

Words from the Hosts

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Cities are spaces of continuous negotiation: about belonging, identity, and coexistence. What does the city offer, afford and what do we make of it? How much space do we claim for ourselves, and how much do we leave for others? Where does the city begin and end, and which stories, places, and layers do each of us choose to recognize?

These questions were at the heart of the 2024 ICOM CAMOC COMCOL conference *Collecting with(in) the City*, hosted jointly by Imagine IC and the Amsterdam Museum. A natural partnership for this conference as both institutions are deeply rooted in Amsterdam's ongoing dialogue about memory and identities, and both share a long tradition of co-collecting — building collections with communities rather than about them. With colleagues from across the world, we came together to reflect on what it means to collect with and within a city today. How to revisit collecting and (re)presenting in and with the city, by investigating the fluidity of the borders between museums and cities.

Co-Creating the City's Memory

For both Imagine IC and the Amsterdam Museum, co-creation is not just a method — it is a value, an attitude, and an ethical commitment. A city is made up of many voices, many experiences, and many truths. To collect its stories responsibly, we must create space for those voices to shape how the city is remembered and represented.

The Amsterdam Museum sees itself as a platform where the city's residents and visitors become co-authors of its heritage. Through programs such as *Collecting the City*, the museum works in partnership with diverse partners to decide what stories matter, how they are told, and how they enter the collection. This approach ensures that the museum's holdings reflect not just dominant narratives but also those who have been underrepresented.

At Imagine IC, this philosophy is described as “heritage democracy”: the belief that everyone's voice is important in shaping collective memories. For more than two decades, Imagine IC has been experimenting with ways to release, record, tell, and share personal meanings and address overlooked narratives — creating a multi-layered collection of lived experiences from Amsterdam-Zuidoost and beyond.

Imagine IC invites people to become active stewards of their own (hi)stories, ensuring that context, biography, and personal perspectives remain central.

In this shared vision, co-creation strengthens the ethical role of city museums. It challenges institutions to listen deeply, embrace complexity, and acknowledge that no single institution can — or should — define what is valuable on its own. Instead, museums become facilitators of dialogue, enablers of care, and hosts of multiple truths. In doing so, they create living, evolving collections that are richer, more inclusive, and more relevant to the people they serve.

Embracing Complexity

In *City Life* (2018), sociologist Richard Sennett reminds us that although humans are social beings, our encounters are often limited by divisions of power, privilege, and identity. We tend to simplify the complex reality of the metropolis, seeking clarity and control — yet Sennett urges us instead to embrace complexity as the foundation of a healthy, open society.

This is also central to our collaboration. Through dialogue and co-creation, we seek to capture a multi-layered collection of meanings that reflects the diversity and richness of lived experience. Brazilian thinker Ailton Krenak, in *Life Is Not Useful*, highlights how ideas emerge through conversation, reciprocity, and attentive listening — a praxis Imagine IC believes is essential for heritage work today. Listening, for them, is an act of care. Traditionally, heritage institutions have focused on caring for objects, but we believe that caring for people — their stories, relationships, and voices — must come first.

Looking Ahead

City museums are changing. Collaboration, co-creation, and participation are no longer optional; they are central to our practice. But listening and care must extend not only to the communities we as museum professionals work with but also within our institutions, amongst our teams and colleagues.

It is our hope that this conference created a space to connect and reconnect, to inspire and be inspired, and to support one another in our work — work that is often challenging and deeply personal. Together, we practiced new ways of listening, caring, and imagining the future of city museums and heritage work.

May these proceedings capture that spirit and serve as a resource for the steps we take — individually and collectively — toward a more inclusive, multi-voiced understanding of our cities and their stories.