Street as Museum as Method: Some Thoughts
on Museum Inclusivity

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Abstract: The paper will use the Community Museum Project (CMP, www.hkcmp.org), a Hong Kong-based curatorial collective (with which the author is affiliated), as a case study in the possible application of the museum methodology to the visual representation of community values and practices; she explores how different areas of knowledge and social resources can be "curated" to nurture synergised social relations. CMP, though operates without a permanent space, shares with institutional museums in the practice of creating representations of histories and objects, the difference being the focus on the undocumented and under-represented vernacular culture (with emphasis on public, material and visual cultures) and indigenous creativity. The city, and particularly the street, is seen as a site of interwoven knowledge and resources. They are given visual forms by means of exhibitions, tours or other public programmes.

Keywords: Community Cultural Development, Indigenous Creativity, Social Curating, Vernacular Culture, Visual Culture

Introduction

IN THE MIDST of incessant "urban renewals" in Hong Kong, local grassroots communities and their indigenous cultures are being uprooted. It was against this background that an independent curatorial group, the Community Museum Project (CMP), was founded – though with an uncertain aim - to take note of Hong Kong's disappearing vernacular cultures. Since 2001, and with the help of some volunteers and limited private and *ad hoc* public funding, CMP has attempted to develop "museum projects" without a museum.

It must be clarified from the outset that the Community Museum Project is not a "museum" *per se*, but a curatorial collective which runs "museum projects". Instead of administering a museum "institution" with its "hardware" and "proper" collections, CMP chooses to work opportunistically and independently of the museum profession,[1] but uses "museum" as a tactical metaphor, a method to engage differently, in the articulation of everyday vernacular spectacles, cultures and values through certain curatorial endeavours. It is under such a self-proclaimed detached position that the Community Museum Project pronounced its name – a conceptual site, a "Project" for collecting, re-presenting, displaying and communicating community stories and knowledge through artefacts and exhibition spectacles.

This paper attempts not only to showcase some of the projects CMP has developed over the years, but to invite professional feedback from the museum community as to whether the issues of "museum inclusivity" could be defined and discussed in the ways CMP proposes. It is believed that, "museum methods", when applied in a broader socio-cultural context, may become a useful tool to affect certain social dynamics in urban settings.

Museum without Museum

The call for a "museum without walls"[2] has, for the good or otherwise, already sustained for more than half a century within the museum profession. The paradoxical idea of a museum "robbing" works of art or cultural artefacts from their original contexts and yet allowing them to be seen by the general populace within specialised and tempered settings, has become the philosophical root, and hence the operation of modern museums. It is under this ironic context that the notion of "museum inclusivity" has the ground for professional discussion: On the one hand, a museum draws a boundary for its "unique" museological mission and operation, and on the other, demands itself "to include", if not exclusively, a larger group of particular, usually under-privileged and "un-tempered" audience. The "Museum", thus becomes a physical setup designed - with all its professionalism as well as public and private re-

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[1] The museum profession, in the context of this paper, may be seen as a specialised institution self-consciously defined by various international or national museum organisations, such as The International Council of Museums, Museums and Galleries Commission, American Association of Museums or Museums Association, etc. All of which have tried to promote written code of ethics, practices and institutional standards in order to maintain its self-image and social legitimacy. Its institutional structure and aura could be sensed in publications like Kavanagh, Gaynor (ed.) *Museum Provision and Professionalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994; Black, Graham. *The Engaging Museum.* London and New York: Routledge, 2005 or Thompson, John M.A. *Manual of Curatorship,* 2nd edition. London: Butterworth Heinemann, 1992; where many of the institutional rationales evolve primarily around the appropriate "dealing" of a Collection.

[2] Malraux, Andre. *Museum Without Walls.* United Kingdom: Pantheon Books, 1949.

sources - to deal with this visionary, if not ironical task; a task to ambitiously include an ever expanding audience into a (often too) specialised scope of museum activities.

It is against this background that the Community Museum Project proposes to do away with the physical museum, i.e., the "hardware" along with its institutional and ideological boundaries and constraints, which has generally become a burden, if not obstacle for true museum inclusivity in the profession. For CMP, the essence of museum practices is the method: its methodology to collect and curate, hence making the collected publicly accessible via proper museum showmanship, regardless of the physical institution. Under CMP's directive, it is therefore appropriate to talk about using "museum methods" to do things museum establishments are normally unable or reluctant to do, such as giving up the collection after the project is accomplished or collecting something which is yet to exist, as the following examples will show. Having said that, CMP does follow a general museums' undertakings to collect, to research, to interpret, to display and to communicate; the issues for CMP, however, are "of what", "where at" and "for whom" under each specific social setting. Metaphorically speaking, this is likened to a museum that constantly moves to different project sites, rather than a museum proper that tries to incorporate different exhibition projects.

