]. Equivalent principles support the conceptualization and execution of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, in which the communication of space leads to highly emotional results, related primarily to built environments such as the dome, as well as other modular aspects of both the exterior and the interior sections of the museum [56]. Current architectural decisions increasingly favor fully integrated projects, for instance through building information modeling, linking the container, the constructed edifice that is, and the content, or exhibition, since the very first planning stages [57]. Not all sorts of museums respond equally well to this, starting with those that face limitations in terms of area, insulation, or other infrastructural aspects, typically the case in retrofitted buildings. While older museums necessarily deal with material challenges regarding structure management, and hence ultimately visitor experience, these same challenges may be spatially assumed as a fully validated heritage component, even to be promoted as such. To put things in perspective, the National Museum in Al Ain operates in a decades-old building that would have been idealized very differently at present but retains a symbolic value to be maintained, especially as a foundational institution. All these elements are carefully calibrated in the official communication process (e.g., visitabudhabi.ae, louvreabudhabi.ae, museumofthefuture.ae, among others) which frames the Al Ain museum in a predominantly historical light, the Louvre AD as a hub for a universal story of mankind, and the Museum of the Future as a journey of knowledge.



Figure 3. Al Ain National Museum (courtesy DCT).

4. Tangentiality

Tangential factors affect the communication process from non-structural, non-replicable, and external angles, either as tangible or intangible aspects of what the museum can offer as an architectural expression. This may be visually simplified as shown in Figure 4. One immediate example of such tangentiality is that of influencer agency, which habitually emanates from social media platforms museums are able to further capitalize on. However, a considerable extent of nebulosity is to be expected, as influencer personality has a singular effect on communication, and therefore on institutional reputation [58,59]. This differs from regular online account activity routinely managed by institutions, through which visitors tag a given museum, or maintain other types of interaction via user-generated content [60,61] within a strategic media positioning. Additionally, unlike planned event-related collaboration results, the tangential effect of nano-influencers on museum communication is becoming a

significant characteristic [62], as is the individual visitor feedback, often heavily polarized, accessible on an assortment of online platforms. In multiple yet scattered cases, local heritage is instrumental in conveying a message of particularity or exoticism for carefully edited messages that utilize heritage as aesthetic elements and scenarios, hence subjecting it to the bias of cultural oversimplification. On the other hand, it is only by riding the wave of preconception that simple, attractive, universally understood messages are successfully transmitted in, say, the promotion of a heritage tourism experience. Excessively complex, theoretical offerings are poised to fail, as they burden the consumer and therefore come across as unappealing, no matter the pricing or intrinsic value of the attraction. When heritage-loaded social media content is created on the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Museum of the Future, or the National Museum in Al Ain, it is done so in precisely the same consumer-focused framework, and even potentially misunderstood fragments of local authenticity—in short, the tangential values that do not form but randomly enhance the museum—feed a visual stimulus for receptors, for instance on a smartphone terminal.

