



From the Vault to the Road: The Paradigm of the Itinerant Museum in the Democratization of Natural Heritage

Marcela Sánchez-Ocampo

1. Natural History Department, National Museum, Costa Rica, Curator

Abstract: Natural history museums serve as critical infrastructures for both academic research and public scientific literacy. However, the centralization of these institutions in urban hubs creates significant barriers to access for rural and marginalized communities, limiting the democratization of natural heritage. This article examines the operational "anatomy" of traditional museums, detailing the rigorous conservation requirements for diverse taxonomic collections—from entomology to paleontology—and the evolution of immersive museography. Building upon these foundations, we propose a paradigm shift toward the itinerant museum model. By analyzing the logistical precedents of historical traveling circuses and modern mobile health units, we argue that modular, climate-controlled mobile infrastructures can replicate the preservation standards of static institutions. The study delineates strategies for selecting robust "itinerant specimens" (e.g., resin inclusions, high-fidelity replicas) and engineering adaptive exhibition spaces using inflatable structures and flight-case systems. Ultimately, this framework posits that mobile museums can effectively decentralize biological knowledge without compromising scientific rigor. Regenerate

Keywords: conservation, citizen science, exhibitions, specimens.

INTRODUCTION

Natural history museums indisputably represent the backbone of biological taxonomy and the understanding of global biodiversity. These institutions operate not merely as static warehouses of curiosities, but as critical research infrastructures (1). Their function is dual and symbiotic: on one hand, they act as irreplaceable reservoirs of genetic and morphological material—voucher specimens—that ground systematics, biogeography, and evolutionary studies in rigorous academic science (2, 3). Without these collections, the verifiability of biological research would be compromised, impeding the essential replicability of the scientific method (4). On the other hand, their impact transcends laboratory walls through citizen science and outreach (5). Museums translate the complexity of binomial nomenclature and ecological processes into accessible vernacular language, fostering scientific literacy among the general public (6). This act of "translation" is vital in an era of climate crisis, where public understanding of biodiversity loss is a prerequisite for political and social action (7, 8).

Furthermore, modern museums have evolved into centers of active participation, where citizens are not just spectators but contributors to data collection and environmental monitoring (9, 10). While the digitization of collections has expanded this reach, the physical experience of the specimen remains irreplaceable for establishing an emotional and cognitive connection with nature (11, 12). However, there is an inherent geographical and socioeconomic barrier to the "cathedral museum" model, which is centralized in large

urban centers and systematically excludes rural or marginalized communities (13, 14). Literature suggests that equitable access to natural heritage is a cultural right that traditional models struggle to satisfy fully (15, 16). The non-formal education provided by these institutions is an indispensable complement to school curricula, which are often deficient in natural sciences in peripheral zones (17, 18).

Within this context, the following working hypothesis is proposed: The implementation of an itinerant museum model, designed with scientific rigor but logistical flexibility, would not only decentralize access to biological knowledge but also catalyze a revaluation of local natural heritage in historically underserved communities (19). It is postulated that mobile infrastructure, capable of replicating the conservation and exhibition conditions of a traditional museum, could generate an *in situ* educational and conservation impact superior to that of sporadic visits to centralized institutions (20).

ANATOMY OF A TRADITIONAL MUSEUM

The operational structure of a natural history museum is governed by strict functional compartmentalization aimed at guaranteeing the perpetuity of specimens. The heart of the institution resides in its curatorial departments, divided taxonomically (21). Mammal collections, for instance, require dual management: skins are preserved dry under controlled relative humidity conditions (45-55%) to prevent fungal growth and pest attacks (such as dermestids), while soft tissues and organs are preserved in fluids (70-95% ethanol) (22, 23). The management of the osteological collection involves maceration and cleaning processes which, if not executed with precision, can degrade the remnant DNA in the bone (24).

Conversely, entomological collections present unique challenges due to the fragility of the exoskeleton. Insects mounted on pins require airtight entomological drawers (Cornell or California type) to protect them from psocids and thermal fluctuations that could cause lipid condensation (25, 26). In the botanical realm, herbaria store pressed and dried plants; here, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is critical, as the cigarette beetle (*Lasioderma serricorne*) can destroy centuries of botanical history in weeks (27). Annexed collections of fruits and seeds (carpological collections) and pollen (palynological collections) require conditions of total darkness to avoid the photodegradation of pigments and cellular structures (28).