Indigenous Creativity of the People: *Objects of Demonstration*

The first project CMP tried to put on to answer the above questions was an exhibition in 2002, entitled, *Objects of Demonstration: An exhibition about the freedom of indigenous cultural and political expressions*.[3] Curated 5 years after Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty, and at the end of the reign of her first Chief Executive, Tung Che Hwa, the idea was to put up an exhibition with a collection of objects that were made by street protesters for local demonstrations before and after 1997, the year of

Hong Kong's "reunion" with China from British rule.

To CMP, such a collection of objects is the raw material of a specific public and expressive culture. Despite the differences and variances of political goals, local protests and demonstrations often help to index and test the boundary of freedom of speech and expression within our society;[4] and these demonstration objects, made by Hong Kong's active citizens, in effect reflect the community's effort and intelligence of making the civic "voices" heard. Each of these objects, although ephemeral in nature, not only crystallises certain political issue or debates, when seen collectively and across time, they also mirror the different states of a city's political freedom, not to mention her people's values, indigenous creativity and localised expressions. Ironically though, these are objects a public museum (in Hong Kong, evidently) would normally find reluctant[5] to collect and preserve.

CMP attempted to collect such "un-collectables" by searching around the city for artefacts and stories of street demonstrations of the past 10 years, and were able to solicit close to 300 items of vernacular creations;[6] i.e., artefacts, images, slogans, poems, banners, flyers, etc. as well as documentations ranging from various forms of news articles to radio and television reports. Held inside an artists' village, the Cattle Depot, the curators deliberately fashioned the gallery setting into an imaginary Government Storehouse where protest objects are kept, not necessarily for preserving historical memories, but as evidences for potential legal cases against the protesters in the future – a mild parody that may foretell the future status of political control of the city.

With such an ephemeral collection, CMP happened to discover the patterns and the vernacular tactics employed by the populace in designing and producing street demonstrations. They could be classified and sorted into thematic categories, namely, the Readymade; DIY objects; Texts; Pictorials; Body & Performances and Monuments.[7] Objects in each category exemplified an array of creative attempts or strategies that strived to give

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[3] A second version of the exhibition was held in 2004 (by invitation) at the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester, UK. Detached from its original context, and treated as an "arts centre show", the 2004 exhibition lost its critical ground for further elaboration. It is therefore not discussed in this paper.

[4] *Article 27* of the *Basic Law* of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China was highlighted as the opening statement for the exhibition: *"Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike."* This serves as a given, a promise, for Hong Kong's political freedom and condition after 1997.

[5] One of the exceptions in the field may be the attempts of SAMDOK (an acronym for the Swedish word *samtidsdokumentation*, meaning "contemporary documentation"), an association of Swedish museums of cultural history devoted to collecting, documenting and studying the present day since 1977. It has undertaken the formidable task of systematically "studying present-day life and collecting present-day artefacts" for the future. SAMDOK's endeavours can be seen in its periodical, *SAMTID & museer.* For recent review of its works, see Silvén, Eva. "Reflecting Collecting", *SAMTID & museer.* Vol.3, no.2, 2007.

[6] See images from http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_002_object.html

[7] See exhibition brochure: Chan, Howard et al. *Objects of Demonstration: an Exhibition about the Freedom of Indigenous Cultural and Political Expressions*, Hong Kong: Community Museum Project, 2004, at http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/img/002_object/od_exbook.pdf for corresponding description of each category.

expressions to certain political and social issues. For instance, in a case lobbying for urban renewal compensation, protesters tied an exceedingly long tail on an effigy of a cat; it, hence, became a visual cue to a local saying "pulling a cat's tail" - meaning to avoid responsibilities by cheating and mutual pretences - which derisively mocked the Urban Renewal Authority and the Government; accompanying limericks and puppets, conceived and made by the concerned residents, were then used to enact in a street performance staged for the media.[8] What CMP tried to do was to explicate the stories behind these demonstration strategies and to visualise them through the standard "tools" of a museum exhibition: artefacts display, didactic panels, publications,[9] public seminars (with protesters), school workshop, etc.

