



NEMO Museum Conference 2023 Report

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1.1 Context: NEMO, the Network of European Museums

KIK-IRPA joined the Network of European Museum Organizations in 2021 (with a brief hiatus in 2022). In February 2023, the Sustainability Unit assumed leadership of NEMO's working group on Sustainability and Climate Action! (SAC!) during its launch at KIK-IRPA in Brussels. Our primary objectives encompass identifying and implementing measures to elevate our institutions to a higher level of sustainability, promoting innovative and effective solutions for emerging challenges in the museum sector, and serving as a crucial link between museums and European policies on sustainability matters. The working group is experiencing rapid growth, with 30 partner institutions actively participating, coming from all Europe.

This report summarizes the key take away from the NEMO Museum Conference, which took place in Lahti from November 19-22, 2023. Under the titles "critical reflection", we push further the reflection and open discussion on how concretely, the museum field could and should act regarding the climate crisis.

1.2 Day 1

Keynote speech and Panel: Part of the solution

This session explores the different spheres of impact museums have in order to raise awareness and engage with the public by transforming into sustainable institutions.

The NEMO Museum Conference 2023 in Lahti commenced with a keynote address by **Kirsten Dunlop** from Climate KIC Europe. Dunlop highlighted the urgent need for a fundamental shift in our approach to urban living, acknowledging the imminent challenges stemming from global warming and mass migration, intricately linked to a rise in stress and conflicts. This underscores the critical importance of developing strategies for disaster risk preparedness. She championed a departure from conventional thinking and called for a renewed emphasis on creativity within our sector. She mentioned a festival in Sydney that celebrates "dangerous ideas," providing a platform where difficult subjects like mourning and anger can be explored and transformed. In conclusion, Dunlop advocates for an integrated approach to global challenges from local to upper local levels. She demands, as for **Julie Decker** (USA) from the Anchorage Museum Alaska, a re-evaluation of the conceptualization of urban living and an increase of local collaboration. As outlined below, we posit that the incorporation of urbanism tools and the

implementation of people assemblies could effectively assist museums in initiating their endeavors to foster synergies within their local context.

Critical Reflection: Tools for Urbanistic Approach and People Assemblies

We posit that our field could benefit from tools developed by experts in architecture and urbanism to facilitate synergies. A noteworthy example is the Memento tool for sustainable neighborhoods ("Memento pour des Quartiers Durables"), crafted by Brussels Environment in 2012. This resource provides analytical tools for assessing the sustainability of neighborhood projects. Originally designed for developers and architects, this contextual guide rejects a one-size-fits-all approach, emphasizing adaptable practices tailored to each community. Structured around ecological, social, and economic pillars, it employs a two-tiered inquiry comprising nine fundamental questions and fifty detailed ones, enriched with case studies and best practices. From our perspective, the "Memento" could serve as a valuable resource for museums, aiding in the identification of connections with local neighborhoods and fostering synergies for sustainable integration, all without attempting to reshape the community. Additionally, the organization of people assemblies and citizen workshops (discussed later) are a means to both broaden the audience and glean valuable insights. We believe that, put together, those tools can help us develop the methodology on Citizen assembly, as for the European sustainability training (see section "and... ACTION!").

Panel II: Part of the problem

This session evaluates how museums as role models only remain relevant and trustworthy if they lead by good example and take responsibility for their own contribution to climate change.

Stefan Simon brought attention to the increasing energy costs linked to extended system lifespans, particularly in the context of HVAC systems claiming to be sustainable. In his presentation, *Be honest objects survived centuries in unstable environments*, **Lukasz Bratasz** challenged the conventional belief that climate control is the primary defense against damage, highlighting the durability of objects in unstable climate conditions. He outlined the methodology from *ASHRAE Chapter 24: Museums, Galleries, Archives, and Libraries*¹, suggesting key steps for changing indoor climate management by addressing fundamental questions: What do we want? What do we know? What can we do? Bratasz provided energy consumption figures for HVAC systems, emphasizing that a significant portion of the energy consumption of a museum (95%) is dedicated to temperature and humidity control. Bratasz debunked the misconception of mechanical damage, citing historical objects surviving in uncontrolled climates since the installation of HVAC systems around 1950/60. He referenced observations on the Lady with Ermine (Leonardo da Vinci) during World War II, demonstrating no crack development through laser technology analysis. The study of 370 decorated oak panels showed no new damage under ASHRAE D. He highlighted the UK Claims annual report, revealing transport as the