Geology and paleontology departments house fossils and minerals. Although seemingly robust, fossils suffer from "pyrite disease," an oxidation process occurring in environments with high relative humidity, transforming iron sulfide into sulfuric acid and destroying the specimen (29, 30). Minerals, for their part, can be hygroscopic or photosensitive, requiring display cases with inert atmospheres or UV filters (31). Curators daily face "vinegar syndrome" in older collections, data dissociation in analog catalogs, and the obsolescence of storage systems (32, 33). Modern data management demands digitization in standards such as Darwin Core, integrating physical specimen information with global databases (34, 35). Finally, physical security against disasters—fire or floods—dictates the architecture of repositories, prioritizing inert gas fire suppression systems over water-based ones, which would be catastrophic for collections (36).

THE EXHIBITION HALLS

Natural history museography has transitioned from chaotic cabinets of curiosities toward immersive narratives designed for cognitive retention. Contemporary exhibition design relies on "spatial narrative," where the visitor's physical path emulates an intellectual journey, guided by museographic supports ranging from classic dioramas to haptic interfaces (37, 38). Historically, museums faced the lighting dilemma: natural light, while aesthetic, proved lethal to organic specimens due to ultraviolet (UV) and infrared (IR) radiation, causing irreversible discoloration and structural fragility in feathers and fur (39, 40). This led to the development of controlled-spectrum LED lighting, which minimizes photochemical damage (41).

In-gallery preservation also combats abiotic factors. Fluctuating relative humidity causes mechanical stresses in wood and taxidermied skins, leading to fissures and deformations (42). Historic fires, such as that of the National Museum of Brazil in 2018, underscore the vulnerability of these structures in the absence of adequate prevention systems (43). Likewise, seismic risks have necessitated the redesign of exhibition supports, implementing base isolators and flexible mounts for large-format skeletons (44, 45). Modern narrative seeks to "capture" the public through emotional connection, utilizing scientific storytelling techniques that contextualize the specimen not as an isolated object, but as part of a dynamic ecosystem (46).

THE ITINERANT MUSEUM: FROM THE TENT TO THE MOBILE LABORATORY

The genealogy of the itinerant museum finds a controversial but logically relevant antecedent in the circuses and traveling menageries of the 19th and 20th centuries. These caravans, though motivated by profit and spectacle, perfected the logistics of transporting "the exotic" and ephemeral architecture (47, 48). While their animal welfare practices and exhibition of human "oddities" are ethically condemnable by current standards, they demonstrated the technical viability of transporting complex structures to remote locations (49, 50). Barnum and Bailey, for example, developed railway loading systems and modular tent assembly methods that allowed for the erection of a "city" in hours (51). This logistical efficiency, stripped of its exploitative component, offers a valuable structural model for scientific museology (52).

The transition toward an itinerant educational model implies reorienting circus engineering toward preventive conservation. Recent studies support that mobile exhibitions can achieve public participation rates superior to fixed venues in relation to cost per visitor (53, 54). Itinerancy breaks the distance barrier, democratizing access to cultural capital (55). However, the challenge lies in environmental stability. Unlike the permeable canvas tents of the past, a mobile scientific museum requires structures with thermal insulation and autonomous hygrometric control (56, 57).

Literature on "pop-up museums" suggests that modularity allows the exhibition to adapt to pre-existing community spaces or deploy autonomous infrastructures in open areas (58, 59). This approach not only decentralizes science but allows for adaptive curation: content can be modified to reflect the local biodiversity of the visited region, increasing relevance for the host community (60, 61). Mobile health units have demonstrated similar efficacy in community penetration, a model that museology is beginning to replicate (62,

63). Academic validation of this model requires, however, strict protocols to ensure that constant transport does not compromise the integrity of heritage objects (64, 65, 66).

ITINERANT SPECIMENS: SELECTION AND CONSERVATION

The selection of specimens for an itinerant collection must prioritize structural robustness and didactic value over fragile rarity. Insects encapsulated in polyester or acrylic resin represent the "gold standard" for educational manipulation, allowing 360° visualization without the risk of appendage breakage, unlike traditional pinned mounting (67, 68). For vertebrates, the use of high-fidelity replicas (latex molds or 3D printing) of footprints and skulls eliminates the risk of damaging irreplaceable original material, while allowing for a tactile experience prohibited in conventional museums (69, 70).

