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UP CLOSE, NO ONE IS NORMAL
THE MUSEO LABORATORIO DELLA MENTE

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Just what is a museum?

It's a living place, not just a place where finished works are kept, but where works are in contact with each other, and being in contact can live for ever.

A place where time is created with space and memory.

A place for meeting, comparing, showing, connecting.

The Center for Studies and Research Museo Laboratorio della Mente comes under the supervision of the Local Health Authority Roma E (LHA RME).

It was established to protect and improve the historical and scientific legacy of the former Santa Maria della Pietà Psychiatric Hospital in Rome.

With regard to its own historical and cultural roots, and in light of the social and cultural significance of the former Santa Maria della Pietà Psychiatric Hospital, the LHA RME is determined to find the best ways of protecting and improving its scientific, artistic and cultural legacy and of working with other government agencies, particularly the Cultural Heritage Ministry, the Lazio Region and the city of Rome.

The Center for Studies and Research Museo Laboratorio della Mente is the result of this commitment, with the LHA RME making use of the former Santa Maria della Pietà Psychiatric Hospital.

Plans were approved on November 16, 2007 by the Lazio Regional Council, when it agreed to the memorandum of understanding signed by the municipality of Rome, La Sapienza University of Rome, the Lazio Regional Office of Health and Education and the 19th Local Area Administration of the municipality of Rome.

The project includes the creation of a multipurpose “metropolitan and urban centre”, social, cultural and healthcare services throughout the area, educational activities, a research facility for university students and the upgrading of the *Museo Laboratorio della Mente*.

Over the course of its 500-year history Santa Maria della Pietà Psychiatric Hospital was a yardstick in the psychiatric field for scholars, researchers and all those concerned with mental health in Italy and elsewhere.

On 7 October 2008 the new *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* was inaugurated. Its design was entrusted to Studio Azzurro, a video-art team that has acquired interesting international experiences in the spheres of art, cinema and museum installations.

The intention of Studio Azzurro as regards the design of the new *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* was to construct communicative settings to foster the promotion of mental health and to actively *involve* the spectator in the narration.

The team therefore sought to construct a narrative framework based on multi-textuality and the continuous alternation of real elements and laboratory experiences, which do not have the sole task of preserving the past of a former Psychiatric Hospital, but also present this past as the paradigm of a history that is both old and new: that of prejudice against diversity.

The ideas behind the museum's design are inspired by recent museology developments, which have questioned the role of museums as places where the past is put on display: museums should rather be spaces for seeking new forms of social relations and clues to our future, institutions capable of being in constant touch with modern-day debates, of staying in touch with reality, of drawing from the present.

The layout of the museum is based on a "historical map" – which also makes use of oral sources and materials from the Cencelli Library and the Santa Maria della Pietà historic archives – of institutional and anti-institutional practices, a continuous, dual dialectical process that deconstructs the geography of spatial, physical, psychological and social constructions and reconstructs individual subjectivity.

By listening to and watching video interviews with witnesses of the mental hospital's history and the direct experiences of the interactive installations, the visitor is invited to reflect on social exclusion and to consider/reconsider his thoughts on the question of diversity.

With its communicative power and intense emotional impact, the sophisticated technological project enables the visitor to elaborate his own path to knowledge and assessment of history, choosing personally from the various multimedia *tiles* of this original technological mosaic of memory.

The museum is thus able to effectively *preserve, transmit and make topical* the questions of mental health, normality and mental malaise, providing correct information on the reform of our mental health system, begun by Franco Basaglia and completed in 1978 with the gradually closing down of all Psychiatric Hospitals in Italy.

This is an attempt to give due importance to a history that has not yet been documented, referring constantly to our everyday lives.

The *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* thus places at the core of its educational project mental health and diversity as veritable resources.

This is the only museum in Italy to be created out of the experience of a mental health service, run by mental health workers within the public health framework.

Over the past year it has been visited by about 7,000 adolescents, who have been given the opportunity to have a fascinating and unusual aesthetic experience.

Visitors are invited to learn chiefly through the corporeal and sensorial dimensions. The visitor's body indeed is the very motor of the aesthetic experience.

There is the “memory table”, for instance: barely brushing the surface of the table, the faces of historic witnesses of the S. Maria della Pietà hospital come to life and talk to us about their intense personal experiences.

The simple action of bringing one’s hand close and touching the item projected onto the table (house rules, keys, etc.) renders the viewer active and involves him in the atmosphere of the narration, transferring the sense of that experience.

By removing the “don’t touch” rule of the museum the visitor becomes actively involved, since if he does not *touch* he will not be able to *see* or to *hear* anything.

The same principle applies for other installations in which the visitor is invited to experience what inmates went through, listen to the sounds of the mental asylum or try a sensorial experience of “abnormality”, which has an estranging effect.

The *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* thus embraces the principle whereby things can be better understood by getting them to happen rather than by reading or listening to a description or observing a representation of it.

The museum item is thus replaced almost completely by the image, and the caption gives way to oral narration, to a meeting with the witnesses, with history.

Let us listen carefully to the stories, complete with photographs and film clips, and at the same time let us observe the faces of the witnesses who, with their wrinkles, white hair, marks of time and age, pass on the echoes of past lives, parallel to the images shown nowadays by TV and other media, which continue to show cases of exclusion, solitude, violence, bullying, race discrimination and non-acceptance of diversity.

Phenomena that museums too, being public services, should learn to combat through educational programmes and effective communication.

As a result of the content and methods of the Italian deinstitutionalization process (which has often been seen as simply getting rid of psychiatric hospitals) and the ongoing criticism of the rationalistic problem-solution paradigm as it is usually applied in psychiatry, the *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* has worked in recent years to develop fruitful collaboration with other museums (namely the Het Dolhuys and Dr. Guislain Museums).

Comparisons of different approaches have contributed to actions to support and implement EU policies to promote mental health, raising citizens' awareness of mental health topics and building throughout Europe a framework for cooperation and the sharing of best practices.

In addition to highlighting the enormous value of the *Museo Laboratorio della Mente* in the sphere of promoting mental health and the culture of participation, the visitor is asked to use this space as a valuable element of Italian *civitas*: a melting pot of tensions and utopias, a permanent laboratory studying the cultures of tolerance.