

Berlin, November 2025

# From Custodians of Heritage to Arenas of Civic Discourse

*How Museums Can Foster Dialogue on Climate Change and Societal Challenges*

*Giulia Valentina Paglia*

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Diversity and Discourse: Engaging Museum Visitors in the 21st Century

4th international conference of the Leibniz Centre of Excellence for Museum Education

# Relevance of the study

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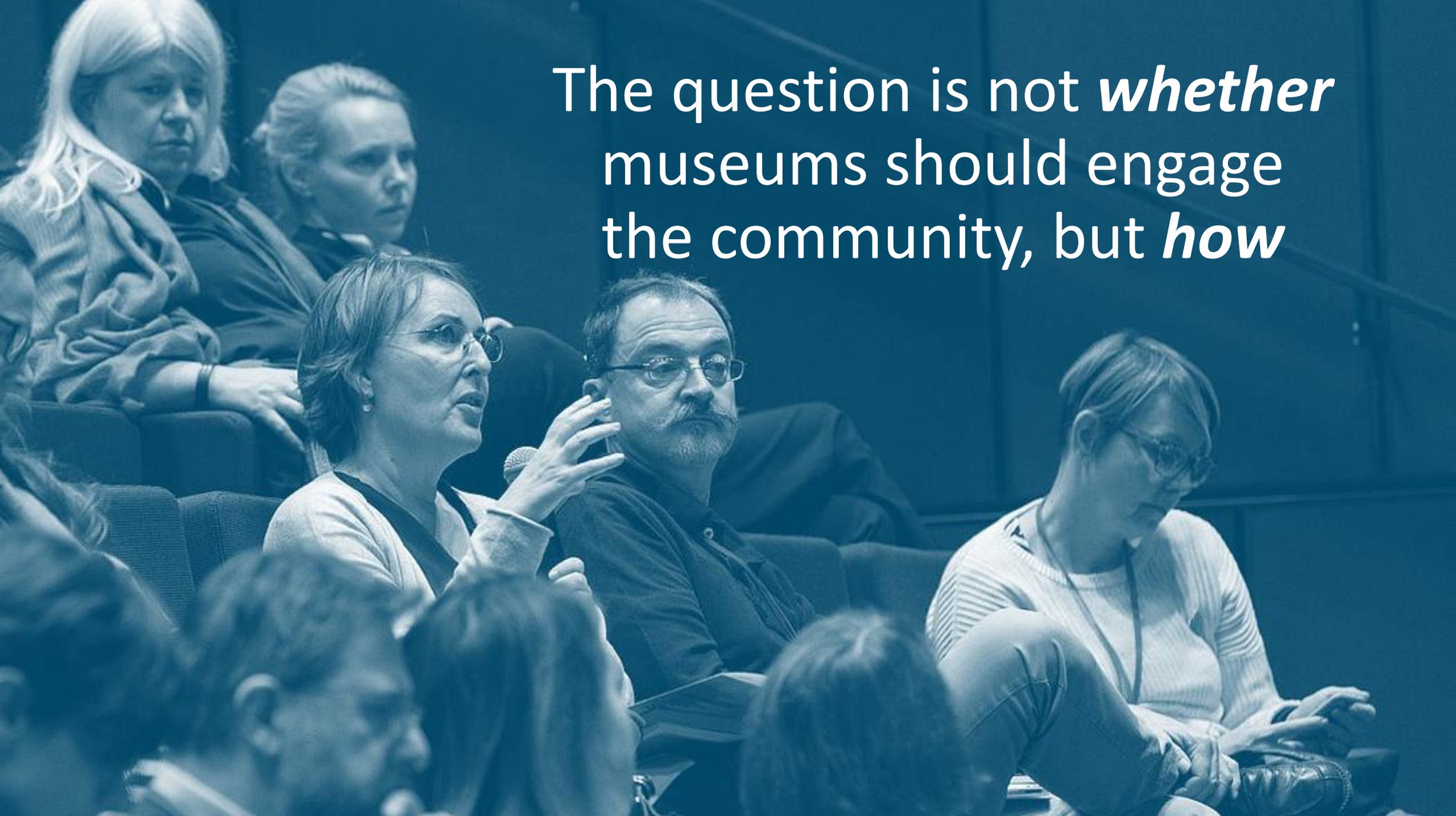
Museums today are among the **most trusted public institutions**

2

Reports show **museums are more trusted than media or government**, acting as "community living rooms" for collective uncertainty

*"Activists come because they believe museums help us imagine new images of what the world could be like"*

*L. Santos, Curator, Researcher and Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa*



The question is not *whether* museums should engage the community, but *how*

# Research approach: building the study

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## Literature Review

Museums as civic spaces, participatory practices, and climate action guidelines (NEMO, ICOM).