The Museum Method to Include

By extending the brief social life of demonstration objects into a gallery setting and treating them as a phenomenon rather than discrete political actions, the exhibition tried to re-present the material and visual expressions of local demonstrations, which would normally be forgotten (or silenced) quickly after each petition in the post-colonial city.

The exhibition drew good media and public responses,[10] and was considered to be rather inspiring to the social workers' and activists' circle - in a sense that it demonstrated an alternative way to give form to certain civic expressions beyond one-off street activism. Protesters (i.e., the object makers and lenders) contributing to the show contented[11] that their voices were once again publicised and heard, by at least the museum public, if not the Government; and that it was through such an occasion that they felt the sense of relatedness to the exhibition culture common in the cultural field. The *Objects of Demonstration* exhibition has unexpectedly evolved into a collaborative platform where the CMP curators started to work closely with local activists, or the "active people" in our society, and relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on issues of certain "common concern". It is through this common ground that people of different "trades" came together into a quasi-museum context; one that CMP endeavours to experiment with by erecting selected

vernacular practices[12] and the ephemerals into a form of museum showmanship.

In this process, CMP came to learn about the assumptions and methods of communicating with "non-museum" people (on the subject matter of street activism, in this case), and subsequently involving them in the curatorial processes of collecting and interpreting, as well as planning related events, such as public seminars and makers' demonstrations, etc. The project has become, not only a means for "collecting" our city's material culture, but also the network and social relations of a community, i.e., in one sense of the word, the "un-collectables", which is normally overlooked by museum professionals in Hong Kong. The practice of a museum is one that legitimises values. It was this exhibition that helped CMP to see the "museum method" as a legitimising and "inclusion" tool for those under-represented issues of community concerns.

Collecting the "Un-Collectables": *Lee Tung Street*

The aforementioned realisation has led the Community Museum Project into some similar undertakings (since 2004) that tackled the issues of local civic practices and street cultures. From CMP's point of view, what are to be collected need not be prized artefacts as most museums aspire to do, they can also be something as intangible as the people's network, and as ephemeral as, say, certain cultural spectacles of a street. With this realisation, CMP has since assumed her role as a "cultural scavenger": She picks up what others have left behind in the street (and our culture) and makes something out of it. Such endeavour has subsequently taken form in an exhibition series and publication entitled, *Street as Museum: Lee Tung Street* (2005).[13]

Since the late 90s, one of the municipal districts of Hong Kong, Wan Chai has undergone massive "urban re-development". Local street cultures and livelihoods are being uprooted; and the renowned Lee Tung Street (LTS), had become a civic "war zone" between the inhabitants and the semi-governmental, Urban Renewal Authority (URA), as the latter proposed to remove all the residents, shops and buildings for redevelopment. What caught one's eyes in LTS then were the tape-sealed windows, the "This is an Urban Renewal Authority property" signage

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[8] Ibid, see brochure for more stories and demonstration strategies.
[9] Various publications can be downloaded from http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_002_object.html
[10] The show was featured in various local presses, radio and television programmes, as well as a few foreign media. It was coincidentally, and naturally so, treated as a civic commentary on the first reign of the HKSAR's rule.
[11] Unexpectedly, many friends of the activists and the visitors had continuously volunteered to contribute their personal creations and stories to the show throughout the whole exhibition period and thereafter.
[12] See http://www/hkcmp.org for exhibition projects like *Designed by Users: In Search of Indigenous Creativity and Wisdom from Designing Tools* (2005); and *In Search of Marginalized Wisdom: Sham Shui Po Craftspeople* (2007).
[13] See http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_002_street_lee.html

and the yellow protest banners that claimed "Give Me Back My Printing Street", "Preserve Our Com- munity Network" and "Let's Plan It Together". (Fig.1)

Figure 1: The North end of Lee Tung Street where some of the Protest Banners were Hung

