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**The Redesign of the Website of the Museum Documentation Centre:  
<http://www.mdc.hr>: From Museums and for Museums**

**Summary**

Nine years after the creation of the first website in 1996, the Museum Documentation Centre has initiated the MDC website redesign collaborative project. The possibilities which technology offers changed drastically through the years. Once modern and advanced web pages become out of date, ponderous and difficult to maintain. The need for an improvement of quality of service to the museums and wider public was recognised. It started with evaluating existing web pages as well as searching and conceiving completely new content based on dynamic web pages, up-to-date news supplied directly by MDC's staff or museums themselves.

On-line Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections in Croatia offers dates on the museums, collections, professional museum staff; on line calendar of events MDC POOL provides information on current and upcoming exhibitions, conferences, publications; web opac catalogue of museum and gallery publications – that is only a part of the online data bases offered. Gathered in one place, they will reveal MDC's activities dealing with collecting, preserving, analysing and disseminating information about Croatian museums.

With new MDC website our purpose is to promote openness, to give accurate and fresh information, to allow quick and easy access to MDC resources and to recognise our users' expectations and needs.

This paper describes MDC website redesign project, its changes, the problems involved in creating, the current state as well as plans for further development.

**How we began, and why...**

The first website of the Museum Documentation Centre (MDC) was set up in 1996, the idea being to present on the Internet the diversity of Croatian museums to the professional and general public, and to popularise the richness of the Croatian museum heritage, as part of the world cultural heritage.

At the outset we were prompted to create a website to facilitate the introduction of the MDC and its activities, while the core of the actual site was the project *Croatian Museums on the Internet* (MHI). Our intention was for the project, which in the course of time was meant to bring together all the information about Croatian museums, to develop into a virtual communications centre for inter-museum exchange of information, experience, projects and know-how. This was a period in which museums, because of the Homeland War, kept their materials in a safe place, and we had the idea that for them it would be the only way in which they could present both their holdings and their activities. The parallel promotion of the MDC and the museums was to have been in Croatian, English and German.

The two-person team (curator and IT officer) worked out a simple structure for the website in which there were four categories. The first three - 1. MDC's Documentation Pool; 2. The Publishing Activities; 3. MDC's Professional Activities - featured the MDC itself, while category 4. Information Network - presented the *Croatian Museums on the Internet* project.

It took about a half a year, after the initial idea, to develop the structure of the site, to produce a simple model according to which museums were to be presented, the definition of the substance, the design, and contacts with the first museums, to create the MDC pages and the first museum website (Trakošćan Castle). The first version was produced in collaboration with a consultant, the firm "Novena" of Zagreb, and in the conception of the design, elements of the house-style were used, elements that had been developed since the eighties by the distinguished Croatian designer Boris Ljubičić.

In organisational terms, the project was run in the MDC. Because of the problems of the time, the absence of technical infrastructure in a large number of museums, the MDC afforded the museums technical support, undertaking such matters of expertise as editorship, copy-editing and translations. Museums, that is their professional personnel, the curators and documentarists, had their collection descriptions checked, and a selection of the most important museum objects from the collection was made. Responsibility for maintenance of the website was assumed by the MDC.

The basic principles followed by the MDC in the selection of the individual museums were the equal representation of the museums of all the regions, and diversity of kind and size of museum.

The websites of the individual museums contained general data about the museum, its history, a description of the collections, a selection of a dozen or so museum objects from each collection, information about the library, the restoration and preparation workshop, and some information about the activities of the museum.

Over the next few years only one person continued working on the project inside the MDC (the editor), defining the contents and coordinating the project,

while the consultant ("Novena") went on working on the development of the technology and the design.

On average, each year saw three museum websites made, and today, nine years on, the *Croatian Museums on the Internet* project covers thirty museums (since some of the museums have several branches, the number is actually greater, and comes to 43). When the first sites came online as part of the MHI project, other Croatian museums started making their own sites independently, so that today 112 Croatian museums have Internet presence, which constitutes 58% of the total number of the 192 units that currently make up the Croatian museum network.

Thanks to the pages having been made with outsourced assistance, the project has constantly been supplemented with new websites, which have become increasingly ambitious with respect to the quantity of material presented and the use of tools that are ever more demanding in terms of technology.

Today it comprises about 15,000 pages and approximately 6,000 images (of museums, museum objects, activities...).