¹ American Society of Heating Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers. "Chapter 24: Museums, Galleries, Archives, and Libraries." In *ASHRAE Handbook: HVAC Applications*, 2019.

primary cause of damage, and that degradation due to climate conditions are not even mentioned. Bratasz argued that institutional climate stabilization has a low cost-effectiveness compared to addressing other risks, suggesting redirected funds for preservation purposes. He pinpointed gaps, including the lack of cost calculations for maintaining various types of ASHRAE climate control. These observations offer compelling arguments to advocate for change or, alternatively, to refrain from striving for a higher ASHRAE class unless essential for the preservation needs of the collections. Finally, he underscored the absence of a Life Cycle Sustainability Assessment tailored for museums.

Conversations with **Ann Deckers** from FOMU Antwerp shed light on the practical considerations in storing photographic collections, contemplating temperature variations between 5°C and 10°C due to associated cost implications. Additionally, the potential impact of extreme climate events on system operation and consumption costs adds another layer of complexity to the decision-making process. These considerations emphasize the importance of not only acknowledging challenges but also actively seeking transparent and realistic solutions within the broader community of heritage caretakers.

Critical Reflection:

As we align our project **Climate2Preserv** with the arguments presented by Bratasz, it becomes evident that the discussions surrounding indoor climate management remain highly sensitive for those responsible for heritage care. Interestingly, it appears that the reflections on these matters are driven more by emotional considerations than a truly critical examination. Consider, for instance, the challenges faced by one of Belgium's largest museums. The institution grappled with substantial HVAC system failures, leading to a severe and prolonged decrease in relative humidity levels that caused damage to wooden panel collections. Since then, conservators at the institution are now implementing stringent measures for indoor climate control, steadfastly resisting even a seasonal change of 1°C during the warmest months (although only relative humidity affects mechanical damage in organic collections). It is worth highlighting that there has been a notable absence of retrospective analysis pinpointing the specific conditions that precipitated the damages and the root causes behind them.

In a broader context, some museums are also apprehensive about the feasibility of external loans due to stringent indoor climate conditions imposed by certain institutions. Interestingly, these conditions may not even be met within the lending institutions themselves. This highlights a need for increased transparency across the board, transparency that is called for from the preventive conservation sector since 1994!² KIK-IRPA, in particular, should set an exemplary standard by leading the

² Ashley-Smith, J. 1994. Let's be Honest. Talk presented at the IIC conference, "Preventive Conservation: Practice, Theory and Research". Ottawa. Available online at: <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/byauth/ashley-smith/honest.html> (accessed on November 28, 2023).

way in transparently addressing the challenges and lessons learned from such experiences.

Workshop: Step into Action: Create your Sustainability Action Plan in an hour

I participated in a workshop led by **Lorraine Finch**, which provided a structured approach for formulating sustainability policies and action plans within museums. The process involved using post-it notes and blank sheets of paper. In groups of six participants, the initial step was to collectively brainstorm and list all aspects related to sustainability and their respective institutions. Subsequently, each group shared their ideas using the post-it notes. A silent brainstorming session followed, and participants then organized the post-it notes on paper, creating distinct categories. Members of the group voted on ideas, and those with the most votes were selected and prioritized based on the urgency of implementation: short, medium, and long-term actions. Finally, priorities were established, and responsible individuals for each action were identified, drawing inspiration from the MLA guidelines for developing an action plan. To enhance the effectiveness of this process, the following ten tips were adhered to:

1. Clearly outline your aims and identify problems.
2. Assemble a dedicated team.
3. Allocate specific roles within the team.
4. Evaluate previous efforts toward achieving your aims.
5. Compile a comprehensive list of potential actions.
6. Transform your list of aims into a coherent action plan.
7. Establish realistic priorities.
8. Define realistic and achievable goals.
9. Set practical timescales for implementation.
10. Implement a regular review process to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments.