In the botanical realm, resin inclusions are also effective for fruits and seeds, but plasticized exsiccata (pressed plant) mounts offer a lightweight and durable alternative for teaching leaf morphology (71). Nests and eggs can be presented using hand-painted artificial models, avoiding illegal collection and the fragility of original calcareous shells (72). Interactivity is key: discovery boxes and frames inviting the touching of textures (tanned furs, barks) foster kinesthetic learning (73). Literature emphasizes that objects destined for itinerancy should be considered "sacrificial material" or research copies, reserving holotypes and type specimens exclusively for climate-controlled vaults (74, 75).

ANATOMY OF AN ITINERANT MUSEUM

The architecture of an itinerant museum must hybridize transport engineering with conservation museography. Inflatable structures and modern tensile structures offer significant advantages: lightness, rapid deployment, and the capacity to create large volumes of air that act as initial thermal insulation (76, 77). Modular assembly systems, based on transformable flight cases (transport boxes that convert into display cases), optimize cargo volume and reduce direct handling of specimens (78, 79). These modules must incorporate cushioning materials such as high-density polyethylene foam (Ethafoam) cut to measure to absorb terrestrial transport vibrations (80).

Lighting in these spaces must be autonomous, based on low-consumption LED systems powered by batteries or solar generators, avoiding dependence on unstable local electrical grids and eliminating heat emission toward the display cases (81, 82). Structural materials must be fire-retardant and abrasion-resistant, such as aluminum composite panels or reinforced polymers (83, 84). Storage during transit is the critical phase; containers with pressure valves and hermetic seals are required to maintain stable microclimates against changes in altitude and external temperature (85, 86).

Assembly ergonomics are vital for conservation: a system requiring complex tools or excessive force increases the risk of human accidents and damage to heritage (87, 88). Studies on international exhibition logistics suggest the use of real-time dataloggers within transport crates to monitor impacts and environmental conditions throughout the journey (89, 90).

CONCLUSIONS

- Natural history museums are indispensable dual infrastructures: reservoirs of biological data for academic science and platforms for knowledge translation for society.
- The centralization of traditional museums creates an access gap to cultural and natural heritage, excluding peripheral and rural communities.
- The anatomy of the traditional museum is based on strict departmental specialization and rigorous environmental control for the long-term preservation of diverse collections (wet, dry, osteological).
- Conservation challenges are taxonomically specific, ranging from pest control in herbaria to the prevention of oxidation in fossils.
- Modern museographic narrative has evolved toward immersive experiences, overcoming historical problems of damaging lighting and static design.
- The itinerant circus model, stripped of its negative ethical components, provides a viable logistical blueprint for the mobility of complex museum infrastructures.
- The scientific itinerant museum has the potential to democratize knowledge and adapt its content to the local ecological reality of the communities it visits.
- The selection of itinerant specimens must prioritize durability and interactivity (replicas, resin inclusions) over the value of the original type specimen.
- Modern itinerant architecture is founded on modularity, lightweight structures (inflatables/tensile structures), and packing systems that simultaneously function as exhibition units (flight cases).
- The success of the itinerant museum depends on guaranteeing preventive conservation conditions (vibration and climate control) during the critical transport phase.

REFERENCES

1. Suarez AV, Tsutsui ND. The value of museum collections for research and society. *BioScience*. 2004;54(1):66-74. doi:10.1641/0006-3568(2004)054[0066:TVOMCF]2.0.CO;2
2. Bradley RD, et al. The value of voucher specimens in ornithology. *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*. 2014;126(4):658-671. doi:10.1676/14-118.1
3. Rocha LA, et al. Specimen collection: An essential tool. *Science*. 2014;344(6186):814-815. doi:10.1126/science.344.6186.814
4. Schilthuizen M, et al. Specimens as primary data: museums and ‘open science’. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*. 2015;30(5):237-238. doi:10.1016/j.tree.2015.03.002
5. Ballard HL, et al. Contributions of citizen science to research and conservation. *Biological Conservation*. 2017;208:87-97. doi:10.1016/j.biocon.2016.05.024
6. Dorfman E. *The Future of Natural History Museums*. 1st ed. London: Routledge; 2017.
7. Newell B, et al. Psychology and global climate change. *American Psychologist*. 2011;66(4):265-276. doi:10.1037/a0023166