In the years to follow, the plan has met with great opposition and resentment. Residents organised themselves to make passionate, if not furious peti- tions against the demolition, and they even drew up concrete counter-proposals for the Government's reconsideration. On any one day since the re-devel- opment plan was announced, one could find endless crowds of Hong Kong citizens (not tourists) trying to take photos of the street before it vanished. Many lamented the government for breaking up the social networks of its inhabitants as well as the unique and prosperous commercial community, nicknamed the "Wedding Card Street" or the "Printing Street". This was the area where generations of print-shops had resided since the 70s, and had slowly evolved into a themed-street for wedding related businesses. Worse still, by destroying the current infrastructure of LTS, it was said, also to destroy part of the historical landscape that visually manifests the developmental stages of Wan Chai district since the 19th century, a significant city's spectacle and geo-social "embodi- ment" of collective memories of the Hong Kong people.
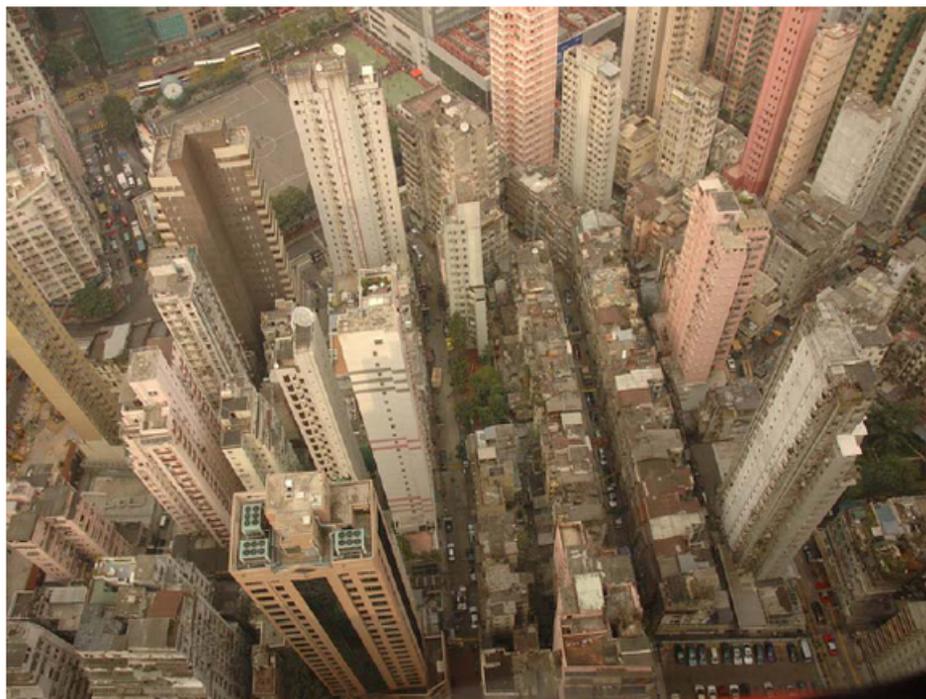
Figure 2: The Lower Clusters of Buildings on Lee Tung Street were Surrounded by Modern High-rises

Assuming the role of a "cultural scavenger" and in an attempt to contribute to the "preservation" of the street, the Community Museum Project decided to conduct an unusual visual documentation of the site - a narrow street of barely 9 metres across, comprising a continuous cluster of 5-storey buildings erected in the 50s. The street was surrounded by Hong Kong's typical high-rises, (Fig. 2) which made its complete façades impossible to be seen at any one angle from afar. For over 6 months, two photographers were employed to record, systematically in grid format, the frontal views of all the shops and floors from both sides of the street. A crane had to be used to raise the photographer up to shoot at each floor level. A designer was then hired for 2 months to painstakingly piece over 300 photographic fragments together into a continuous façade image – using Photoshop and with necessary visual and digital manipulations. The outcome is a pair of 6-metre panoramic images of the street, which have never been seen before in reality. (Fig.3) This is the same familiar street, but from an unusual view, only made possible with digital photographic manipulation, a complement to the usual photographic and archival approach in museum practice.

Figure 3: The West (above) and East Façade of the Building Clusters on Lee Tung Street

In addition, CMP's photographers were accompanied regularly by the curators and research volunteers during the shooting process, where a spectrum of oral histories and anecdotes were recorded from the shop-owners and residents in due course. Stories and anecdotes like how inhabitants of the street shared their community or spatial resources; how the printing business had evolved and changed its commercial forms; or even how different shops had been moving from one location to another within the same LTS,

etc. were collected. These episodes which substantially manifested the ecology of the street were then translated visually and didactically into a series of illustrative panels and a publication[14] that helped to contextualise the façade images in the coming exhibition.

What is presented here is not merely a nostalgic record, but an often-neglected "visual knowledge"[15]

of a site, a spectacle that is able to shape not only the communicative function of the exhibition and publication, but more significantly, the publicity of a particular civic issue in Hong Kong. It has become an icon that manifests the visual identity of the street, a unique "collection" of CMP, for generating public, if not museum discourses.

