

**PSYCHIATRY WITHOUT WALLS: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY  
OF PSYCHIATRY IN REGGIO EMILIA (ITALY)**

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“The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is”.

Marcel Proust

*(Remembrance of Things Past, The captive, vol. 5, 1923)*

Since 2012 the Museum of the History of Psychiatry is working in Reggio Emilia, Italy. It is hosted in one of the buildings of the former psychiatric hospital San Lazzaro. Therefore we will start with a brief introduction about its past (1).

Reggio Emilia is a city in the north of Italy with 173.540 inhabitants living in the city, and 536.618 in the district. It was established by Romans and grew up during the Middle Age. During the leprosy and plague epidemics in those times, it was built a hospital in the east area of the town for all contagious patients in order to be segregated: it was named "San Lazzaro", being Lazarus the saint protector against the plague. During the Renaissance, when plague vanished, the hospital was dedicated to host poor people, homeless and also

persons with mental problems, without any project of care. Then it was called "*ospizio di mendicITÀ*", which we may translate from the Renaissance Italian language as "shelter for people without money". Only in 1821, after Pinel, Chiarugi and their revolution about the treatment of psychiatric patients, Francesco IV, Duke of Este, lord of Reggio Emilia, nominated for the first time a medical doctor, Antonio Galloni, as main director, with the task of organizing a modern psychiatric hospital. In the following decades, the hospital grew up and become famous throughout Europe; at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, San Lazzaro was mainly composed by around 20 buildings, with about new 2000 patients hospitalized every year. In 1978 all psychiatric hospitals were closed by law in Italy and replaced by Community Psychiatric Services. So, San Lazzaro also closed as asylum, leaving several traces related to its long history.

The Museum of the History of Psychiatry was proposed by director Carlo Livi in 1875 in agreement with the doctrine of positivism. It was considered important that the museum be opened to the community, show the progresses made by alienists and mark the difference between him and his predecessors. The Museum grew up and increased for several decades by the directors who succeeded Livi. It was hosted in two rooms located in the hospital's library.

Then, in 2012 we curated a new exhibit for the Museum (2), actually hosted in one of the buildings of the former hospital; being the pavilion for patients who committed crimes, it was enclosed by a tall wall, that was destroyed in the '70s: during the restoration they built a mesh wall to recall the boundary of the original one. In three rooms at the ground floor (formerly used as dining and recreation rooms) you can see a map of the hospital and find some object used in the everyday life. In the twelve cells, where inmates spent the nights, there is the exhibition of restraining objects, instrument for water therapy, skulls and bones from the anthropological collection, electroshock machines, working tools and so on. As you can imagine, these materials and the cells themselves really shock the audience, and they really need an accurate operation of mediation to avoid possible misunderstandings (3). At the first floor, we have a congress room, the space for educational lab and two repositories: one for scientific instruments and one for paintings and potteries made by patients.

Today the Museum is part of the City network of museums (who collaborates with the Department of Mental Health) that includes art and archeology collections, monumental churches, natural history repertories, local museums and spaces for temporary exhibitions. The management of the city

museums, although not neglecting its research mission, have been working for years searching new strategies to promote knowledge and learning, especially looking for new links with our lives (4). The education department promotes the image of museum as a fascinating and emotional place, where all visitors are welcome. They are free to express feelings and emotions and to elaborate the objects exhibited in connection with their own stories and lives. These new strategies are projected according to literature evidences and analysis about audience development, in order to improve the quality of the guided tours, and the experience of the museums, but also to promote social values and support creativity (5, 6). Moreover, Reggio Emilia has always been open to innovative projects about education and social cohesion according to the idea that differences and also weaknesses are not a loss, but a gain for the community in its entirety (7).

Based on our professional and social expertise, we accepted the difficult challenges offered by this museum: speaking about history and present of madness is never easy, especially in a country that closed its psychiatric hospitals 40 years ago. It was immediately clear for us that we should accompany the visit of the public with a guided tour that was not only a sequence of dates, names and so on. To reach this purpose we have chosen different strategies for different kind of public (8).

The Museum is open for the audience every Saturday afternoon and admission is free. In opening those opening days, it is visited by a general audience, especially adult people, without specific knowledge of the material. We have developed for this kind of public a theatrical model of visit. Some texts from the inmates' case files are declaimed by actors during the guided tour, in order to create a more compassionate experience for the public. Please note that the actors are patients followed by the Community Psychiatric Services: acting is part of their psychiatric rehabilitation program and they are paid for this acting work. This is the result of the collaboration between City museums and Department of Mental Health and it is also a great occasion to fight stigma.

In addition we planned a special program for students, differentiated depending on their age. High school students can also, after the guided tour, meet mediators -"*facilitatori*"-: people with experience about mental illness, who explain their own histories and speak about illness, recovery, everyday life, structures for psychiatric help.

In 2017 we also started an education project for primary school (6-10 years old) students that focused on difference as value, taking care and promoting inclusion. Through different ways of expression (drawing, storytelling, body language), the lab aspires to put children in contact with problematic themes, in a personal and emotional way. The central moment of this activity is the knocking down of a wall (made with rehabilitation cubes), which is a metaphor of the wall that divided the hospital and the city in the past. So we try to tell the story of this place, in order promote with children the idea of an including city. We received some suggestions and we applied for a grant "*Reggio Emilia città senza barriere*", a public organisation who works to realize a city without walls, both physical (e.g., accessible to everyone, also for people with motor disabilities) and mental (e.g. without stigma against anyone).

In the past years, we staged musical and theatrical performances with professors particularly interested in the history of psychiatry. After studying the origin and meaning of madness in literature, history and arts, students wrote the canvas of the performance, produced specifically for the spaces of the museums: e.g. setting to music some poems about madness, following the suggestion of the paintings by the inmates on the cell walls. Results over the last years are really promising: the number of students visiting the museum is increasing ever more. About a half of them came from Reggio Emilia (city and district), but many came also from far away.

Moreover, the museum hosts conferences and meetings open to everyone and special events in collaboration with public and private organizations. The aim is always to promote social cohesion with the district by taking advantage of special commemorative dates. For instance, in 2017 we organized a special visit to the museum and the archive with the LGBT association of Reggio Emilia, for the Transgender Day of Remembrance, telling stories of patients hospitalized because of their sexual behaviour (8). Furthermore, we also organize trainings for professionals in mental health services devoted to connect past and present and showing psychiatrists the history of their topic.

In summary the museum speaks about us and our lives: our assignment as professionals is finding ways to meet different audiences by resorting to a combination of objects and spaces and the opportunity to listen to different stories. Our goal is to magically transform museums in a place of encounter, by promote meetings, debates and exchanges, in a net of random and fortuitous connections that advance knowledge and facilitate learning.

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