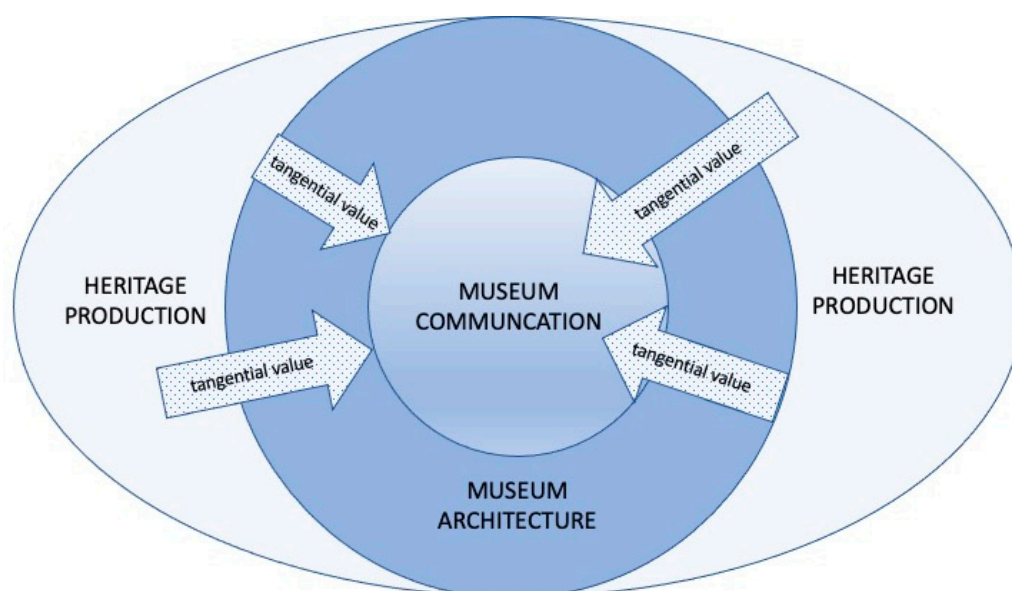


Figure 4. Correlations between the elements mentioned in the text.

An additional and considerable tangential value is the communication alignment triggered by COVID-19 circumstances. Despite massive empirical data supporting the idea of acceleration in digital museum environments during and in the wake of pandemic-instigated lockdowns, new heritage challenges have emerged, namely in the form of visitor indifference and information overload [63]. Again, this has had structural, i.e., non-tangential effects on product placement and marketing trends. Museums have certainly become less rigidly constricted to physical spaces and have acquired managerial expertise in the field of communication [64]. The Louvre Abu Dhabi plausibly represents one of the most effective case studies on consumer loyalty, based on highly sophisticated media engagement. However, general regression models applied to museum communication strategies demonstrate that COVID-19 restrictions merely intensified a previously ongoing strategy in pursuing digital ecosystems [65]. From this perspective, one might invert the entire reasoning, and consider pandemic impacts as tangential, not structural, despite their socio-economic extensiveness and transversality. The UAE museums mentioned above rapidly picked up their visitor numbers and even surpassed pre-COVID figures, which would indicate little to no disruption in consumer behavior, recalibrating cultural cravings in a postdigital urban setting in the United Arab Emirates [66].

A third, macroeconomic tangent is expressed through lateral dynamics in cultural clusters, which are not necessarily perceivable as such through the lens focusing on mu-

seum communication. This specific dimension relates to transferrable undercurrents at the branding level of cultural agglomerations. To put things differently, while a strong case can be made for inducing economic effects in communities by using museums as anchors, these same communities require some degree of joint outreach to foster coherent heritage messages to the prospective visitor, a fact perceptible in operational environments [67]. It is thus crucial that museums find an adequate digital discourse and online journey [68], although many ingredients of this discourse do not need to be digital at all, to start with the typical heritage museum resource itself, especially in situations of geographic concentration. In the United Arab Emirates, heritage clusters develop in strong affiliation with national strategic options and produce spatial museum-oriented patterns, often reinforced by public investment in archaeological or ethnographic elements [69]. Confirmation from other internationally branded museums reveals a correlated entrepreneurial drive that, nevertheless, is not to be taken for granted [70], as clusters do not succeed in theory only, and require monitoring.