Although so far no evaluation of the MHI project has been made, the constant and almost daily contacts with museum professionals enable ongoing analysis and approximate evaluation of what has been achieved.

With changes in the logo and the visual identity of the institution, up to 2000, the home page was redesigned twice, and from 2000 to 2004 various changes were introduced three times (new headings, placing a *Calendar of Events* section on the home page).

Unfortunately, because of the expense involved, it was not possible to continue in a trilingual version, and we had to give up the German edition.

Up to the end of the nineties, not only was the website constantly supplemented with links to the new websites of Croatian museums, but it was also expanded with three completely new projects:

- In 1999 a database and an electronic edition of the book *War Damage to Museums and Galleries in Croatia* was published, in which the state of affairs in museums buildings and their holdings in the period 1991-1997 was exhaustively documented.

- In 1999 the *Calendar of Events* came in – an online calendar of events in Croatian museums and galleries, announcing exhibitions, giving information about new museum publications, various events, conferences and symposia;

- In 2001 *Recent Acquisitions of the MDC Library* was put on the Web – bibliographical database, accessible online, a new service of the library.

It is important to mention that Library Search and Museum and Gallery Register Search services were put on the table, showing that there was an awareness of the need to make the documentation fonds of the MDC available to the users, but unfortunately, there were no technological premises for this to be achieved.

In these projects, the MDC confirmed its then current basic orientation for documenting and providing information services to the professional museum community and its goal of popularising the work of museums among the general public.

The troubles that started to dog the work on the website in 2001 when the IT officer left were most of all reflected in the MDC pages, which were not updated, and in the impossibility of putting through new projects which had been worked out in conceptual terms, but could not then be achieved, such as the Online Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections in the Republic of Croatia.

The statistical analyses recording the number of visits to the MDC website, which constantly indicated a large number of users; marketing analysis worked out at the beginning of 2005, which showed that our museum community considered the MDC website an important project; and constant queries from our users were a confirmation to us that a complete redesign of the website needed effectuating as soon as possible.

### **Nine years later...**

Nine years after experience with the first website, at the end of 2004 the MDC started work on the redesign of its site, in conjunction with an evaluation and improvement of existing contents, and devising and providing the concepts for entirely new substance.

The structure of the site was planned in detail and very carefully established; we insisted all the time on simplicity, and the criterion that the site had to be capable of addition and expansion in later phases, without its basic structure being compromised.

The criterion in the definition of the contents and services were the use of materials and projects already existing on the previous website, which the museum community had accepted, and the degree to which our fonds had been processed, enabling the creation of new substances.

We organised the contents according to headings in such a way as to bring out the collaboration between the MDC and the Croatian museum network. We put the needs and requirements of the users in the foreground.

In the effectuation of the website, apart from the inner working group (curator,

documentarist, librarian), all the MDC experts took part, and a long-term consultant, the firm "Novena", which once again worked out the technology and the design. We settled some problems from several points of view, endeavouring to speak aloud about all the possibilities. We considered the quality of the content on the site, the frequency with which the content was to be renewed, the use of interactive opportunities, at the same time concentrating on visual attractiveness, intuitiveness and simplicity of the user interface, as well as loading speed.

Since on the old website it was a big problem that the pages were not updated and not active, after the introduction of the new system for administration and management (Content Management System – CMS), we created a dynamic website in which it was possible to alter content, create pages, organise subheadings, apply standardised formats of typical pages and, most importantly, update contents inside the MDC (from any computer even) without tedious involvement of the IT team and the webmaster (or at least with their involvement being much slighter than had been the practice to date), relying on in-house human resources, teamwork and the workflow approach.

We were faced with the first task, of defining the structure of the pages, the contents and design of them.

We based the web design on the visual identity of the MDC. The grid of squares by which the typography in the logo was broken up was enlarged from the upper left corner in order to create the lines of force in the format. The useful zones in the format (navigation, contents, places for graphics and the baseline) were obtained by setting out the network in fields. The basis of the page was monochrome, black and white, which lets the colour of the graphics and contents come out. The pages were dimensioned for a standard screen resolution of 1024x756 pixels.

At the same time with the development of the structure of contents and design, the possibilities for the making of programmes and applications related to the online database and interactive web pages were analysed.

