

The Museu da República Data Base – a creative tool to educate and disseminate information

Ana Cristina Léo Barcellos Evres^()
and Karla Estelita Godoy^(#)*

(*) Museu da República, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil

E-mail: aevres@hotmail.com / tecnica@museudarepublica.org.br

(#) Museu da República, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), Brazil

E-mail: godoy_karla@hotmail.com / bdr@museudarepublica.org.br

ABSTRACT

The strategy used to show the Museu da República's collection in a simple and attractive way, where collaborative work is incentivated and new proposals for heritage education are offered, includes basically experimentation and creativity. The process of changing established mentalities took a long time. Today the result of this system can be seen in www.republicaonline.org.br/

KEYWORDS: Brazilian history;
Cultural heritage; Educational process;
Information system

INTRODUCTION

The Museu da República, located in the Palácio do Catete, was head office of the Brazilian republican government for 63 years. It was created in 1960 to preserve the Brazilian republican memory, and has become through the years an important technological center of knowledge and education.



**Figure 1: Museu da República
(by Alex Ferro)**

BRAZIL – A COUNTRY IN SEARCH OF DEVELOPMENT

Brazil has entered the 21st century with a population of 169 million people distributed over an area of 8.511.965km². More than two thirds of the population is living in the cities and 90,5% of these people in the southeast region, while the rest of the population is spread disproportionately among the other regions. Education is one of the greatest problem that brazilians are having to face in order to progress. Illiterates comprise a large part of the population and lots of people are still unable to have a job or even attend school. Only a few people have real access to opportunities, but even

amongst these fortunate people one could find big differences which reside in the cultural aspects of the north and south part of Brazil. Whereas in the south the European and North American values predominate, in the north one can still find ways of living primitive.



Figure 2: Children of the Brazilian rural zone (Museu da República's Collection)

Nonetheless, the difference of values and in the ways of expression of the cultures of the northern part and the southern part disappear when we take into account their richness and diversity, expressing not only one identity, but several. Therefore, one could say that Brazil has many cultures, instead of only one.

And these many cultures provide a large amount of artifacts, objects, documents and collections gathered as time passes, comprising a valuable cultural heritage kept in many museums. Brazil has over one thousand museums responsible for the memory of those cultures, but unfortunately disproportion between regions results in not preserving and diffusing them in the most appropriate way.

THE TECHNOLOGY ABOLISHING FRONTIERS

In Brazil, the number of PC's users has been rising over the years and there are today 10,7 million internet users. Most schools have added computer classes to their curriculums and this has helped immensely to abolish frontiers between the wealthy and the poor sectors of Brazil's society.

Museum collections are the primary sources of information with which elementary and high school students are not yet familiarized in Brazil. In order to overcome this handicap, the Museu da República has developed an educational tool that presents them the collections, documents and books, all inserted within a pertinent context. Information technology has become the most important ally able to democratize and extend the access to the collections spread all over Brazilian territory.

CHALLENGES

The Data Base was conceived as a management system that gathers three types of collections and provides access to information regarding more than 8.000 museologic objects, 80.000 documents from the Historical Archive and 20 thousand bibliographic records. The Data Base enables a joined recovery of informations. Other crucial aspects considered in the creation of the Data Base were: flexibility, simplicity and consistency in retrieving information.

The data input – Museu da Republica Data Base

The first great challenge was to gather in only one system distinct collections. There were many disputes concerning subjects and it was necessary to

confront the library rules against new organizational methods for historical documents and objects.

Rules for data input, such as titles and author's names, were adapted to the reality of the Museum collections. Nevertheless, the specificity of each area was kept. The system allows an assured data input for historical archives, library and museology that keeps their integrity and respects the international rules.

Interdisciplinary

The second great challenge was to find the common information among the Museum collections. The accuracy and speed of the recovery of information depended on the correct inter-relation of the data. It was defined that the common points among the three areas would be subjects, authors, collections and places. From these common points records were created and used for the three areas (Historical Archive, Library and Museology) to guarantee the reliability and integrity of the data. The records are: Geographic Areas, Collections, Institutions, People and Subjects. Each of them allows the inclusion of biographies and entries providing a fuller vision to the users.

A simple, attractive and friendly language

The third great challenge the project faced was the adoption of a simple and attractive language able to be used by the largest variety of users. A manual was developed to help, step by step, the professionals in charge to feed the data.

An open system

The system is open, flexible and modular. It works on simple PC's (with a minimum of 450 or 500MHZ speed).

The operating system uses Microsoft SQL Server and Microsoft Windows NT.

Because of its adaptabilities – new data fields can be included if necessary – so that the system can be used by the others Brazilian museums with similar collections.

The CD-ROM that describes the methodology used is being concluded until the end of the year.

CULTURAL HERITAGE: PRESERVATION THROUGH EDUCATION

From the Data Base to the Website

The Website *Getting to Know Museu da República* works as an interface to provide the access to the Data Base. Its construction brought out new challenges. After creating a system able to retrieve information from three different collections – historical documents, publications and objects – it was necessary to face problems of division and fragmented collections.

Even though the Museu da República was created to gather and preserve the Brazilian Republican memory, due to political reasons, historical documents and objects are sometimes located in other institutions. This could spoil the way of understanding the collection as a whole. But more than offer large lists, the Website was conceived to combine context, information and a friendly interface. In order to make this possible, the museum collections have been strategically classified according to parameters defined for elementary and secondary school, making identification of subjects easier to teachers and students.

