

PALAMUSTO – The European Training Network for the Palace of the Future White Paper¹

The following white paper offers a statement from the PALAMUSTO Consortium Members about their perspective on the palace-museum as a specific museum type. The paper's content benefits from the knowledge and skills brought into the project by its senior research members. More importantly, it integrates the whole experience PALAMUSTO's senior and early-stage researchers gathered during these four years of research, training weeks, lectures, visits with external experts, discussions and confrontations between different points of view. The paper is a manifesto-like contribution to the way the palace-museum type should be considered and to the role of one of its most important professionals: the curator. The text is divided in four main sections: Towards a New History of the Palace, Research Themes of the Palace-Museum, the Curator's Role and Mediation for the Community.

1. Towards a New History of the Palace in Europe

A new History of the Palace can only arise on the basis of a new understanding of this type of historical building. During the twentieth century, palaces were mostly seen as a privileged expression of art and style of a specific historical epoch (or epochs), sometimes as an expression of the architect's (or the architects') artistic skills. The palace's analysis was frequently focused on formal aspects, mainly of the main facades and representative spaces. All issues besides artistic or historic aspects were often left without consideration.

In contrast to this, today the palace must be seen as a heritage object, meaningful in all its complexity, as the palace is one of the most complex habitational building types we know in Europe. Here many, socially very different people shared their living space: we must consider not only the palace's "owners" (emperors/empresses or kings/queens, nobles or ecclesiastics and their relatives), but also office holders, clergymen, visitors, servants and even enslaved people. But the palace was not only their home: for all of them (except maybe visitors) the palace was at the same time their "working" place. The palace was a ruling centre of countries or territories, as much as a place to represent their owners (often male and female). Moreover, it had to accommodate ceremonial events and high-ranking visitors. Religion practices were enacted daily here. It was the place where laws, contracts and other records were written, copied and archived; where works of art and precious objects were kept and sometimes displayed; where food and drink for many people (including water, which was also used for many other purposes) had to be supplied, sometimes even produced, stored, cooked and served; where clothes had to be stored and cleaned for use; where servants for the maintenance of building and surrounding gardens had to have their workshops; where soldiers and watchmen guaranteed security. All these palace "workers" had to have a place to eat, to sleep, to be entertained, to take care of hygiene, and to have their physiological needs satisfied. The way this happened varied greatly according to their status, i.e., their social

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position and function within the palace. So today the palace must be seen as a microcosmos of cultural history, a veritable kaleidoscope of past times.

In addition to this intricate nexus of space and function, we must also consider the complexity caused by time. The palace was often used for many generations, each of them adapting the existing structure to the needs of their time. The palace regularly changed, was sometimes partially demolished, and often extended with new wings. Interiors were adapted to more fashionable ways of life and of representation, exteriors were improved according to new aesthetic ideas. Marriages as well as an unexpected inheritance could very often bring about a shift in power and dynastic status of the residing family. Such socially relevant changes would inevitably find their way into the material reality of the building fabric, alter the material and artistic expression of the residence. The palace is therefore a historically multi-layered structure, in which older layers may still be recognisable despite having been hidden by more recent overlays.

Even the palace's artistic dimension, which has been the main focus of formal analysis in past decades, must now be seen in this holistic perspective. Rather than an abstract expression of time(s), style(s) or the artist(s)' creativity, the artistic aspects should be seen in the context of making visible political power, social status, dynastic legitimation or simply self-representation, sometimes real, sometimes just intended. Similar to early modern Catholic churches, for instance, art as part of the palace building was put at the service of the palace's commissioners as a means of communication, and not so much as an individual expression of the artists working there. Art in the palace was no *l'art pour l'art*, art had to follow a purpose.

As a habitational and a "working" building type throughout generations, the palace's heritage value is connected in the first place with ways of life that are now long gone – certainly in the case of the late medieval and early modern palace. To name just one factor that makes it so difficult for contemporary Europeans to understand, the palace collectively housed so many different people, far beyond the nuclear family prevalent today, and functioned simultaneously as their living and "working" place in contrast with the separation of private and public life upheld today. Nevertheless, a new history of the late medieval and early modern palace must consider the complexity of its functions and the diversity of its inhabitants, in order to gain true insight in this astonishing multi-layered "machine à habiter", to quote Le Corbusier, or rather, this "machine à habiter et à travailler" as we now understand it.

