

Sustainability الاستدامة Nachhaltigkeit

By Frisco [Francesco] Aresti

An initial approach to sustainability and its role in what I do

The concept of sustainability has fascinated me since my studies and museum experiences. The focus on sustainability is ever-present nowadays and presents museums with many challenges to tackle and choices to make. For example, what is the environmental impact of renovating a museum collection? Additionally, a museum that amasses objects from around the world could raise concerns about its social sustainability, as it might deprive local populations of access to their cultural heritage. Conversely, when museums collaborate closely with local groups, they often foster a strong sense of belonging and positively impact the viability of cultural expressions.

For these reasons, I decided to explore different dimensions that the term sustainability encompasses for museums. I believe that the broad concept of sustainability offers museums a vast range of opportunities to address priorities that are already integral to their missions. It is up to museums to demonstrate their ability to influence environmental, social, and cultural issues through collaboration with the communities they serve.

Sustainability in museums has emerged as a crucial concept that, considering environmental aspects, has embraced multifaceted perspectives and context-based strategies. At its core, sustainability for a museum can be understood as the capacity to regenerate the set of practices, processes, and tasks over time. By ensuring the viability of collections and the transmission of knowledge to future generations, the museum as a public and societal actor addresses both local and international issues. This possible definition aligns with

UNESCO's concept of sustainability, which emphasizes a long-term goal and integrates a holistic approach through the three pillars of sustainable development: environmental protection, social equity, and economic dimension.

Before beginning my SAWA experience, I did not yet fully grasp this broad interpretation of sustainability. Now, thanks to online meetings and experiences in Berlin and Sharjah, I understand how SAWA has also helped me better frame my work priorities in terms of sustainability.

As a PhD fellow at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Galicia, Spain), I focus on collecting, documenting, and exploring the oral narratives (stories, accounts, etc.) related to the Tower of Hercules, a lighthouse in the city of A Coruña. This ancient Roman tower, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and symbol of the Galician city, is associated with numerous myths and tales that form a rich tapestry of intangible heritage. For the tasks of my project, the engagement of local communities is essential. For this reason, I collaborate with the UNESCO site of the Tower of Hercules (which includes an Interpretation Centre) and the Archaeological and Historical Museum of A Coruña.



The lighthouse of the Tower of Hercules
(photo from: <https://www.torredeherculesacoruna.com>)

Sustaining the residents' collective memory linked to the lighthouse means engaging with contemporary debates surrounding the tower. By providing a space for the evolution and transmission of stories, the expressions of intangible heritage remain alive within the community. Furthermore, the myths on the tower intertwine with more recent events, linking the heritage site to sensitive local and global issues, such as environmental disasters, the Francoist dictatorship, and Galician emigration.

Some of Spain's greatest environmental disasters have occurred off the coast of Galicia. In 1992, the oil tanker *Mar Egeo* ran aground: locals vividly remember the Tower of Hercules amid clouds of black smoke from burning oil, an image now woven into the mythological lore of the lighthouse.

The tower also symbolizes the journey of leaving home. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, transatlantic liners carrying Galician emigrants departed from the port of A Coruña to the Americas. From their ships, these people saw the Tower of Hercules as the last image of their homeland before crossing the vast ocean.

Here, I have aimed to concisely present some reflections on the Tower of Hercules to help frame how the sustainable potential of museums as a space of negotiation materializes when they embrace sustainability in their role as social actors. I can now mention a notable example of good practice promoted and supported by the cultural complex of the Tower of Hercules in collaboration with local environmental groups. They cleaned the natural area surrounding the lighthouse and reintroduced native flora that had been threatened by invasive species. This project, which can also serve as a sustainable metaphor for life around the Tower of Hercules, has had a positive impact on the local bird species, which have since returned to the area they had previously abandoned.

Sustainability: Etymology and Meaning across Languages

The term sustainability derives from the Latin root *sustinere*, which means "to hold up" or "to endure". The languages I daily use at work (*sostenibilidad* in Spanish, *sustentabilidade* in Galician) share with English this same core idea behind sustainability: the ability to maintain or endure over time. Its contemporary usage emerged in the late 20th century, primarily in the context of environmental conservation, but has since expanded into various fields such as economics, social development, and cultural viability across various sectors.

In English, the word sustainability became widely adopted during the environmental movement of the 1970s, especially after the United Nations Brundtland Report (1987), also known as "Our Common Future". This report defined sustainability as meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The German term for sustainability, *Nachhaltigkeit*, similarly focuses on endurance, preservation, and careful resource stewardship (the word *nachhaltig* also conveys the idea of long-term, lasting, permanent). It stems from forestry practices in the 18th century, when the term described responsible forest management where trees were cut down at a rate that allowed for regeneration and balance between consumption and replenishment.

In Arabic, the term الاستدامة (*al-istidāma*) is derived from the root دام (*dāma*), meaning "to last" or "to endure". As in other languages, it carries connotations of longevity and the ability to sustain a process or state over time. In modern usage, *al-istidāma* refers to sustainability in the context of environmental conservation, resource efficiency, and the long-term resilience of social and cultural systems.