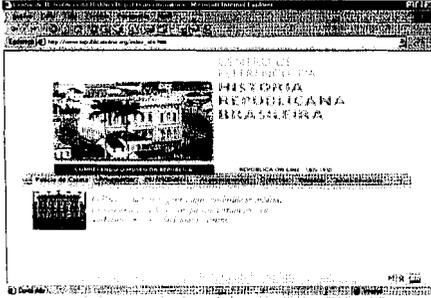


Figure 3: Access screen to the Website - Getting to Know - with the presentation of subjects

Defining themes

Palácio do Catete

The Palácio do Catete and its garden, which constitute the Museu da República, is one of the largest Website navigating themes. Constructed about 1860 by the richest coffee farmer during the imperial time, the Baron of Nova Friburgo, the complex is considered an exponent of eclectic Brazilian architecture, mixing artistic European style – as Neoclassicism, Manneirism and Baroque – and elements from other historical times. From its wealthy decorated rooms, came decisions that defined the destiny of nation, such as Brazilian participation in Second World War and the creation of labour laws.

When the Palácio do Catete was selected as a Website navigating theme, the main idea was to show how important this construction is to retrieve information through objects and documents on display and its own architecture.

Presidents' Collections

As the Head Office of the Brazilian Republican government from 1897 to 1960, the Palácio do Catete was also a dwelling place for most of the

18 presidents that resided there. Thus, Palácio do Catete was known as “the presidents’ home”.

Therefore, there was an expressive collection from the public and the private life of the presidents that was big enough to constitute one of the Website navigating theme.

Events

Another important peculiarity of the Museum is its current subjects. As we live in a Republican regime, through the specific events like civil wars or popular and political movements we can recognize facts from ancient and modern history of the country.

Public figures and other collections

These themes follow the same principle, mixing ancient and modern collections. Some of the outstanding historical characters and other significant collections were chosen to show how relevant, distinct and comprehensive the heritage is from the Republican regime.

The website structure

The division in themes makes it simple and attractive to navigate in the Website. Users can find a sort of helpful options that liberate them from having a large knowledge about the Museum collection to get information.

From a technical view, all of these themes became queries that define the system of retrieval.

The system is dynamic, updated and whenever the Museum acquires new collections they can be input in the Website.

For experts users, the Website provides a section for free queries as well. The introduction screen presents basic information about the system's operation and there are also suggestions in order to help the user find more about the subject chosen.

Get to Know in order to preserve

The Website has also a section called "Educative Window", specially designed for the young ones. This window is an educational tool developed by a multidisciplinary team with the purpose of creating educational activities using technical and historic resources. Students and teachers will find interdisciplinary activities based on Museu da República Data Base.

A combination of texts, images, colors and sounds excite senses and the imagination of the youngsters taking into account the multiple knowledge of the student, and providing the teacher with a tool to work subjects that were thought as boring in the old times. Students and teachers are invited to interact and exchange experiences through the site.

The Educative Window's performance has revealed multiple possibilities on interchanging information between the Museum and the schools, and specially among teachers who use it as a virtual board on classes. This relationship allows another view about the collections in general and a better use of it.

Paulo Freire [1], one the most prestigious brasilian educator formulated a theory taking into account the mode of local life of the student, raising the value of the culture he lived in, its singularity and identity. As far as Freire was concerned, the main role of education was liberate people, making them able to take their own decisions about their actions and play an active role in world. According to him, the access to information was the only possible way to get a complete education so that students could become able to change the present and the future.

At Museu da República, we are doing our best to perpetuate his way of thinking.

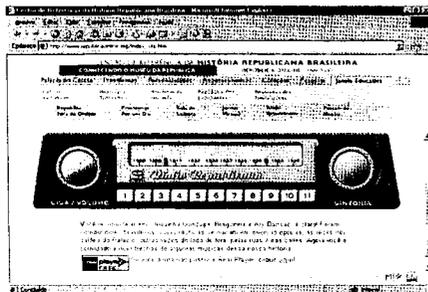
Staff

The creation of the Data Base and the Website was possible thanks to an efficient interdisciplinary staff that never gave up the dream of building a better for Brazil, bringing equitu and democracy to people on general.

CONLUSIONS

Cultural heritage: using to preserve

The responsibility of preserving cultural heritage becomes stronger when it is shared with society, that understands it better and begins to respect it. According to the philosopher Michel Serres, we can only attain equity among



**Figure 4: Screen of the activity
Republican Radio**

people, inventy a social tissue that minimizes violence, pacify the world and attain freedom throughout education. And he believes we should never give up the project of sharing knowledge and information. In his own words, "in order to save cultures from annihilation we have only used up to now museological preservation, protections that kill instead of promote them by reinforcing a touristic mass use of them". [2]

The concept of the Website *Getting to Know Museu da República* is based on three principles: using to preserve, giving access to information and developing creative educational activities.

But more than this, its ambition was to help to form citizens more conscient and prepared to share knowledge in this globalized society.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ana Cristina Léó Barcellos Evres:

Curator and manageress of the Museu da República Data Base and the Museum Website, MSc in Museology and assistant to the Direction of Museu da República for the last three years. Co-ordination of Museum's editions and manageress of the documentations, research and preservation of the cultural heritage.
E-mail:
aevres@hotmail.com,
tecnica@museudarepublica.org.br

Karla Estelita Godoy: Curator, MSc in Museology and Co-ordinator of the Museu da República Data Base and the Museum Website.

E-mail: *godoy_karla@hotmail.com*
bdr@museudarepublica.org.br