Furthermore, we cannot deal with a palace without considering its context. The palace was embedded in an urban structure or a landscape. Sometimes, the palace was inserted in an existing settlement, sometimes a new city developed or was created on purpose around it. The city and their inhabitants were connected to the palace in multiple ways, not only by the spatial (urban) environment but also in other, also practical, ways. They accommodated and sustained court society – a court was an important factor in the urban economy – but also interacted with it socially, culturally and politically. Today these connections have changed, while remaining alive in another way. The palace has still an urbanistic function and an economic importance. Very often the building still mediates a historical identity; it thus has an emotional and vivid meaning for the people, which is a value for the society of a city, a region or a country.

2. Research Themes of the Palace Museum

The palace is a never-ending source of information about history, i.e., political, social, anthropological, economic, architectural and art history. The many heritage aspects of the palace can thus only be covered through research on a great variety of themes. This research looks at a broad range of source material, from documents to objects, but the most important source is the palace itself. The built structure is the starting point for any study of the palace's history. In this perspective, the palace must be considered as an artifact of material culture: there we find the themes that are relevant. The palace should not be used for any history theme chosen at random, but only for those which left recognisable traces in its built structure, or as the case may be, in its former structures, now vanished.

The same applies to collections and other artefacts that are, or once were, part of the "machine à habiter et à travailler" – again the focus should not be limited to objects with artistic value, but should be extended to all the instruments and devices without which the palace could not have functioned. Of course, artworks, like rare and extraordinary objects, too, are very important research themes, as they offer us a wealth of information on the way the palace's commissioners intended to present themselves, and for that matter, their political and social connections also. On the other hand, technical devices and instruments inform us about the daily life, the hierarchy and personal relations of the palace's inhabitants, and therefore also about their identity. These aspects should not have a lower importance in research choices, as was the case with the mostly art-focused research of the past and its results. In view of paragraph 4, Mediation, it is important to consider that most of the visitors have no advanced education in the humanities and may find other aspects of interest in the wide range of topics the palace offers.

The range of themes for research is very wide and depends on the relevance for each palace as case study. Study themes may be found in remaining material artifacts or in

Material Issues

Space/Architecture (building exterior, room organisation and function, fittings and furnishings, outbuildings, gardens, parks, infrastructures like water supply systems, heating, or garbage disposal)

Objects between art and daily life (furniture, art collections and art works like paintings, tapestries, sculpture, porcelain, technical devices like stoves or chimney pieces, practical objects like bathtubs, chamber pots, weapons, agricultural tools, means of transportation like carriages)

Immaterial, Memory Issues

Life habits (representation versus privacy; gender differences, ceremonial, and ritual conventions, society and family life, eating and sleeping routines, food production and/or confection, travelling)

Historical events (important historical events linked to the palace like dynastic foundations or throne losses, wars, treaties, marriages, births and deaths, visits and liaisons, meetings)

Leisure time and festivity culture at the palace and in the residence cities/surrounding landscape (masked balls, operas, food preparation and table culture,

illuminations in the cities, processions, fireworks etc., hunting in the landscape, serenades in the gardens)

People connected with the palace (princely family members, courtiers of various ranks including officers of the court, the nobility and the clergy, servants and slaves, ambassadors, representatives of government and civil servants, artists, craftsmen, merchants, suppliers)

3. Curator's Role

As stated above, one of the most important professionals in the palace museum is the curator. The curator manages the exhibition spaces accessible to the public as well as the collections, and plays a crucial role in communicating with the public. He/she/they support(s) his/her/their work with research and can be described as a mediating interface between science, the palace departments and the public. The curator's research is the foundation of every communication on the palace to the audience. Besides his/her/their lectures, papers and scientific publications, the content he/she/they provide(s) is the basis for press releases, marketing, guided tours, audio guides, apps, virtual reconstruction, events and publications like flyers, guides etc. He/she/they act(s) in the "middle" of a palace organisation and his/her/their work influences the other departments. In comparison with other researchers and with curators of other museum types, the role of a palace-museum curator shows some characteristic differences.

a) *Fundamental research versus applied research*

Research in a palace museum derives from the specific case study the palace is. Questions, themes, research subjects arise from the history of the palace and the preserved objects and spaces. Therefore, the main research activity of the palace's curator is applied in nature. This is maybe the greatest difference with research conducted at universities and research centres, which are not necessarily bound to any particular theme, epoch or subjects. Perhaps the research in larger museums (like the Louvre, the MET, the museums in London and Berlin, just to mention art museums) which possess extremely rich and broadly-scoped collections can compare to the former; they can possibly justify the investment in fundamental research. But this is seldom the case in palace museums – by which we do not mean historical palaces used like museums, such as the Hermitage for instance, but palaces functioning as museums of themselves! Here research is defined according to the museological needs of the palace's specific case, like the historical events and persons connected with it, the collections which are kept there or which once belonged to the palace, to the palace's specific architectural historical layers and their meaning in its history, etc. Of course, palace curators must look beyond the strict limits of the palace's issues and establish links and comparisons, draw parallelisms with similar cases, cross regional and even national boundaries to find appropriate models, and to study the palace's influence elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is primarily the palace's buildings, its movable objects, and their history that must serve as starting point of any research activity. Only then the palace museum's mission can be accomplished: this is the road leading towards a straightforward recognition of its meaning and heritage value.