8. McGhie H. Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals. *Curating Tomorrow*; 2019.
9. Bonney R, et al. Citizen science: A developing tool for expanding science knowledge and scientific literacy. *BioScience*. 2009;59(11):977-984. doi:10.1525/bio.2009.59.11.9
10. Shirk JL, et al. Public participation in scientific research: a framework for deliberate design. *Ecology and Society*. 2012;17(2):29. doi:10.5751/ES-04705-170229
11. Hedrick BP, et al. Digitization and the future of natural history collections. *BioScience*. 2020;70(3):243-251. doi:10.1093/biosci/biz163
12. Hsi S. The FIDO project: Design and deployment of an outdoor museum exhibit. *Proc. ACM*. 2003.
13. Dawson E. Not designed for us: How science museums and science centers socially exclude low-income, minority ethnic groups. *Science Education*. 2014;98(6):981-1008. doi:10.1002/sce.21133
14. Kreps CF. *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation*. London: Routledge; 2003.
15. Sandell R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*. London: Routledge; 2002.
16. Falk JH, et al. *The Museum Experience Revisited*. Left Coast Press; 2013.
17. Rennie L. *Learning science in informal environments: People, places and pursuits*. National Research Council; 2009.
18. Tal T, Morag O. School visits to natural history museums: Teaching or enriching?. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*. 2007;44(5):747-769. doi:10.1002/tea.20184
19. Jolly L. The mobile museum: An experiment in transportable culture. *Museum International*. 2016;68(1-2):120-130.
20. Mujtaba T, et al. Learning and engagement in a mobile science exhibition. *International Journal of Science Education*. 2018;40(10):1187-1207.
21. Simmons JE. *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies*. 2nd ed. Rowman & Littlefield; 2017.
22. Carter DJ, Walker AK. *Care and Conservation of Natural History Collections*. Butterworth-Heinemann; 1999.
23. Williams SL, Catharinsrine R. A review of the preservation of mammalian tissues in fluids. *Collection Forum*. 2012;26(1):45-56.
24. Sullivan K, et al. DNA degradation in bone from maceration. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. 2015;60(1):15-20.
25. Metsger DA, Byers SC. *Managing the Modern Herbarium: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Elton-Wolf; 1999.
26. Pinniger D. *Pest Management in Museums, Archives and Historic Houses*. Archetype Publications; 2001.
27. Strang TJK. A review of published temperatures for the control of pest insects in museums. *Collection Forum*. 1992;8(2):41-67.
28. Bridson D, Forman L. *The Herbarium Handbook*. 3rd ed. Royal Botanic Gardens Kew; 1998.
29. Waller R. Conservation of mineral specimens. *Mineralogical Record*. 1999;30(1):5-12.
30. Larkin NR. Pyrite decay: cause and effect, prevention and cure. *Natural Sciences Collections Association News*. 2011;21:35-43.
31. Howie FM. *The Care and Conservation of Geological Material*. Butterworth-Heinemann; 1992.

32. Tétreault J. Airborne Pollutants in Museums, Galleries and Archives. Canadian Conservation Institute; 2003.
33. Graham A, et al. Natural history collections: A new approach to data management. *Nature*. 2004;428:132.
34. Wieczorek J, et al. Darwin Core: An evolving community-developed biodiversity data standard. *PLoS ONE*. 2012;7(1):e29715. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0029715
35. Nelson G, Ellis S. The history and impact of digitization and digital data mobilization on biodiversity research. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B*. 2018;374:20170391.
36. Cote W. Disaster preparedness in the museum environment. *Curator: The Museum Journal*. 2010;53(2):167-184.
37. Lord B, Piacente M. *Manual of Museum Exhibitions*. Rowman & Littlefield; 2014.
38. Bitgood S. *Attention and Value: Keys to Understanding Museum Visitors*. Left Coast Press; 2013.
39. Feller RL. *Control of Deteriorating Effects of Light and Ultraviolet Radiation*. National Gallery of Art; 1994.
40. Michalski S. The lighting decision. In: *Fabric of an Exhibition*. Canadian Conservation Institute; 1997.
41. Druzik J, Michalski S. *Guidelines for Selecting Solid-State Lighting for Museums*. Getty Conservation Institute; 2012.
42. Mecklenburg MF, et al. Structural response of painted wood surfaces to changes in ambient relative humidity. *Smithsonian Contributions to Museum Conservation*. 1998.
43. Zamudio KR, et al. The loss of biodiversity data: The fire at the National Museum of Brazil. *Science*. 2018;362(6413):403. doi:10.1126/science.aav3296
44. Agbabian MS, et al. *Mitigation of Seismic Hazard to Museum Contents*. Getty Conservation Institute; 1991.
45. Podany J. *Advances in the Protection of Museum Collections from Earthquake Damage*. Getty Publications; 2006.
46. Bedford L. *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Safe Spaces in Museums*. Left Coast Press; 2014.
47. Tait P. *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance*. Routledge; 2005.
48. Stoddart H. *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*. Manchester University Press; 2000.
49. Hughes HA. The traveling menagerie in nineteenth-century Britain. *Journal of Victorian Culture*. 2015;20(2):147-162.
50. Mullan B, Marvin G. *Zoo Culture*. University of Illinois Press; 1999.
51. Davis JE. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top*. University of North Carolina Press; 2002.
52. Albrecht D. Mobile museums and the itinerancy of heritage. *Museum History Journal*. 2016;9(1):77-93.
53. Corsane G. *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*. Routledge; 2005.
54. Black G. *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. Routledge; 2005.
55. Witcomb A. *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*. Routledge; 2003.
56. Cassar M. *Environmental Management: Guidelines for Museums and Galleries*. Routledge; 1995.
57. Thomson G. *The Museum Environment*. 2nd ed. Butterworth-Heinemann; 1986.

