

10 years

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FORUM:

CHATTING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

With the tenth anniversary of the journal we wanted to take a deep breath and look into the future.

This forum consists of short pieces from colleagues around the world that discuss general and specific issues regarding public archaeology in the coming years. We asked for an open format, trying to grasp a fresher approach than the one usual academic writing permits.

As with other forums in the journal, we will keep it open from now on in case any of you want to participate too. It is a good occasion to debate the current and coming role of public archaeology and we hope this selection of papers helps to foster it.

We originally invited 50 people to participate. However, these difficult times made it difficult for some to do so. Nevertheless, we have a good set of contributions that will be of interest to you all.

Enjoy it (and participate if you feel you have something else to say).



Laugh now,
but one day
we'll be
in charge.

BONESY

FORUM: Chatting about the future of public archaeology

DEALING WITH A HANGOVER OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY: SCATTERED THOUGHTS ON THE ITALIAN 'ARCHEOLOGIA PUBBLICA'

Francesca BENETTI

Public Archaeology is a young discipline, we all know that. It's even younger in Italy, where public archaeology has not even reached 'adulthood'. Cited for the first time by Armando De Guio in 2000 (De Guio and Bressan 2000), it was only a decade later that Public Archaeology started to become 'a thing', thanks to some pioneering experiences at the University of Florence (Bonacchi 2009; Vanini 2011), and especially after a national conference in 2012 (in Florence: see Zuanni 2013 for a summary). Italian archaeologists' first reaction was to overlap the new discipline with the experiences already in place, which in Italy were under the category of 'valorizzazione' (enhancement). They were not exactly the same: while Public Archaeology is characterised by a reflection on the objectives of the research from the very start, a focus on having a reliable methodology, and a strong element linked to evaluation, 'enhancement' experiences – while often valuable and successful – lacked the same structure and reliability. This is probably due to an underestimation of these practices as a scientific topic, thus deserving the same structure required for any other type of research. Often this resulted in a mere description of the activities carried out, with a generic objective like 'increasing the knowledge of archaeology in the public sphere' without really evaluating if the activities worked or not. Public Archaeology became a sort of a trendy subject, outdating the term 'valorizzazione', at least in most of the university milieu, and creating confusion on the subject and the methodology¹.

¹ The data gathered by Lazzerini 2019 broadly confirm this sentence. The frequency of Google alerts related to the words 'Archeologia Pubblica' (Public Archaeology) in Italy sharply increased in 2016. L. Lazzerini also carried out a survey targeted to university professors and most of the respondents declared they carried out public archaeology activities (largely related to communication), but very few carried out some study of the public they were talking to.

This sometimes has led to a sort of 'hangover' effect, similar to what happens with summer songs: they sound fun when you first hear them, but after months you just want to move on! Few doctoral theses awarded in Archaeology have been devoted to topics related to Public Archaeology up to the present date and the risk is that after this 'hangover' the subject will be penalised in comparison to others.

On a positive side, Italian Public Archaeology moved in several different directions. Thinking of the Italian context, in 2009 Chiara Bonacchi suggested that museums could have become the suitable environment for Public Archaeology (Bonacchi 2009: 343). Eleven years later, we can see that Public Archaeology developed in different strands, of these museums is one (e.g. Nizzo 2017), but not the only, thanks to the activity of several stakeholders, in particular the universities: participation of local communities in archaeological research from a social, legislative and theoretical point of view (Brogiolo and Chavarría Arnau 2019; Chavarría Arnau 2018; Volpe 2016; 2020); public archaeology on fieldworks (Ripanti 2017; 2020); tourism (Innocenti 2018); archaeology in the digital sphere (Bonacini 2012; 2016; Dal Maso 2018); education (Morandini et al. 2018 and an ongoing doctoral thesis by Sonia Schivo at the University of Padova); open air museums and reenactment practices (Valenti 2016; 2018); crowdsourcing (Sanna Montanelli 2018); political use of archaeology (Corolla 2019; Pinna 2019); administrative and legislative management of archaeology (Benetti 2020; Manacorda 2020; Sgarlata 2016).

2020 has been a challenging year: all the cultural activities suffered for the pandemic, and the wave of consequences will affect the sector for years to come. Where to go from here? What next? I do not have a crystal ball, but here's a preliminary list some practical ideas that could form a sort of agenda for the practice of public archaeology in Italy.

From the perspective of public archaeology, during the pandemic it became evident that heritage is about people. The need to reach people resulted in an increased digital engagement from museums, local societies, archaeological sites, private companies. It will be important not to lose sight on this emphasis on people rather than 'things' and use it as a driver of our actions. Hopefully, this could help embedding public archaeology practices and methodologies in 'everyday archaeology' and avoiding the bad habit of

using community involvement and public participation in a tokenistic way (e.g. to receive funds). To overcome this, it would be good practice from funding bodies to consistently ask for monitoring and evaluation frameworks, in order to verify if, how and in what measure the funded bodies deliver what they promised in their bids (on this topic see also Ripanti 2020).

The universities were drivers for research and actions in public archaeology in the past decade, together some volunteering societies (such as 'Archeostorie'). In the next ten years we could see a continuation of this expansion of public archaeology outside universities, especially if a specific legislation on 'Cultural and creative industries' with fiscal benefits will be developed (it has been discussed for a while now, it is time to seriously lobby for it!). It would be positive to embed public archaeology practices also in commercial archaeology, for example by introducing the position of 'engagement officer' and by training the civil servants of the Soprintendenze.

Embedding the principles of public archaeology in everyday practices would be in line with the recent ratification of the so called 'Faro convention' in Italy, which had a difficult journey in Parliament. The Convention was in fact contested and vetoed for quite a long time by some of the right parties for concerns related to the danger of 'flattening' western culture to flatter other cultures such as the Islamic one (!). Against the raising populism, it is urgent to develop more inclusive practices in heritage management². This may require some legislative and administrative changes (see Benetti 2020 for an in depth analysis), together with increased coordination and trust between the different stakeholders. Obviously, legislative amendments will take time and huge negotiations, but Italian archaeological heritage legislation largely dates back to the beginning of last century and the world has changed immensely. We, as society, are changed immensely, thanks for example to technological changes, cheap travels, increased social diversity, gender equality movement, just to name a few elements, and the notion of heritage itself changed. The legislation, the administrative structures, and our practices have to be responsive and driven by strong ethical principles (and a thoughtful reflection on ethics is still awaited in Italy).

² Some great experiences have already been carried out, such as the project 'Accogliere ad Arte' in Naples (Consiglio and Riitano 2015).

Covid19 hit the sector hard. It may be an opportunity to be a bit reflexive, identify structural challenges and propose a strategic shift in the sector. We should not aim to have things to be 'back to normal', as they were before the pandemic. We should aim to improve practices, commit to evaluate and deliver what we promise, analyse our failures and share them without shame, to grow by learning from our mistakes. To do so, more coordination and sharing are needed even between practitioners, especially for the young generation of researchers, which has been specifically trained in Public Archaeology. We are working on this: the first conference for young public archaeologists will be held in 2021, with the aim of building a network for the future of the discipline.

Full steam ahead then – the destination is far away, but we have a roadmap.

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