We are of the opinion that this methodology could be applied at KIK-IRPA to formulate our internal sustainability action plan. Additionally, we see potential for the Sustainability Unit to utilize this approach in offering tools to Belgian museums for the development of their respective action plans through consultancy services.

1.3 Day 2

Museum director interview

Claudia Casali (Director of the International Museum of Ceramics) shared insights from Italy, where more than 200 cultural sites were affected by flooding in 2023. The institutions lacked emergency plans specifically addressing flooding. While the authorities' early warning system proved effective, the majority of heritage institutions failed to implement preventive measures to safeguard their collections. The specific reasons for this lack of action still need to be identified and defined. The influx of volunteers from various regions raised the challenge of coordination. Conservation students from Ravenna and Bologna were engaged in cleaning efforts, but a significant issue arose during the drying process of the mud, which tended to harden like cement. The absence of a well-defined strategy highlighted the need for proactive measures,

emphasizing the significance of specialized training for volunteers. The lessons learned from Italy's experiences will be incorporated into the state-of-the-art strategies for disaster preparedness and response in Belgium. Despite Italy having an existing regional/national policy for protecting heritage in crisis situations, they encountered similar challenges faced by Belgium during the 2021 floods, such as a lack of coordination, difficulties in obtaining a comprehensive overview of impacts and needs, and a shortage of methodologies for cleaning up artworks.

Session I: Taking action on climate

This session explores the scale from activism to taking action, by analysing the different positions and perspectives of museum representatives and (climate) activists. What can museums do to sum up power for climate?

The panel on activism and climate action featured perspectives from XR Belgium (**Rebekka Eschauzier**), Museums for Future in Turkey (**Emek Yilmaz-Sancar**), and the Dutch Museum Association (**Vera Carasso**). The discussion underscored the role of museums in climate activism, recognizing the necessity of a redefined role for cultural institutions in societal well-being.

Rebekka emphasized that activists view themselves as alarms, which, while uncomfortable, serve as a call to action. She offered apologies for actions taken by colleagues that involved attacking museums, acknowledging the stress caused to the museum sector. Despite this, she supports the implementation of using precious artworks as tools for change, using museums as canvases. She expressed grief and anger over a system that she believes is detrimental to the planet and a few individuals, yet she maintains hope, providing the energy to take action. As museum professionals, activists see themselves as caretakers of vulnerable and valuable items.

Critical reflections:

While XR Belgium has presently shown a willingness to collaborate, a significant portion of the museum sector remains unsettled by the actions carried out by activists within museums. This sector consistently operates with limited resources, and if such actions were to multiply, they could exert additional pressure on institutions. A critical question arises too about the effectiveness of these activist actions in promoting their cause or diminishing it in the eyes of the general public. In Belgium however, and as mentioned by Rebekka, XR is already in dialogue with some museums, although the discussions are challenging and trust is sometimes lacking. The collaboration with SMAK in Ghent was unexpectedly terminated after an action on the ring, despite a previous agreement for organizing activities and art creation in a designated room³.

³ Lakiere, F. 2023. 'Klimaatactievoerders van Extinction Rebellion ketenen zich vast op Gentse ring, politie pakt 14 deelnemers op'. Het Nieuwsblad. Available online at: https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20230923_93829026 (accessed on November 24, 2023).

Voices from the audience have emphasized that collaborations with activist organizations, when considered relevant, can contribute to amplifying the societal role of museums and counteracting the criminalization of activism. Recent incidents in other countries, such as the attempt to dissolve the citizen activist movement *Soulèvement de la terre* in France⁴ and the German police raids on climate campaigners in seven states⁵, have sparked concerns regarding the authoritarian measures states employ against these activist groups, impacting a fundamental right: freedom of association. The UK has also witnessed climate activists being sentenced to prison for targeting art pieces⁶. While art should be protected from acts of vandalism, there is a need for an appropriate and well-balanced response. As professionals in the heritage field, despite the potentially shocking nature of these actions, shouldn't our responsibility lie in elucidation rather than condemnation? It's essential to foster dialogue and avoid contributing to the polarization that can fuel extremism. Jointly organizing collaborative activities, such as citizen assemblies in museums, could serve as a constructive way to address these concerns.