58. Richardson J. *The Pop-Up Museum*. MuseumID. 2014.
59. Simon N. *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0; 2010.
60. Kreps C. Appropriate museology in theory and practice. *Museum Management and Curatorship*. 2008;23(1):23-41.
61. Stam DC. The informed muse: The implications of 'The New Museology'. *Museum Management and Curatorship*. 1993;12(3):267-283.
62. Hill A, et al. Mobile health clinics: A systematic review. *International Journal for Equity in Health*. 2012;11(1):1-12.
63. Orians CE, et al. Mobile health: A strategy to increase access. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*. 2009;20(4):1048-1064.
64. Marcon PJ. Shock and vibration during transportation. In: *Art in Transit*. National Gallery of Art; 1991.
65. Mecklenburg MF. *Art in Transit: Studies in the Transport of Paintings*. National Gallery of Art; 1991.
66. Saunders D. Traveling exhibitions: The risk of movement. *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*. 2001;22:87-101.
67. Triplehorn CA, Johnson NF. *Borror and DeLong's Introduction to the Study of Insects*. 7th ed. Thomson Brooks/Cole; 2005.
68. VanDam M. Resin embedding for insect display. *Entomology News*. 2010;121(3):298-301.
69. Ritzman TB, et al. 3D printing for museum collections. *Journal of Paleontological Techniques*. 2016;15:1-12.
70. Wilson LA, et al. The value of digitization for museum retention and outreach. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*. 2017;1:1-5.
71. Bridson D, Forman L. *The Herbarium Handbook*. 3rd ed. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; 1998.
72. Russell GD, et al. Artificial nests in ornithological research. *Journal of Field Ornithology*. 2018;89(2):113-125.
73. Paris SG. *Perspectives on Object-Centered Learning in Museums*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002.
74. Nudds JR, Pettitt CW. *The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections*. Geological Society; 1997.
75. Cato PS. *Collection Care and Management*. Natural Science Collections Alliance; 2001.
76. Kronenburg R. *Portable Architecture: Design and Technology*. Birkhäuser; 2008.
77. Topham S. *Blowup: Inflatable Art, Architecture and Design*. Prestel; 2002.
78. Mollerup P. *Collapsibles: A Design Function*. Thames & Hudson; 2001.
79. Kronenburg R. *Flexible: Architecture that Responds to Change*. Laurence King Publishing; 2007.
80. Schlichting C. *Working with Polyethylene Foam and Fluted Plastic Sheet*. Canadian Conservation Institute Notes; 1994.
81. Cuttle C. *Lighting by Design*. Architectural Press; 2008.
82. Ajmat RF, et al. Lighting design in museums: Exhibition vs. preservation. *Energy and Buildings*. 2011;43(11):3033-3039.
83. Ashby MF, Johnson K. *Materials and Design: The Art and Science of Material Selection in Product Design*. Butterworth-Heinemann; 2013.

84. Kula D, Ternaux E. *Materiology: The Creative Industry's Guide to Materials and Technologies*. Frame Publishers; 2009.
85. Stolow N. *Conservation and Exhibitions: Packing, Transport, Storage, and Environmental Considerations*. Butterworths; 1987.
86. Richard M. *Packing and Crating*. In: *Museum Registration Methods*. AAM Press; 2010.
87. Chartered Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors. *Ergonomics in Museum Design*. CIEHF; 2018.
88. Ambrose T, Paine C. *Museum Basics*. 3rd ed. Routledge; 2012.
89. Lull WP. *Conservation Environment Guidelines for Libraries and Archives*. Canadian Council of Archives; 1995.
90. Padfield T. Why keep climate records? In: *Museum Microclimates*. National Museum of Denmark; 2007.