In this context, rather than looking at art collections as important examples of mainstream art history, the palace's curator should first investigate the palace own objects' characteristics, provenience, the reason why they were brought into the palace and to what use and from whom they were intended to. The same goes for the palace's architectural history, or rather, the history of the palace's creation and evolution. The curator must thus focus on the existing artifacts within his/her/their remit, no matter how incomplete or heterogeneous they may be. The result of this case study research provides vital information not only for a pertinent heritage evaluation of the palace, but also for the mediation with the public. Without this the palace will remain a monotonous, incomprehensible museum, as it still is the case of so many palace museums in Europe.

For fundamental research, which the palace's curator is certainly capable of, there is always the possibility of putting together research projects in collaboration with a larger research team, preferably including universities and research centres. These have the human resources and research means which palace museums often lack. They will assure the scholarly carrying out of such activities. The palace's curator on the other hand has a determining role in defining the research direction, since no one but he/she/they know(s) the research object better.

b) Curatorial strategies in the palace museum in contrast to those of other museum types such as the Art (History) Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts

In museums of Art (History), Applied Arts, Archaeology, etc., it is very often the single object or a coherent group of objects that constitute the units exhibitions are built with. In the last years thematic concepts were fashionable. But more often than not, the historical objects were singled out as individual study cases and were therefore taken out of their historical context to be displayed. In the case of the palace museum the situation is quite the opposite. The palace building is simultaneously the showcase of single objects, but above all a most important historical object in itself. This palace building offers what other museums lack: the historical context. When visitors enter a historic building, they step into another sphere, expecting a journey though time. The palace's spaces, either interior or exterior, are the historical places where the palace's collections and technical devices were kept, used, displayed, etc. Therefore, the smallest indivisible unit in the palace museum is not the single (art)object, but spaces: a room, a courtyard, a garden section, etc. The display strategy in a palace museum should be to organise the objects throughout the exhibition spaces in a manner which generates sufficient understanding of the palace's narrative. The ideal situation is to reconstruct spaces, interiors, and atmospheres as authentically as possible, i.e., to place original objects into their original place. Experience has taught us, however, that this ideal situation can bring curators into tricky situations. There may be misinterpretations of historical information, and a reconstruction is usually a choice that excludes other historical layers. Authenticity is also a difficult value that can only be approached but never fully achieved. Nevertheless, research can reveal the relationship between historical architectural spaces and objects, so that they can be brought together and a long-lost atmosphere may thus be recovered. This is one of the most fascinating working advantages of the palace curator's work.

As much as research in the palace museum is more of the applied kind, so the decisions taken by the palace museum curator must conform with the palace's heritage value and meaning. It is therefore not unthinkable that a very important object (for instance, from

the art historical perspective) but with little relevance to the heritage meaning of the palace museum is put in storage, whereas other objects which are less impressive but played a determining role in the history of the palace, might find their way into the exhibition rooms. The ultimate justification lies in the fact that the context in which it was displayed and/or used, is more important for the palace museum than the object in itself. The object can be part of an ensemble which hopefully, in the best conditions, (re)creates an interior almost like it was. [There are, of course, alternatives for exhibiting important objects left out of the main exhibition: either the palace has a gallery for collections which otherwise have no place in the museological narrative; or such objects can be sent as a loan to other museums where they get the relevance they deserve.]

Yet the kind of authenticity referred to above is the exception rather than the rule, especially in late mediaeval and early modern palaces turned into museums. Original objects very often no longer exist, or were dispersed throughout time, or even had different “original” locations in the palace according to different times. Sometimes the spaces where the still existing objects originally stood have been destroyed in the meanwhile, or irrevocably changed. Frequently there is no information available for these empty spaces, and therefore it is not possible to take “historically informed” decisions. Here the curator must use his/her/their creativity to find ways to solve this problem (see paragraph Mediation). But in no way the palace’s spaces should be used for object exhibition without any connection to the palace’s history and heritage meaning – this would make the palace and its presentation irrelevant. Missing objects can be replaced by copies or contemporary design solutions that make the message visible.