Figure 4: The Exhibition, entitled: *Lee Tung Street as You Have Never Seen Before* was held at a Corridor of a Shopping mall in the C.C. Wu Building

Inclusivity of What?

With the 2 iconic images, the exhibition was deliberately held in a popular shopping mall (as opposed to in a museum) in Wan Chai, the C.C. Wu Building, (Fig.4) which was a few blocks away from the debated site. CMP invited the residents and shopowners from LTS to become docents for the exhibition; and by referring to the different sections and people in the panoramic images they started to explain their livelihood stories to the visitors. The docents evidently had managed to tell very touching, if not emotionally charged, stories out of their own living experiences, drawing references not only to the history and ecology of the community, but also the (critical) issues relating to the re-development debates. The exhibition had unintentionally become a platform which allowed the concerned residents to express their personal views to the audience. (Inter-

estingly, many visitors made an attempt to visit the real street only after they came to listen to and see the show.) One of the 30 year old print-shops from the street, Tak Kee, was also invited to bring along their printing machine and station to demonstrate the old-style typecast printing in the exhibition venue. Visitors also had the hands-on opportunity to make the smaller scale LTS icons in monochrome prints. The owner of the C.C. Wu shopping mall subsequently wanted to show appreciation to Tak Kee's voluntary contribution, by giving the print-shop a commission to print their corporate materials, hence creating certain business relation between the two community partners.

The exhibition and the panoramic façade images drew huge media attention, and they were used[16] by many newspapers and magazines to promote not only the exhibition, but also the re-development debates of LTS, Wan Chai and Hong Kong at large; hence bringing the issue to a different level of public

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[14] Community Museum Project. *Street as Museum: Lee Tung Street.* Hong Kong: Community Museum Project, 2005.

[15] Knowledge is encoded, not only in words and textual (or verbal) semantics, but also in a vast array of visual articulations or forms common to the design and creative disciplines. One of CMP's curatorial strategies is to visualise information, making certain "knowledge" more approachable for the general public. For related practical ideas, see Wurman, Richard. *Information Anxiety 2.*Indianapolis: QUE, 2001 and Tufte, Edward. *Visual Explanations.* Graphics Press, 1997. More theoretical discussion can be seen in, for instance, Chaplin, Elizabeth. *Sociology and Visual Representation.* London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

[16] No less than 10 local presses have requested to borrow the LTS images for their uses, but without offering CMP any royalty.

concern. With such publicity, CMP was also able to use the LTS brochure to raise donations - from the audience and the general public - for the residents and concern groups. The money was used to launch further lobbying events to rescue the street in the days to come. The LTS panorama has unexpectedly become a public icon for social dialogues and actions; it has also become an index or a navigation map for some city tours. Lee Tung Street was, in effect, seen as a living museum, where many other cultural and lobbying events were held in situ thereafter.

Although the attempts at rescuing LTS from demolition were ultimately in vain,[17] the experience from working with the residents and hence producing a series of visual records of their stories and the street is invaluable in helping the Community Museum Project to formulate her embracive "museum" approaches. The issue of museum inclusivity may be discussed with the following considerations: Likened to standard museum practices, but in a non-institutionalised way, CMP is able to give visual forms (exhibition, demonstration, publication, etc.) to a social issue, and that such forms, if designed visually and engagingly, will help to mediate the relations among different social partners – the general public; the residents; the concern groups; the media; the shopping mall and street level shops, etc. Perhaps also in a more *ad hoc* way, it is being "inclusive" in the sense of one concerned community working together on a civic act, namely, to affect the re-development plan of LTS. Again, it is the collaboration with certain active people in the society that forms *our* community (i.e., the exhibition circle, the media, the activist circle, general citizens and the residents *as a whole*). This is different than being "inclusive" by trying to draw *other* communities into *our* museum. The stakeholders for the *Lee Tung Street* project are already people from the street in its very inception.

