

Reflecting on the Museum Association’s Learning and Engagement Manifesto

Activism – A case study for the War Childhood Museum (WCM), by Jasminko Halilovic, Founder and Director, WCM

Museums are not neutral. Museum activism should be based on listening, acting and delivering with our communities.

Museum activism is about taking positive action to make the world a better place. Museums are part of the fabric of society and are impacted by and can have an impact on events outside their walls.

Positive action is at the core of the War Childhood Museum (WCM) and the activities it undertakes. Activism has taken various forms and has been present all the way from the Museum’s creation to the present day.

The War Childhood Museum is a platform, a safe space for dialogue about the past; it is a politically neutral institution that transcends ethnonational divides in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, the contribution it makes to the reconciliation process in this still-divided country has been in direct opposition to many of those in power. As a result, at the beginning of the project, the local government in Sarajevo did not want to provide a space for a permanent exhibition. The WCM immediately responded with a broad public campaign aiming to obtain support from the wider community and to put additional pressure on the government to recognize the project. The campaign included activities on social media, a petition signed by well-known artists, and an event organized by the representatives of diplomatic missions in the country. As the campaign increasingly attracted attention, support started coming from unexpected sources and in unexpected ways; for example, fans of a major football club in the country presented a 20-meters long banner that read “We demand the opening of the War Childhood Museum” during the Premier League match.

In its early days, the WCM managed to establish trust and credibility within the community, mostly due to its transparent work and determination to present the past with dignity and integrity. In the moment when it needed support to make the most important step in the life of any museum – the opening of its permanent exhibition – the community stood for the WCM. This was also a prime example of cultural activism: museum professionals and their audiences fighting together for their institution. The public response clearly reflected the wish and need for a museum of this kind, and under such pressure, a space for the permanent exhibition was provided in 2016.



Opening Night, War Childhood Museum

For the most part, the lack of the local government's support for the work of the War Childhood Museum continues to be a reality to this day. Due to the constant need to fight against injustice and unfair treatment, the Museum has repeatedly exposed the lack of transparency on public spending in the field of culture.



Positive action through education is another form of activism that the WCM endeavors. The Museum works with more than 5,000 children and young people annually, aiming to raise awareness about the importance of providing a peaceful world for future generations. With the support of partners and donors, the WCM is able to organize transport for children and youth from schools all over Bosnia and Herzegovina – free of charge – so that they are able to take part in organized visits and workshops. The focus of these activities is on children’s role in building and preserving peace, helping them recognize their individual responsibility in the peacebuilding process. In this way, the Museum stands not only as a place to learn about the past, but also as a place that actively engages in shaping the future.

Everyone at the WCM believes that museums should have an active role in pursuing social change – and this is the reason why activism is at the core of the Museum’s work. As such, the Museum aims to continue strengthening its community and contributing to a more peaceful world, while exposing abuses of power that attempt to hamper citizens' right and ability to do so.