These vectors allow for an empirical scaffolding of the central premise underlying the paper. It takes the communicational use of an architectural expression, the museum building and ancillary structures, gardens, and the immediate urban environment as a given fact, based on both circumstantial and academic evidence [71]. The circular shape of the Museum of the Future is archetypal to humanity, while the void refers to the unknown future; conversely, the iconic dome of the Louvre AD creates a visual effect, a Rain of Light, inspired by the palm trees in an oasis. These are symbolic yet still direct messages to the observer. To be explored more in detail are the tangential values that interfere with the established organizational communication in museums. At the city level, these may affect self-perceptions [72]. A chief example of heritage tangentiality vis-à-vis museum expression is, precisely, the intensity of investment in cultural distinctiveness. Legitimate concerns about the maintenance of social identity in a nation demographically based on expatriates have been well identified [73], making museums useful beacons for aggregating ideas on shared history, folklore, ethnography, and storytelling, as well as community formation. For visual communication purposes, multiple actions are temporary: for example, exhibitions on a given subject such as an anniversary of the birth of the Nation. While supporting objects on display are central to the setup of a straightforward message, tangential aspects of that same message are unstable and reliant on factors impossible to manipulate from the museum supply side. Individual feelings on otherness, group perceptions fueled by unrelated upstream features as unpredictable as currency fluctuations, employment satisfaction, viral social media posts, car prices, or technological innovations, establish subtle shifts in one's relationship with historical and natural heritage elements. Museums do have the ethical responsibility to function as adequate interfaces, allowing for fitting reinterpretations of what heritage signifies to groups of people, but to do so they are required to maneuver on multiple paradoxes. It is, for instance, not possible for a museum to create heritage on its initiative, and there are many limits to staging it, a process inherently dependent on selection and oversimplification. Furthermore, heritage is not a fully commodifiable entity, as it remains produced by the community that is then supposed to consume it as a museum experience. A third contradiction resides in the dynamic essence of heritage, which is not equivalent to history or archaeology but instead a societal expression. Translating this everchanging complexity into the immobility of a space requires multiple layers of museography that are not necessarily compatible with a clear single communicational strategy, but do constitute defining tangential heritage values. Indeed, the communication of national museum content is often static, in the sense that labeled displays are representative of generic allusions to traditional clothes or desert life utensils. This contrasts with what has been called UAE living museums, in the form of heritage festivals and villages, offering insights into the habits of Bedouins, pearl divers, mountaineers, or fishermen, usually in scenarios with no differentiation in social status, wealth, and tribe [74].

5. Conclusions

As outlined above, tangential heritage values are influential yet remain peripheral, and hence cannot be understood as structural to sustainable museum communication. Multiple forms of community cultural co-creation envelop this reality, as events such as traditional fairs and art festivals generate points of contact that museum outreach ought not to ignore, as openly perceived synergies on architecture can ultimately help densify separate products and experiences. The resulting public awareness connects to the freeriding aspect of administrative and political support to cultural resources. When companies, official agencies, and other government bodies launch tourism promotional campaigns, they commonly do so by highlighting heritage visitor attractions. This becomes a temporary, tremendously critical tangent for museum communication, even if a specific institution is not perceptible as an ultra-recognizable building. Very noticeable in the cases mentioned before, and indeed architecturally thought-provoking, is the segmentation of meanings a museum offers, both physically and as digital reimaginations of that same tangible. The substance of the latter varies greatly and capitalizes on exploitable preconceptions related to well-known architects, urban selling points, graphic design, and the very large number of other variables that influence consumer behavior by simply using the museum building as a trigger. A final tangential feature is that of academic research itself, which has dedicated much effort to museum marketing and outreach, and by doing so encourages an interdisciplinary debate on the place of architectural externalities in the wider communication practice. This converges to new forms of engagement with increasingly diverse and wider audiences, and to more sustainable tangential communication dynamics. These do leverage benefits for museum identity, but may also intensify latent media drawbacks when its architectural expression is undervalued, domestically or at the international level.

When confronting these three UAE examples, tangential heritage values produce rather uneven practical effects on their operational reality. The Al Ain National Museum integrates Emirati heritage precisely as a core production factor, and as such does not differentiate at the level of public cognition, hence the communication strategy, between tangents and key components. This is substantially different in the case of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, where in-built French heritage management intertwines with the uniqueness of Emirati architectural inspiration and absorption in a profoundly local landscape, while institutional communication insists on the concept of universality. Finally, the intellectual abstraction subjacent to the Museum of the Future produces the lowest possible exposure to the effects of heritage tangentiality, except in the most radical, metaphysical understanding of the term, in which heritage is understood as a universal, intangible, and fully communal concept. This does not occur, though, in a realistic situation, and the Museum of the Future communicates within the same heritage production brackets as any other cultural institution. Forthcoming critical studies on museum design may benefit from addressing multiple stakeholder opportunities from a strategic angle. In other words, the very fact that the production of community heritage is not independent of a museum building, but rather evolves around it, while the building remains architecturally stable, forges a multiplicity of tangential values for which new communicational formats are to be shaped.

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