Museum Slam on Stories of Action

Six museum professionals present their small and big steps of climate action in museums.

Presentations from small-scale museums underscored their capacity for change, attributing it to their adaptability and close connections with local communities. The significance of inclusivity and dialogue emerged as pivotal elements, with examples from Belgian and Norwegian museums underscoring the importance of appreciating diverse perspectives. As **An Lavens**, the director of BELvue museum, aptly expressed, “Polarization should be avoided. We will encounter failures at times, but we shouldn't halt our efforts!” **Ilenia Valerio**, from the Museum of Natural History, shared a compelling case study wherein they facilitate climate dialogues with teenagers in the museum. The process involves active listening, perspective-shifting, non-judgmental interactions, and a commitment to inclusivity. Valerio emphasized key principles such as listening to understand, engaging in

⁴ “A measure of dissolution seriously infringes upon the freedom of association, a fundamental principle recognized by the laws of the Republic. It can only be implemented to prevent serious disturbances to public order,” declared the high administrative court. Ouest-France. 2023. La dissolution des Soulèvements de la Terre annulée par le Conseil d'État. Ouest-France. Available online at: <https://www.ouest-france.fr/environnement/ecologie/la-dissolution-des-soulevement-de-la-terre-annulee-par-le-conseil-detat-f6616e82-7f01-11ee-b253-15639905f92e> (accessed on November 28, 2023).

⁵ “German police have carried out raids in seven states in a probe into climate campaigners suspected of forming or backing a criminal group because of their controversial activities”. McGuinness, D. Kirby, P. 2023. German police raid climate activists who blocked traffic. London: BBC News. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65693412> (accessed on November 28, 2023).

⁶ “The public prosecutor had asked for four months of which two suspended, but the judge said she did not want her sentence to discourage other people to demonstrate.” Reuters. 2022. Climate activists who targeted 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' sentenced to prison. Reuters. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/climate-activists-who-targeted-girl-with-pearl-earring-sentenced-prison-2022-11-02/> (accessed on November 28, 2023).

dialogue rather than debate, asking about preferences and feelings, adopting a neutral stance, and creating a safe space for open discussions.

Workshop Amplifying democracy: Museums as catalysts for fostering dialogue
 Organized by NEMO Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action. With **Alenka Černelič Krošelj** (Slovenian Museums Association), **Rebekka Eschauzier** (XR Belgium), **Alan Miller** (University of St Andrews), **Gina O’Kelly** (Irish Museums Association) and Working Group leader **Estelle De Bruyn** (KIK-IRPA).

In our rapidly changing society, many individuals and communities feel unheard and democratic systems appear inadequate in representing their interests. Trust is a cornerstone of building a new society, and museums offer crucial spaces for fostering dialogue, democratic engagement, and collaborative actions. The SAC! Workshop on Citizen Assemblies delved into the role of museums in amplifying these under-represented voices in a democratic and equitable way. Through a co-creative workshop uniting heritage professionals, activist organisations, and universities, we defined objectives and underscore museums' proactive role in driving societal change and the sustainable transformation. The workshop featured guest facilitators, leading hands-on activities based on fictional scenarios, aiming to yield tangible outcomes. Participants participated in developing a methodology for organising people’s assemblies in collaboration with local stakeholders. Discussions during the workshop delved into the potential for museums to position themselves as powerful advocates for sustainability and democratic values, inviting collaboration and feedback from participants. Employing a co-creation approach with participants, key steps have been outlined, laying the groundwork for further development.

The emphasis on people's assemblies in the workshop underscores the urgent need for implementing methodologies for democratic dialogue within museums. This workshop seeks to assure both parties that collaborations are not only feasible but also beneficial. A well-defined methodology offers reassurance by providing clear steps, warnings, and tips, ensuring that everyone involved shares a common understanding of wishes and expectations. At the end, a call to action was directed at the participants: don't wait. Implement something now with willing partners and provide feedback. There is expressed interest from the KBR museum in organizing a citizen assembly.