The most demanding part of the work related to the fact that we had decided to put three complete new databases into the website – the Register of Museums and Galleries of the Republic of Croatia (*Review of Museums / Find Museum*), the Collection of Museum Posters (*Find Poster*) and the Webopac (*Library Catalogue*). In technological terms, this meant that as well as the three bases in existence already we would be able to provide much more information, and much more "knowledge" than in the previous version of the website.

## **From museums and for museums – towards a virtual museum information, documentation and communications centre for users of various profiles**

The intellectual structure of the pages is the outcome of the almost half-a-century long systematic communications between the MDC and museum professionals and of the documentation of the museum activity.

The basic characteristics of the MDC website are:

- a focus on the concept of the *open MDC website*, facilitating simple and rapid access to our documentation fonds and data on the Internet and the creation of a space for communication;
- incentivising collaboration between the MDC and the Croatian museum community;
- the promotion of the basic activity of the MDC (documentation, information, consultancy, museological, research, educational, publishing, library and exhibition) by free access to information and material, letting the MDC take part in the preservation of knowledge concerning the history of museums and galleries of Croatia and contribute to the development of the Croatian museum community;
- the promotion of the potentials of museums, their activities and their achievements among the general public;
- encouragement of collaboration with museum professionals for the sake of progress in the museum profession;
- placing the emphasis on a broad spectrum of different kinds of users;
- the promotion of the public accessibility of our collections, data bases, publications, project results, protection, as well as the consultation of fonds and data in the premises of the MDC;
- the creation of a space for communication and interaction among museum professionals with similar interests and problems;
- the development of a strategy for the implementation of information systems in museums;
- encouragement of the application of international standards and terminology;
- drawing attention to the importance of creating fonds of the digital heritage;
- stimulation of users to apply new electronic services by the introduction of new technologies
- the stimulation of collaboration with the cultural tourism sector.

From the very beginning we wanted the website to be worked out for the good of the whole social community, and accessible to everyone, constantly bearing in mind that the main target group consisted of museum professionals.

*From museums and for museums – towards a virtual museum information, documentation and communications centre, one that would open a large part of its fonds, databases, activities and services primarily to museums, but also to users of various profiles.*

We did our best to identify all possible users, to plan and create an area of interest for each of them, convinced that a very wide but undefined opening-up might well lead to the creation of a chaotic website.

We wanted to provide a high quality of service to professionals. We endeavoured to stimulate them to make use of our fonds, databases, to keep up with the results of our projects and those of museums and to communicate with us. It was important for us to obtain as much feedback as possible, via their commentaries, suggestions, responses to questionnaires and participation in forums.

We were of the opinion though that to appeal only to the professional audience would be to create a closed and hermetic space, perhaps totally uncommunicative to the general public. Hence we decided to provide this general public a choice, via an online gallery, of material from our documentation fonds, and via an attractive Internet presentation of museums (*Museums on the Internet*) and the provision of data about museums (*Museums in Croatia / Review of Museums*) to promote museums as spaces open for research, learning and fun.

Hence we settled on six main headings:

1. The MDC – containing information about the MDC (about us) and our work (the register, collections; the library; publishing; projects; protection)
2. Museums in Croatia – presenting detailed information about the museums and galleries of Croatia, the network of museums and a review of museums on the Internet;
3. Calendar of Events – offering updated information about announcements and events underway in museums and galleries in Croatia and in the MDC;
4. Regulations and guidelines – giving laws and regulations important for the museum activity, as well as guidelines and instructions
5. Professional Exams – providing information about passing the professional exams for professional grades in the museum world
6. Forum – opening space for professional discussions, exchange of ideas and projects.

Just two of the sections (*Regulations and Guidelines* and *Professional Exams*) of the six provided are meant only for museum professionals, for these are very specific contents, while the other sections are meant for both the professional and the general public. All the sections are conceived in the same way – a short explanation of the contents is always given, followed by an array of some user-oriented contents and services.

The basic objectives aimed at through these headings were as follows:

- I. opening up the documentary resources via special services and projects: online databases, online exhibitions, digital catalogues
- II. the creation of communication points for museum professionals and the general public;
- III. the creation of information and communication spaces for the promotion of

professional standards and the advancement of the museum profession by the creation of programmes of professional development and ongoing education.

I. Opening up documentary resources via:

- online databases

*Review of Museums* gives data from the Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections of the Republic of Croatia that the MDC has been keeping since 1992.