4. Mediation for the Community

The most powerful means of mediation in a palace museum are historical spaces and atmospheres. This is where visitors have the opportunity to glance into another time, another sphere. In most cases the public can recognise a kitchen, a bedroom, a reception room as such. But given the difficulties for the modern public to understand spatial organisation according to the patterns of life of the late mediaeval and early modern times, so different from today’s, even very eloquent historical reconstructions must be completed with (text, written or oral) explanations. More than any specific space, it is the spatial organisation and the sequences of spaces in the complex, often labyrinthic palace architecture that most puzzle the contemporary visitor. Moreover, the visitor brings his/her/their notion of today’s single-family house into the palace museum and expects to find the same characteristics there, only bigger and more luxurious. [When a confused visitor keeps asking “Yes, but *which* is the main entrance to the palace?”, it is disconcerting for the palace museum’s staff to try and explain that very often there is no such thing as a single main entrance where the correct butler is expected to stand ready to open the door to passers-by!). Palaces are very complex architectural structures and bigger palaces are very often compared to a small town. A key strategy to a good mediation is to explain the palace as an artefact closer to the urban scale rather than to the architectural one.

For an effective mediation, it is necessary to consider every adequate tool, even every gadget today’s technology offers. Printed plans can clarify the palace’s architectural structure, video animations may visually explain the development of the building throughout the centuries, placards with genealogical trees make people’s familiar

connections understandable, time-lines offer a compact historical evolution, audio-guides will help the visitors to make sense of what they are actually looking at, augmented or virtual reality is an effective means to replace visually lost objects, to complete or interpret interiors difficult to reconstruct – and, most importantly, it can vividly illustrate life as it was in a time nobody of us experienced. To activate the senses the curator could use the taste of historic food and drinks, the sound of ceremonial trumpets, or the scent of lavender used to perfume the cloth in former times. It is important that an up to date mediation offers not only perceptive formats, but also interactive, participative and collaborative ones too. The topics on offer should use the wide range of research the curator developed, since experience shows that visitors are highly interested in the most different aspects of cultural history.

Objects in the palace museum should preferably be displayed in context, i.e., in an historically reconstructed space or, if this is not possible, in such a way that the objects' function in the palace's life becomes evident. The former, old fashion way to display important objects individually and according to types in vitrines like in "normal" museums is now replaced by arranging objects in ways that make the visitor immediately understand what he/she/they is/are looking at. So, the palace presentation must avoid the methods of the museum presentation, like glass showcases, banners, object numbering, light steles, etc. The classical example is to display table services set out on a table, as they used to be arranged for meals. Taking this example, the curator has then to choose the proper style of presentation. Should he/she/they show a table perfectly ready for a state dinner, showing the objects in their correct historical context, but which still makes them appear as precious relicts? Or should he bring in a funny moment, maybe a table with used napkins left on it, burned candles, half-full or tipped wine glasses and breadcrumbs on the tablecloth (with all due respect to conservation needs)? Again, the explanation offered to visitors about any kind of object displayed in the palace museum should not be about abstract issues like style of configuration type, but about the use and the connection to the people that once lived there. Because, in the end, the palace museum is not about things, but about people and the way they lived. The palace buildings and their movable contents, i.e. their material remains offer the most appropriate testimony to illustrate this.

In addition to the reconstruction of space, other uses are conceivable for the palace museum. Sometimes there is not enough information available to create a meaningful reconstruction, or choices are made to 'sacrifice' less meaningful spaces for other uses, like education. This offers the palace museum the opportunity to engage with the audience in different ways and build bridges between history and modern-day life.

To have a visitor see and think about a reconstruction, discuss a way of life in history or to learn about old materials, skills, and processes in workshops – to name but a few – are all valuable opportunities to trigger discussion on bigger topics that still very much matter today. By addressing sometimes difficult themes in a serious, factual, sometimes playful, but always respectful way, makes the palace museum relevant for the future.

Final words

With the present text the PALAMUSTO participants intend to help palace museums to find new museological strategies concerning research, collection display, and museum management which are more fitting and more respectful of this particular museum type's heritage value. Given the central role of the palace museum's curator, this text reflects the investment in training and research which the project PALAMUSTO made in such future professionals. This white paper is therefore also a sum up of many concepts that were discussed during the running time of this European Action, which for more than four years brought together university professors, palace museum managers and other stakeholders in this heritage with early-stage researchers. Of the latter, a much more accurate professional performance may now be expected as curators in the palace museums of the future.