

# Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum: A Template of Good Practices

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Portobelo is a community of Afro-Panamanians in the province of Colón. It has several attractions. Everything speaks to us: the people, the living heritage, the walls of the monumental heritage and the landscape. Including the Caribbean sky, the sea and boundless flora around us. All existing historical buildings and monumental ruins testifies the historical prominence of Portobelo, in its different periods. It includes the history of conquest and colonization, as well as the intense activity that occurred on its streets, walls, alleys and marine or jungle landscapes.

During the colonial period, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and once power was secured, in this community the installation of spaces and fortresses was carried out by enslaved Africans.

These buildings were directed by architects from the Spanish government, for strategic military domain and for boosting the trade from sea and land.

The Royal Customs in Portobelo, formerly a hubbub trading center for the Portobelo fairs, has been since June 2023 the headquarters of the Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum. Currently, history is told and described from different dimensions and rooms with different narratives, with audiovisual and technological resources. The stories now follow a thread from the colony ancestors to reaching the living heritage that built an imaginary of interpretations. The oral narrations and expressions show the rituals from festive celebrations and how the population wholeheartedly embraced devotions from the conquistador.

To understand the importance of establishing the Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum in Portobelo and in the Royal Customs, history gives us clues on the mission from this building. Historian Alfredo Castillero Calvo refers to how silver deposits found in Mexico and Bolivia impacted Panama:

*When the American spaces were organized in this manner and the system of fleets, trade fairs and galleons was created to extract silver from the rich metal deposits and take it to Spain, Panama was in the middle. This wealth crossed the isthmus to concentrate at the Caribbean terminal, where the Portobelo fair was held (Calvo 2015).*

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99 Focal point of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Micultura, Panama.

The Real Accounts or Customs from Portobelo led the registration and administrative control of the arrival of galleons and exchange of goods. It was a warehouse, depository, with offices for trade fairs on its ground floor, and also the governor's residence and lodging for high-ranking authorities on its upper floor. It was a center for distribution of riches and products transported by mules via Royal Road from Portobelo to the heart of Panama through the Chagres rivers, to be sent to the Pacific and from there to Peru and Spain.

The renown of the riches, products, and exchanges of gold and pearls with China and other countries attracted pirates, privateers, and various traders, leading to a decline in the number of fairs held (Castillero Calvo reports that 95 of them were developed).

The traffic and fair-trade destination diminished and Portobelo had a painful action added to its history: But since Panama was a key route for the Spanish empire, the crown did not abandon it, granting it two formidable resources. On one hand, Panama was turned for a decade into the main center for slave distribution in America. On the other hand, it established an annual contribution that Peru was required to send to cover its military and bureaucratic expenses, known as the "wage." (Calvo 2015).

The customs building, in Renaissance style and built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (more precisely in 1630), is one of the last colonial buildings in Portobelo. It is located at and is part of the monumental area of Portobelo. The Fortifications on the Caribbean side of Panamá, Portobelo and San Lorenzo, were declared World Heritage by UNESCO in 1980.

In 2012, 32 years later, the monumental set of the Fortifications was declared in danger. All current projects for restoration and integration to the sustainable development of this area contribute to teach the population about the monumental site, measures and management plans to avoid harm and generate development.

The 2003 Convention establishes among its statements "the deep-seated interdependence that exists between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage." On the other hand, respecting the fundamental values of synergy between heritages was the theme of the 2011 General World Heritage Conference for the State Members to enforce it voluntarily:

*It outlines the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, which moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment and approaches on the entire human environment with all its tangible and intangible qualities. It seeks to increase the sustainability of planning and design interventions by considering the existing built environment, intangible heritage, cultural diversity, socio-economic and environmental factors along with local community values (UNESCO 2011).*

Since the process of establishing the Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum in the Customs building, there are many approaches consistent with its contents. The team that

aligned the museology, coordinated by Anayansi Chihaco from the Museum, with CIHAC and Heritage, analyzed the meaning of the country's new museum, of the Afro-descendant population in general, and of the Afro-Panamanians who live around it.

It was essential to make consultations in all senses: about the location of houses in relation to the monumental area, about the integration of the local workforce in the restoration steps, or about how they wanted to name the museum. On the other hand, the distribution of rooms and the script on how to tell 400 years of history were carefully selected, to give a foundation to those responsible for the museography.