Street as Museum

The LTS project has also inspired the *Street as Museum: Cultural Tour Series,* [18] launched the same year, where local Wan Chai residents were hired to become tour guides for a series of street tours themed under the broad umbrella of "vernacular city's spectacles". The tours were designed to highlight some of the "street level" phenomenon and cultures of the district. This included, for instance, visiting "street businesses" and appreciating the indigenous system of shop-designs; tracing stories of Wan Chai's sex industry; searching for local disappearing industries, and following the routes haunted by ghost

stories, etc. Anecdotes were told in reference to the spectacles or visual signposts identified in situ. A cultural practitioner or academic was also invited to accompany each tour to help with the task of city "reading", or visual culture analysis, i.e., to prompt the audience to see beyond the "surface of things". The tours generated by certain curatorial process and framing, have become a means to re-organise local spectacles into a series of quasi-museum experiences.

Methodologically speaking, tour themes were generated based on the resident's special knowledge of the district, and the availability of existing spectacles in situ which manifest the selected themes. Through engaging the locals, and drawing on the indigenous knowledge from "people of the streets", traces of personal history were simultaneously elicited and recorded in the process. These stories were then interwoven, cumulatively, into the different versions of the tour's narrative and some have been developed and designed into brochures accompanying the tours. The street is, in fact a collection of multi-sensory spectacles waiting to be curated, visualised, interpreted and "talked about" by museum curators, working partners and the participating audience. In this project, CMP was able to theme "the sights" into a flow of "exhibits" and interactive narratives that give new meaning to the existing streets. The best museum is, perhaps, more a dynamic platform than a fixed site where local people and the audience can proudly tell everybody stories about their livelihood and (urban) experience with the surrounding objects and settings "framed" in front of them.

Conclusion: Social Curating

The idea of a museum without a physical space and a collection is not new; but in order to qualify an institutional entity to be "a museum" without certain acquisitions or collection proper makes the notion of a museum rather uncomfortable. The Community Museum Project, seeing herself as an entity running "museum projects" rather than "a museum" at least resolves this uneasiness at the naming level.

Without prescribed institutional burden, CMP is able to concentrate on applying and testing the museum method to the full. This has become a means for her to curate "things" creatively and not bounded by the physical and conceptual constraints of a "walled" museum. By opening up and extending the museum projects onto the "street level", and by collecting and interpreting the city's artefacts, stories and the wealth of visual manifestations from our public culture - i.e., *our* community as opposed to *their* community - the seemingly chaotic street-cul-

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[17] All the buildings in LTS were torn down in spring 2008.
[18] See http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_002_street_cultural.html

tures are given new visual, museological and possibly, civic forms. Through engaging community partners in the process, a platform is, in turn, created for our community articulation and interaction. "Community", to CMP, is the subject matter, interactive partners and project settings altogether.

Moving from the more formal material and visual documentation of the street and its cultures (as in LTS), to an interactive public programme, like the *Cultural Tour Series,* CMP has come to see herself as 1) a "cultural scavenger", who picks up what the dominant institutions have left out; 2) a creative platform for visual articulation of everyday cultures and values; and 3) a mediator for different social and museological resources. Her projects also demonstrate the potential of different social partners – local residents, cultural practitioners, NGOs, and commercial corporations, etc. – when invited to collaborate under certain curatorial settings - can generate new knowledge, social relations and public actions. This is different from preserving material artefacts as most museums do; it is the intangibles and the (potential) cultural infrastructure[19] that CMP tries to "materialise", using museum methods.

The idea of "street as museum as method" not only facilitates cross-disciplinary collaboration and public participation, it is also, through this "social curating" exercise, that CMP strives to become a visual and community platform for articulating under-represented histories, indigenous creativity, everyday cultures and social debates. Metaphorically, the street is a site and a conduit for all kinds of local social traffics and resources for the public. The "street as museum" approach towards discovering and disseminating local knowledge and practices, and hence, the reorganising of social relations and curatorial purposes, may become a dynamic means to help envisage "museum inclusivity". It is in this context the notion of an "Inclusive Museum" may possibly be anticipated.

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[19] The idea of cultural infrastructure is adopted from the community cultural development field as explained in the following quote: "Marginalized communities lack cultural infrastructure as surely as they lack economic infrastructure. Just as economic development aims to stimulate the flow of capital and goods within a community and between it and other sources of prosperity, community cultural development aims to stimulate the flow of cultural information and resources. One way this aim can be advanced is by training young people to deploy cultural tools for social changes, asserting themselves as artists within their own communities and winning recognition for their contributions to cultural change" (Adams & Goldbard, 2001, p.36). CMP has attempted to adapt the last sentence (idea) into the following: … *Another way this aim can be advanced is by working with the public to deploy cultural tools for social changes, asserting themselves as curators within their own communities and winning recognition for their contributions to cultural change.*

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