As well as names, addresses, telephones and Internet addresses, by searching this base, all users can get information about the museum and collections that the museum possesses and information about the professional personnel. A review of museums is possible according to four criteria: alphabetical review, geographical review, according to kind of holdings and according to museum collections. After the user has chosen the criterion according to which he or she wishes to browse the base, a list of proffered responses appears.

We have been careful to create links among databases. For example, some museum will, in the *Review of Museums* section, be linked with the *Calendar of Events*, *Croatian Museums on the Internet*, *Library Catalogue* and *Bibliographic Bases of the Library*, *Reports by Zagreb's Museums* and *Reports by Croatian Museums*, the *Online Gallery*.

By thinking about linking up all the contents, we started on the process of creating a unified information system within the home establishment (the MDC) and perhaps tomorrow within a global information system of a network of Croatian museums and world museums and heritage organisations.

2. *Calendar of Events*: online calendars with news from the MDC and news from Croatian museums; this gives information updated daily concerning exhibitions, publications, conferences and events, as well as other information.

Our objective is for this uniform calendar to be an essential point for the provision of information concerning all events related to Croatian museums. The news published in the *Calendar of Events* is put in everyday by members of the MDC pool and MDC curators. Access to the Pool is provided for all members who have their own password to access the electronic module for inputting and can themselves, when they wish, announce certain events. In the next phase we want to encourage museums to join the MDC pool in an even greater number, for this will ensure higher quality, great coverage and detail of information.

News pops up in the central editorial interface, and is checked out before online publication, so as to ensure uniformity, but an endeavour is made to reduce interventions in text to a minimum and to preserve the authorship of

stories. One of the reasons for the creation of this project was the fact that we did not manage to update the data of the museums who were first involved in the MHI project, data relating to activity and publication, and the second was to create an archive of events, conceived in such a way as to become a useful supplement to our documentation funds, i.e., so as to create an electronic archive of the activities of Croatian museums.

From a search of the archive of the *Calendar of Events* it is possible to obtain a survey of all events that have taken place in museums since 1999, according to three criteria: time, place and kind of event.

3. The database *War damage to museums and museum holdings in the Republic of Croatia* is an already existing project that towards the end of 1999 published on the Web the results of the project of scheduling, assessing and evaluating war damage that had been performed by MDC experts with many consultants. As well as complete data about all museum items that had been damaged, some of the photographic documentation is published as well, and searching is facilitated according to five categories: cities, museums, collections, damage and restitution of museum objects.

4. The Museum Posters Collection, which contains 7,700 museum posters, is the only one computer-processed to date and will be presented on the website by the online database *Find Poster*. In the initial phase it will be possible to search only the part of the collection so far processed and digitalised. Searching the collection will be possible according to publisher, author, year and topic.

5. As well as the existing services of the library, i.e., the network-accessible electronic bibliographic database *Recent Acquisitions of the MDC Library*, the plan includes (in phase two) putting on a *Library Catalogue (Webopac)* with the publications of all Croatian museums and galleries and the launching of a new project: *Have you Read*, which will be the presentation of a new publication chosen by the librarian.

6. Part of the sub-section *Projects* is the data base *Croatian Women Painters Born in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, with which in 2002 the presentation of donations to the city of Zagreb was started on the Web. The first in a series of donations of Dr Josip Kovačić contains the biographies of thirty three painters, a list of the works included in the donation and the presentation of the collector himself. The database enables search according to painter, technique and topic.

- online galleries

The MDC manages four collections – a collection of museum posters, a photographic collection, a video collection, and an archive, which are presented with a short introductory description, a link with information for users, from which it is possible to obtain detailed instructions about working time, services and conditions of use, and online galleries. Each collection thus has an opportunity to exhibit a selection of its material from time to time.

When this space is expanded, with additional Web curator activities, our users will in time be increasingly acquainted with what the collections contain.

- electronic publications and PDF format publications

The ample publication activity, as well as the existing electronic publications *War damage to museums and museum holdings in the Republic of Croatia* and two issues of the *Reports by Zagreb's Museums* for 1999 and 2000, provides a survey of the complete publications of the MDC, i.e., all its magazines, annuals, reports, monographs, manuals, guides, catalogues, bibliographies and the most recent integral editions of the publications *Muzeologija* and *Informativa Museologica* published in PDF format.