Conclusions by David Vuillaume

David Vuillaume (NEMO’s Board president) summarized key themes from the conference, highlighting growth, crisis management, and activism as central topics.

1. **Growth:** The ability of museums to evoke emotions, empathy, and shared experiences was acknowledged as a powerful tool. However, the challenge lies in reaching a larger audience quantitatively, considering that only six out of ten people visit museums in Europe. There is a call to rethink the concept of economic growth and explore ways to enhance accessibility.
2. **Crisis Management:** Museums were identified as having the potential to assist people in navigating crises. They can provide well-being, inclusiveness, and art that prompts reevaluation. Making change desirable was emphasized, encouraging

museums to offer perspectives on possible futures. While recognizing the gravity of climate-related problems, there are diverse approaches to addressing these challenges.

3. **Activism:** Climate action was framed as a political endeavor contributing to a healthy democracy. Museums were urged to adopt activist roles without necessarily being extremely radical. Expressing climate traumas was deemed acceptable, but destructive actions, such as attacking artworks, were not. Museums were positioned as guides in rebuilding connections between culture and nature, sciences, and humanity. The potential for museums to enable people to develop and express creativity was highlighted as both short and long-term actions.

The report concluded with announcements of NEMO's initiatives, including a new study on museums, climate, and policy, focusing on sustainable action and political engagement (see pp. 5-6 for Belgium)⁷. The NEMO mapping of Climate Action in Museums, a collection of examples showcasing museums taking action on the climate crisis, was introduced⁸. Museums are encouraged to contribute using the provided Google form. The KIK-IRPA project “Climate2Preserv” is already pinned. Finally, the NEMO Statement on sustainability, reflecting the commitment of the museum sector to environmental sustainability, was shared:

Our ethical and professional priority is to work with our communities for the future sustainability of the planet. Museums have a critical role to play in environmental sustainability and imagining our possible futures. Our commitment is that we will use our diverse collections and the stories that they hold to inspire people and facilitate change. We realise that it is no longer possible to preserve all heritage and collections in their current conditions. We are committed to re-evaluating our collections in terms of their social, historical, environmental, and educational impact.

The directors voiced a commitment to collaborate with communities to ensure the future sustainability of the planet. They advocated for a radical shift, recognizing the imperative to re-evaluate the heritage we preserve and explore innovative ways to utilize it.

Critical Reflexion:

A recent publication from the Belgian Climate Center addresses the critical inquiry of how to effectively organize and institutionalize the just transition in Belgium, exploring the what, why, and how of this pivotal shift⁹. The report advocates for

⁷ NEMO. 2023. ‘Museums, Climate and Politics. Taking political action in the sustainable transition. Berlin: Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO). Available online at: https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/Publications/NEMO_Report_Museums_Climate_and_Politics_11_2023.pdf (accessed on November 24, 2023).

⁸ NEMO. 2023. ‘NEMO mapping of Climate Action in Museums’. Berlin: Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO). Available online at : https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1hXgKYwS9OY_tifSmvdzRs3NK_oDLbo&ll=54.82547248130889%2C14.663553450000004&z=4 (accessed on November 24, 2023).

⁹ Fransolet, A. & Vanhille, J. 2023. Just Transition in Belgium: Concepts, Issues at Stake, and

the establishment of a 'social-ecological state,' underlining the intricate connections between ecological and social challenges. It underscores the indispensable role of strengthening democracy in the just transition process, calling for the reinforcement of social dialogue, support for marginalized groups, and the enhancement of fair participation.

Central to the report is the concept of a 'just transition' framed as an opportunity to foster social justice and well-being, guided by the principles of social-ecological justice. A paradigm shift is emphasized, echoing sentiments expressed during the conference that we must transcend mere harm reduction and instead reinvent existing systems. The report provocatively questions whether the impetus for change should originate from political entities, traditionally entrusted with defining strategy within our democratic system. There is a growing skepticism about the efficacy of the current system in enabling transformative change and ensuring widespread recognition.