## Good Practices Analysis

Democracy Next assemblies, "Atupertu con la Ricerca," Timespan, and GUM.



## Expert Interviews

10 semi-structured interviews with experts, directors, curators, and researchers from diverse countries for "ground-truth" insights.

# Main findings I

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1

Everyone agrees museums *should* foster dialogue but few actually do, there are too many barriers

2

Climate change is particularly challenging, but increasingly necessary

*Museums should be the place to initiate change, to initiate adaptation to contemporary challenges like climate change.*

*S. Sreckovic, Ethnographer, Museum counsellor at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade*

# Main findings II: Challenges

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Practical: lack of  
stuff, funding, time

Socio-cultural:  
political pressure  
(e.g.: Serbia), fear

Structural:  
museums still  
perceived as elitist

*That's why activists protest in museums - because they still symbolise authority, power, and exclusivity."*

*L. Santos, Curator, researcher and Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa*

# Best practices

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- ➔ Multivocality & Diversity of Speakers\*
- ➔ Continuous, not episodic, engagement
- ➔ Clear theming connected to the museum's mission
- ➔ Co-production with local community partners
- ➔ Affordable and accessible formats



*\*We always try to have 4 people on stage to allow multivocality and multiperspective. We are a science museum, so it is difficult to talk about social topics, but we try to invite speakers from different fields.*

***M. Doom, Director Ghent University Museum***

# The guide

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Step-by-step instructions for organizing accessible and sustainable Community Forums



## Before the forum

Mission alignment  
Goals and partnership  
definitions  
Logistics and outreach strategy



## During the forum

Multivocal panel  
Inclusive and engaging  
setting  
Data collection



## After the forum

Public summary  
Follow up content  
Planning for continuity  
Internal evaluation

# Conclusion

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People trust **museums** and see them as **places capable of hosting difficult and meaningful conversations.**

**Three conditions** must be addressed:

1. Accessibility
2. Long-term community relationships
3. Confidence and capability

Community Forums are not a universal solution.  
But they are a **concrete, scalable, and flexible tool.**

*The concept of reciprocity is essential; museums must focus on what the community wants from them, fostering a two-way dialogue rather than a one-sided approach.*

*L. Santos, Curator, researcher and Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa*

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# Thank you for your attention

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# Q&A Session

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- 1 What can museums learn from the civic assemblies in Germany?
- 2 How can museums reach audiences who never come to museums?

# Q&A Session – focus on citizen assemblies

## I. Before

Setting up the governance, preparing evaluation, doing sortition



**SORTITION – STAGE 01**



Invitation sent to a random sample of the population (2.000-30.000) by Post, Phone, Email...



Recipients can volunteer to opt in to the lottery

Preparing the learning and evidence



**SORTITION – STAGE 02**



Second selection by lottery amongst the volunteers stratified based on : gender, age, location, socio-economic criteria



Final group broadly representative of the community concerned (city, state, country etc.)

## II. During

01 Welcome & intro



02 Learning



03 Deliberation



04 Drafting & presenting recommendations



## III. After

Follow-up: Response to & implementation of recommendations by the authority, communication, evaluation, monitoring



Making it ongoing



### Highlights:

In Bonn and Dresden: non visitors produced concrete recommendations on accessibility, language, inclusivity.

### Lowlights:

Costs  
Complexity in organization  
One-off processes.

### What we can learn:

Not every museum should copy the format, but we can borrow the principles: diversity by design, time for informed deliberation, and a clear mandate to influence the institution

# Q&A Session – focus on accessibility

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- Respondents like Rita Ouédraogo and Giulia Gregnanin insist on going physically where people already are and on **building programmes with them rather than for them**.
- Off-site activities, mobile archives, home-delivered materials, working with local activists or associations who already have trust in specific communities.
- It also means tackling practical barriers: price, language, schedule, and the aesthetic of the museum as an “elite” space. Community forums, in this sense, work best when they are one piece of a broader outreach ecosystem that actively redistributes the museum’s presence beyond its own walls.

