

Remarks on the Second European Conference on Corporate Museums

By Chiara Nenci

For the second time, the Conference on Corporate Museums was held in Milan this year, following the initial one, promoted by the Milan Province and the Association Museimpresa, in cooperation with Assolombarda on the 14th and 15th November 2008. This event took place in Italy where Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile's idealism do not allow industrial products to be considered expressions of taste and the art of an entire historical period and civilization.

Within a complex schedule of events during the annual Week of Business Culture (14-23 November 2008; 13-22 November 2009), conference discussions were carried out once again at the Assolombarda Headquarters (2008: Museum Activities to Valorize Companies: Experiences in Comparison 2009: Corporate Museums in Europe), while, like last year, the Province made Palazzo Isimbardi available to the organizers for the second and third session (2008: Impact on Territory and Social Context; Networks and Associations of Corporate Museums. 2009: Corporate Museums as Factor of Creativity and Innovation; *Celebrations*)

The European nature of the meeting, aiming at promoting shared knowledge for the future development of relations from a perspective of community cohesion, provided the audience, both professionals and laypersons, with an understanding of both the affinities and the discord in the so-called "product culture". Massimo Negri's seminal research was honored by the presentations of several speakers who discussed Italy's strong sensitivity to business heritage, considering it an internal education source. The marketing effect of corporate museums (Franz Heberstreit, Siemens Forum) is still kept under control even if, in some cases (Museo Ducati in Bologna and Galleria Ferrari in Maranello) when the mission of a museum is a driving force, where passion for a sport transfers to the enthusiasm for the product, much-decorated also in the establishing of a museum whose aim is to hand down the strength of a legend and thus risks, at the same time, becoming a mere corporate mouthpiece: "If the company goes well, the museum goes well too" (Livio Lodi, Museo Ducati).

In point of fact, Tommaso Fanfani in his opening speech of last year's sessions (whose Proceedings are now available), reiterated that even in turbulent times for a corporation, the museum should be independent, not only to survive, but also to perform its specific function. At the same time, the culture of a product may become "different" from the product itself: for example in a conscientious type of *corporate social responsibility*, as in the case of Guinness promoting campaigns against driving while intoxicated (Valentina Doorly, Guinness Storehouse, Dublin).

The myriad of presentations last year described a range of museums whose features vary greatly from each other: from the Museum of the Necktie in Zagreb to Sony's showroom on Fifth

Avenue; from the Portuguese Museu de Agua Epal (established as a result of privatization, but conceived as the museum of a district whose boundaries are traced by the remains of an ancient aqueduct) to the great Museo Ferragamo which, in buying the shoes designed exclusively for Marilyn Monroe in an auction and then putting them back to production, reshuffled the cards and transformed the status of the modern object, in a market dominated by notions of *model/series*. The three sessions of the conference were structured in the same way as last year's, giving the floor again to some of the speakers of the first conference. The presentation of "cases of corporate valorization" was more in evidence this year, not only because of the choice to dedicate a third session to the celebrations of some major brands (Kartell's 60th anniversary, Mini's 50th anniversary and the upcoming centenary celebration of Alfa Romeo in 2010). Unfortunately, if last year's conference left the audience with some unanswered questions, general debate was avoided once again on some issues that were worth a little more interest:

- the role of the archives in the companies: "a qualifying prerequisite for creating a museum with a cultural mission beyond the mere collection of objects" (Vittore Armani in «Culture e impresa», n. 6), which Giuseppe Paletta clearly spelled out in his presentation of the project REMIND in 2008, illustrating how complex corporate recollection can be when we integrate business archives with personal archives. Francesca Appiani's speech on the Museo Alessi also recalled this theme and it is not a coincidence that Appiani herself defined Alessi's case as a "hybrid", because it has achieved a balance between the traditional museum activity of collecting objects, and the "lively" organization of the archives that tells the objects' history. A story of 18,000 objects through which it is possible to rebuild "the rituals of the table from a social and anthropological point of view" and in which the collection of a post-modern museum is the point of both arrival and departure of other accounts, as expressed by sociologist Baudrillard.

- the relationship with traditional museums, now that Science and Technical museums are opening their doors to companies, *partners* in projects of exhibition areas dedicated to materials of their own production as in the case of Mapei and Vinavil at the Museo Leonardo da Vinci in Milan;

- the representation and recognition of workers, central players who rarely appear on the scene except when the product is "not very sexy" (Montemaggi speaking of Dalmine Foundation).

In conclusion, we mustn't forget Philippe Daverio's provocation in his closing speech of last year's conference sessions. He defined corporate museums as the contemporary tool for strengthening corporate identity in the industrial society, a role once entrusted to the Vatican Museums by the Catholic Church and to the Uffizi by the Medici dynasty. Indeed, according to the recent publication of the guide *Turismo industriale in Italia. Cultura d'impresa tra memoria e futuro* (Touring Club 2008, accomplished with the cooperation of Museimpresa), there is a clear attempt to bring present day wide museum tourism to follow the "product path" in a modern *grand tour* once reserved for visiting the most prestigious European fine arts collections. It would be excellent if, just once, visitors had been inspired to entrepreneurship and know-how by these museums, since this should be the role of corporate museums rather than being perceived as memorial chapels of big brands, postmodern encyclopedias where "the enormous vegetation of objects as flora or fauna, with tropical, glacial, mutant and extinguishing species" (Baudrillard) is celebrated; or worse, places where heritage becomes marketing and the staging of past knowledge becomes a "good business deal" so that "this corporate culture thing starts to be interesting" (Montemaggi).