Some politicians are already taking innovative steps, organizing citizen assemblies to collaboratively develop strategies on climate change, as exemplified by initiatives in France, Brussels¹⁰, Ireland (first one), Iceland, and the United Kingdom. There is a palpable desire to harness the creativity of the public and establish a shared common goal. However, a crucial challenge lies in the implementation of the identified measures proposed by citizens. This narrative aligns with the notion that authentic leadership emerges from communities collectively shaping narratives and advocating for change. The involvement of citizens in decision-making processes is seen as pivotal, potentially influencing decisions if their voices are vocal enough. Here, museums, viewed as safe and respected havens, emerge as potential transformative agents in the just transition.

In summary, museums can play a pivotal role in fostering democratic engagement, enhancing societal understanding, and catalyzing systemic change.

Policy Levers. Scientific report on behalf of the High Committee for a Just Transition, Brussels: November 2023. Available online at: <https://www.climatecentre.be/post/scientific-report-for-a-just-transition-in-belgium> (accessed on November 24, 2023).

¹⁰ Missions Publiques. s.d. L'assemblée citoyenne pour le climat de Bruxelles. s.l. Available online at: <https://missionspubliques.org/pf/lassemblee-citoyenne-pour-le-climat-de-bruxelles/> (accessed on November 28, 2023).

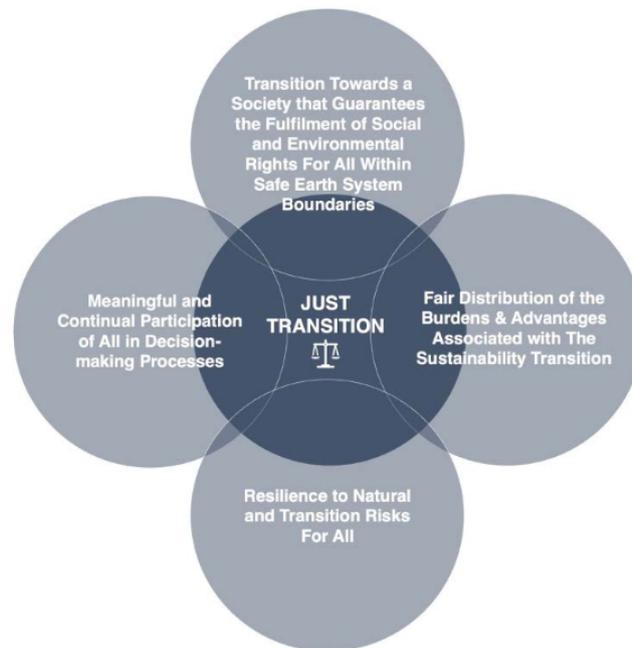


Figure 1: The four dimensions of just transition (Fransolet, A. & Vanhille, J. 2023)

NEMO Annual General Meeting

In looking ahead, NEMO has outlined its annual priorities for 2023-2025, placing a central focus on sustainable transition, and especially social relevance, for the upcoming year. The plan extends into subsequent years, highlighting social values such as well-being, inclusion, equity, diversity, and sustainable communities. NEMO's 2024 European Museum Conference, set to take place in Romania, will delve into the theme of inclusion, with a particular emphasis on the LGBTQ+ community.

Acknowledging budget challenges, the organization is exploring additional funding sources, leading to the decision to raise member fees, a move approved by the Assembly. The meeting concluded with the election of new board candidates, **Vera Carasso** from the Dutch Museums Association (NL) and **Paulina Florjanowicz** from the Polish National Institute for Museums (PL).

During the Members' Forum, I moderated discussions on sustainability. Participants expressed interest in addressing new themes, including sustainable design, exhibitions, and procurement. There was a request for a system to track the actions implemented in museums after the conference, given the overarching theme of "action." Many participants were enthusiastic about implementing changes upon returning home. Establishing such a system could facilitate mutual inspiration, motivation for continuous improvement, and the exchange of tips. The WG SAC! could play a role in facilitating the exchange of these ideas and monitoring respective improvements, while the NEMO mapping could serve as a reference. Additionally, NEMO could invite lecturers from various fields to inspire a multidimensional and intersectional approach to issues like the climate crisis, reinforcing the notion that we are not alone in these endeavors.