Museum Sustainability: a multifaceted concept

Often, the terms sustainability and sustainable development overlap. In the UN framework, sustainability is understood as a long-term and ongoing process that does not have an endpoint; instead, it is meant to be maintained in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development, on the other hand, involves targeted initiatives or efforts within a certain time frame to progress toward sustainability. It has a clear direction, with set milestones like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim for specific achievements by 2030. After these goals are reached, new development goals may emerge.

International organizations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) have recognised the vast perspectives of sustainability. ICOM's "Museum Definition" highlights the role of museums in promoting sustainability through education, community engagement, and the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

Apart from environmental sustainability, a significant aspect of sustainability in museums emphasizes social inclusion and community engagement. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), highlight the importance of fostering inclusive and equitable access to cultural heritage. Museums are encouraged to adopt community-based approaches that promote collaboration with local inhabitants, ensuring that collections and narratives reflect diverse voices and that the museum serves as a space for cultural dialogue. This may involve co-curating exhibitions with local artists, engaging community members in decision-making processes, and creating programmes that reflect the diverse narratives of the community.

By collaborating with local communities, museums help preserve and revitalize cultural practices that might otherwise be at risk of fading away. For instance, by

investing in community-led initiatives, museums support crafts, rituals, and other cultural expressions.

The economic dimensions of sustainability are also vital. Cultural organizations contribute to local economies by attracting tourists, creating jobs, and supporting local businesses. Here too, museums must decide their priorities and not distort their ethics just to deal with the financial uncertainty that often afflicts the cultural sector. By focusing on economic inclusivity, museums can ensure that the benefits of cultural heritage are distributed fairly within communities.

During the SAWA activities in Berlin, several experiences highlighted how these collaborative efforts could strengthen community ties and promote a sense of shared stewardship over cultural heritage. The Friedrichshain/Kreuzberg Museum (FHXB) particularly resonated with this concept. FHXB actively engages locals and serves as a platform for otherwise marginalized voices, enabling these communities to share their stories and practices in contemporary society.



The exhibition at the FHXB in Berlin

(photo from: <https://www.museumportal-berlin.de/en/exhibitions/ferngespraeche>)

One section features the permanent exhibition *Ortsgespräche – Ferngespräche – Ortsgeschichten* (“Local Conversations – Long-Distance Conversations – Local Stories”), where the museum explores various locations within the district, presenting them from the perspective of long-time residents and new Berliners alike. Visitors walk across a city map and, through multimedia devices, discover personal routes of individuals who associate those places with their accounts and memories. Originating from a participatory project with residents, the exhibition aligns with cultural sustainability by bringing the urban stories of migration and arrival in Berlin to light. The resulting mental map weaves together diverse personal experiences, helping Berlin residents and visitors alike to form connections and conceive urban spaces as dynamic, living places.

The experience of Sharjah and its many insights from the UAE are more recent. The Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre exemplifies an institution guided by sustainability as a core principle. Starting with the building, which incorporates architectural designs suited to the heat of the climate and energy efficiency, the center highlights the interplay between environmental and social sustainability through its educational and research initiatives. Today, it also serves as a shelter for sea turtles – a programme that began in collaboration with local fishermen who rescued some of the animals.



*Detail of the Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre
(photo by the author)*

Still in the UAE, one of the activities at the Sharjah Art Museum involved choosing artworks from the exhibition *Parallel Histories* drawn from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation and explaining how they relate to our glossary terms. I selected the tapestry “Wool Yarn Dyeing at the Centre” (2004) created by the weaver Reda Ahmed and the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre in Egypt. This group of weavers has produced tapestry masterpieces since its founding in the 1950s. It is renowned in textile arts for its creative research, intricate detail, and attention to sustainable practices, such as natural dyes.



*The tapestry “Wool Yarn Dyeing at Centre” (2004) by Ramses Wissa Wassef Arts Centre, Reda Ahmed
(photo by Franziska Kabelitz)*

Having been familiar with some of their work, it was a wonderful surprise to finally have the chance to admire one of their pieces in person. The tapestry depicts various stages of wool dyeing in a single scene that forms a large, collective tableau of gestures, skills, and diverse stories represented by the colors of dyes. The weavers illustrated their world, and the tapestry features a creative style, as one of the group’s principles is that no pre-designed patterns may be used. This textile exemplifies how artisans can represent a living world through their craft and express the community in which they live.

Conclusion

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept that transcends environmental impact. It encompasses social inclusion, community-based approaches, and economic choices.

At its heart, sustainability is about setting priorities: determining what truly matters, both on a broad scale and within the unique context of each museum. Through their programmes and decisions, museums can enhance the relevance of cultural expressions, ensuring their safeguarding and flourishing for future generations. In recent years, the cultural sector has encountered several challenges, with society calling on cultural institutions to interact with them and engage with complex social and environmental issues. For this reason, building sustainability in the museum sector involves identifying these core priorities and developing actions to make a meaningful impact in the communities they serve.

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