We hope that our publications will become still more accessible to readers, and that our associates will find it easier and faster to acquire information concerning notice of upcoming topics, and be able to impact the shape of forthcoming issues by their questions and suggestions.

- electronic form for inputting and publishing reports on professional museum activities

We are planning (at phase two at present) to develop, for the two publications *Reports by Zagreb's Museums* and *Reports by Croatian Museums*, which have a cross-section of the annual professional activities of Croatian museums displayed through sixteen standardised headings and 63 sub-headings, an electronic form for the online submission of reports by the museums themselves, with the proviso that we will define the phases of the work, from reception of text, editorial processing, copy editing and proofing within the MDC, and authorisation by the editor and publication on the website. These *Reports*, together with the *Calendar of Events*, will create in time a uniform and very complete archive of professional museum activities.

II. The creation of communication points:

- for museum professionals

Within the *Museums in Croatia* section, there will be the subsection *Network of Museums*, which should in the forthcoming period develop into an information point and professional forum for the implementation of the main activity.

Via the network of Croatian museums, as well as advancement of professional work, the improvement of the quality of the way museums work, and the establishment of uniform standards and norms for carrying out the museum activity, professional assistance, inter-museum collaboration, partnership, preservation, protection, scholarly research and numerous projects promoting museum collaboration will also be stimulated.

- contacts – ask the manager, curator, editor, librarian...

Within the MDC section, i.e., all its collections and the library, and also within the publication, projects and protection sections, as well as *Professional Exams*, all users will be able directly to contact the managers of collections

and projects, editors of publications and conservation consultant with questions, proposals and comments.

- for all users: forums and questionnaires

By introducing the separate section called *Forum* we wanted to set up an open communication space through which we can stimulate dialogue and listen to the opinions of users interested in a wide range of topics related to museums and their activities. Although during the nineties we occasionally polled museum professionals in order to obtain an evaluation of our own projects, we had no occasion to establish to what extent the wider social community was sensitised and whether it was keeping up with what was happening in Croatian museums.

The Forum will link up all those who are interested and want to take part in exchange of ideas and projects. All aspects of work in museums will be open for discussion.

The Moderator will control the inflow of messages, the publication of contents and will not accept messages and topics that are not suitable for discussion.

In a separate user space on the home page, in which there are some separate items, we have placed a questionnaire-type question that will be regularly replaced.

III. The creation of information and communication points for the promotion of professional standards and the advancement of the museum profession by the creation of a professional development and ongoing education programme.

The *Professional Exams* section is intended to be an information point meant for museum professionals alone, those who want to find out something further about taking the professional exams. Since for a number of years the MDC has organised and coordinated the taking of the professional exams for museum grades, in this section it is possible to find links leading to laws and regulations that determine the conditions and contents of the exams, information about how an exam can be registered for, a list of the required reading, and the names of the members of the professional commission.

The sub-section *Projects* is envisaged as presenting lectures, discussions, seminars, panels, presentations, promotions that are held as part of the *Open Wednesdays at the MDC* project, at which all museum professionals who are capable of stimulating a creative dialogue and assist in raising awareness of the need for the preservation of the museum heritage can take part.

We also plan to work out a programme for topic workshops and e-learning workshops, distance learning, meant not only for museum professionals from the whole of Croatia, but also for teachers and collectors. This will enable us to acquire new knowledge from the area of preventive protection,

digitalisation, museum education and so on.

At this moment (for the realisation of the project is currently underway) we have to admit that we are not sure who will be the most numerous users of our contents, which contents will be the most interesting, which will not be interesting at all, whether the users are going to be satisfied with our pages, and what their expectations are.

Although we did previously have information about dates and times of accession, and the total number of hits on our pages, which approached the number of 59,000 visitors a month, we should say that we had no chance of analysing, for example, the social and demographic structure of our users, their motives for visiting the pages and their satisfaction with what they found there. What will accompany the phase of setting up the pages will be the testing of the pages that we wish to do in collaboration with several focus groups – students of museology, museum professionals, members of heritage organisations, journalists and a randomly selected group of users of different sexes, ages and interests.

## **Conclusion**

Our intention is that this system should not only be launched but also kept continuously supplemented. It is our plan to set up a version of the MDC Website in English as well, because we would like to develop our collaboration and exchange of knowledge with cognate foreign institutions and to stimulate the launching of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary projects dealing with museums.