Guillermina Benítez, anthropologist and specialist in Heritage Education, values the careful planning of the work script for the interdisciplinary team from the Ministry of Culture, including consultations to citizens, where the respondents about the intangible cultural heritage of the region expressed how they wanted to see themselves in this museum and what elements should be present. Benítez establishes that, now, the fundamental challenge is the continuity of the museum and the need for teaching programs and permanent promotion strategies.

Architect Eustorgio Márquez, head and supervisor responsible for the Customs/Museum project, wrote on the inauguration program that, for the plan to give this building a functional museum and preserving the values from the building and from the first restoration developed in the 1990s, a second step of construction plans was required. On the walls, both the stone veins from the colonial building and the splendor and texture of coral columns and walls can be appreciated. The external room describes and illustrates on panels the fairs and the history of the Customs and fortifications.

Now, it is a building that narrates, inside and out, the architectural history and steps for restoration of Customs. Aprocosa was the hired company. Achieving success in both endeavors—the restoration and establishment of the museum—incurred a cost of 3.7 million dollars, funded through a loan from the IDB. The maintenance and administrative procedures involve the city of Portobelo and the leadership of the Patronage of Portobelo and San Lorenzo, demonstrating their collaborative efforts with various civil society institutions and organizations.

Once the two narrative rooms were established, the first room's script should talk about the past of uprooting and slavery. One of the most prominent museology approaches was the one coordinated for the script by Marixa Lasso, historian and director of the Historical, Anthropological and Cultural Research Center (CIHAC), with the goal of showing how much the Afro-Panamanians had to navigate in the process of achieving freedom. The historical room integrates the achievements and contributions from slaves in the country's development history. This is narrated by the museography with a large interactive map of the travels from Africa, alternate parts we can touch and turn to obtain information on names, life stories, almost anonymous or unfamiliar heroes, data, figures, fundamental dates.

For Jonathan Hernández, responsible for the museography, the biggest challenges were to “condense 400 years of history without long texts, but with historic accuracy,” and present a concept “that respected the architectural characteristics not to compete with them, but to highlight them.” All of this is included in a curatorial proposal that complies with the laws and conventions on a monument, with community validation and with the integration of local artists in the creation of images and intervention in the furnishings.

His “greatest satisfaction comes from seeing how people use the exhibits, creating convivial spaces where people from different cultures and standpoints can meet to explore, feel proud to be from here, contributing to the education of a country I am fortunate to consider my home.” Challenges and needs: “Panama is a highly unique country with an immensely rich history. More spaces like the ones we have designed for the Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum are needed.”

Room two of the museum goes in the opposite direction – from the relevance of the living heritage to the interpretation of its history through traditional expressions of the intangible cultural heritage. It shows the resilience from descendants of runaway slaves who fought against oppression during the colonial period and describes the power of creativity to celebrate through festive recreation of the conquest of freedom by Congo *nengres* (men). Their dance represents the triumph from *nengres* and *machas* (women) over the devil represented by the slaver.

The room highlights two main themes: cultural practices associated to the strong devotion to the Black Christ of Portobelo, with videos, news, oral tradition and the display of a tunic; and the ritual and festive expressions from the Congo culture, recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO on November 29, 2018.

This room describes the cycles of celebration from the Congo season, its chants, music with strong presence of drums as an instrument and as a rhythm current spread throughout our geography. There are also videos, artistic furnishings, recreations of colors from the ribbons of the Mice or Congo queen crown, drums and seats that are used by visitors who play them; and mortars that remind us of the connection with the earth and products from the traditional cuisine.

For Giselle González Villarrué, minister of Culture: the restoration of the Royal Customs in Portobelo meets the need to safeguard a monumental Panamanian heritage that was in danger of being lost and that is witness to the architectural wealth of a period. Creating this space in this Museum is an act of justice that values the living heritage that safeguards the ancestral memory, and that currently generates new life stories far from the echoes of slavery that made a mark on multiple generations of Afro-descendants.

This is the restored Customs building, the Afro-Panamanian Memory Museum for locals and visitors from all over the world, often illustrated in art by local workers and artists. It is a museum which has its guides and neighbor people receive workshops, assistance, and seed funds for their endeavors. Recently, Portobelo celebrated near the Museum a prototype of fair with popular culture and flavors because its new fairs will be a place for selling joy – never again for trading human beings.

In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 2003 Convention, for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, having a Museum of this nature, and a team who knew how to consider all contexts, with authorities and professionals truly aligned, represents a model of good practices, which documents and processes comprise educational resources for future projects.

## References

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