

MAKE PEACE AND NOT WAR

Pic credit: International Institute for the Inclusive Museum and Vietnam War Remnants Museum



Almost every country in the world has a war museum. They remember, recall and memorialize their countries in war and conflicts. Some on the home front. Others elsewhere where sometimes they had no business to be. In World War II the largest army in the world was trained and raised in India. Drafted to fight for the British. Few of them are yet recognized in the museums of the allies. I once conducted an exercise with my graduate students to visualize the biggest Peace Museum in the world. The Australian War Memorial is the largest museum in the country. It has probably the best museum educational program that I knew at that time. We worked through a mock exercise where the exhibits remain the same. But the text was to be reinterpreted so that the narratives were all about peace. Bingo. Same objects. Multiple narratives. War to peace museum. What if all the war museums and memorials changed their mission and represented what they have with minimal cost to promote peace? We can aspire for a better world. A culture of peace.

Peace is the mission of the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Last year during March - April, it staged the exhibition 'Waging Peace - U.S. Soldiers and Veterans Who Opposed America's War in Vietnam'. It provided both domestic and international visitors an understanding of the extent of the anti-war activities of U.S. soldiers and veterans against the American War in Vietnam. During the exhibition, on 20th March, a dialogue was facilitated on 'Remembering the past and building the future'. More than 100 Vietnamese and U.S. veterans participated. Dr Ms Tran Xuan Thao, Director, War Remnants Museum, featured the first voice of historical witnesses from both sides. The Museum offered a healing space for veterans and people from both countries. 'Together with healing, reconciliation and coping with the legacies of the war, it helped promote the relationship and comprehensive cooperation between the two countries' says Dr Thao.

It is the most popular museum in Vietnam. It is one of the most visited in Asia. Over 1.3 million experienced the place last year. Not parts of it. But most of it. The mission is simple. To Love. The effects of war are presented in graphic displays. Confronting. But transformative. Over 3 million died in Vietnam during the American War. An equal number were injured including those that struggle with serious mental health challenges. About 4.8 million are exposed to chemical warfare. Over 58,000 Americans died in the American War. There were also several thousands of Australians and Koreans. But everyone was exposed to the impacts of chemical warfare. An international solidarity led by Vietnamese and American organizations and individuals, deals with hundreds of thousands of unexploded ordnance and the toxic chemical legacy. U.S. veterans have joined the struggle in Vietnam. Digital affordances are maximized in all efforts.

I co-convened some time ago a seminar on the cultural dimensions of the digital in museums. It is about saturation



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(Professor Dr. Amareswar Galla, an Indo Australian, was the trainer for the ASEF Museum Training Road School last week in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.)

→ War Remnants Museum has a dynamic children's discovery centre. What is unique is that it integrates collaborative learning of children with all forms of abilities.



Legacies of War present in the War Remnants Museum. Museum employee band playing at the opening of the Discovery Centre on Agent Orange Day, 10th August 2010. The band had toured the USA prior to the opening.



'Mother'. 1993. Bomb fragments by Nguyen Hoang Huy, sculptor from Tay Ninh Province. War Remnants Museum collection.

Visitors, especially foreigners from Europe and North America are often keen listeners to the narratives and individual stories associated with military hardware from the American War. It is the story telling that bridges the gulf between war and peace to promote reconciliation and solidarity for promoting peace.



tion of narratives through digital media. It was in Seoul, Korea, at the Art Centre Nabi. One of the speakers was a well-known French museologist Professor Michel Van Praet. He underlined the over saturation of the media and digital domains with news of war and violence. TV, online content, war games, you name it. He argued that when you are constantly exposed or bombarded with sensational violence, then our senses are gradually numbed. You see it every day, the violence. Empathy is soon replaced with apathy. His passionate analysis was that museums could make the mistake of going overboard with digital media and take the human out of the museum visits and experience. An argument was made by the seminar that deep research needs to inform the balance between all forms of communication tools so that the real stories and narratives and their ability to draw on what makes us human is not minimized in the digital world.

This balance in presenting multiple perspectives and the use of digital technologies and space in a people centred approach is what is impressive at the War Remnants Museum. The ground floor is an open plan of spaces. A large digital screen immerses the visitor on entrance in the challenges of demining and recovering the landscapes from the effects of chemical warfare. On the inside is another large orientation screen that provides across the world protests and calls for peace. Woodstock Festival to street marches in Europe and Australia are profiled. Then the new galleries provide photographic and video material from all the continents of the world – highlighting the calls for an end to war and promotion of peace. You leave the museum, not disturbed or angry. You leave with transformative learning with an understanding about the wastage of war, especially its legacies on humans and the environment.

It is in this environment that the Directors of the eight museums of Ho Chi Minh City met last week in a Curatorial Studio Workshop. It is part of the Museum Training Road School of the Asia Europe Foundation. Its aim was to conceptualise and develop curatorial narratives through collaboration. It will result in a project with exhibits in the different museums and cultural spaces in the City on the process of urbanism over the past 45 years since the end of the war in 1975. How does one deal with the different mandates and expertise of the museums on a common platform? If they were all museums without walls what kind of narratives would they facilitate together. How is place making understood and interpreted? Who are the actors in this growth of the city and its challenges of rapid urbanisation and environmental impacts? How about the intangible heritage values and cultural diversity of the urban population? What about the working class and more than 20 ethnic minority groups and immigrants from the neighbouring countries? How does one curate such complexity? How can curatorial capacity building enable the ingenuity of Vietnamese museums to develop, interpret and present multiple narratives?



Museums Directors and researchers from the eight museums of Ho Chi Minh City working on the concept design for an exhibition on the making of the urban centre in the Studio Workshop at the War Remnants Museum.

→ Second generation legacy of Agent Orange. Heather Morris Bowser, from the USA, self-portrait showing missing limbs. Her father was exposed to Dioxins in Vietnam. Impacts of agent orange last six generations.



Mangrove forest destroyed by chemicals in Ca Mau. Young boy seen foraging for food here amid the devastation. Photograph represented as a significant ceramic mural at the entrance to the War Remnants Museum/ It was taken by Goro Nakamura from Japan on 6th May 1976.

NEXT WEEK
Heritage Matters will reflect on why the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal is a national museum in India.