

# Collecting with(in) the city

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09–11 October 2024

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of museums

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for the Collections and Activities  
of Museums of Cities

MI COMCOL ICOM  
International  
Committee  
for Collecting

# Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL  
Conference  
09–11 October 2024**

Collecting with(in) the city  
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Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum  
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski



Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte  
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

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# Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions

Annemarie de Wildt

& all the writers of conference cards

The joint 2024 CAMOC and COMCOL conference in Amsterdam brought together heritage professionals from around the world to explore the evolving relationship between museums and its diverse communities. Under the theme *Collecting with(in) the City*, the conference explored how museums can collect *with* and *in* the city, and how they position themselves within these dynamic urban environments.

What made this conference particularly engaging was the use of conference cards to capture (or collect so you will) not only formal insights but also emotions, moments of inspiration, critique, and personal resonance. One could call it intangible Rapid Response Collecting, the equivalent of the instant collecting practices in response to important moments, that was coined in 2014 by the V&A Museum.

These handwritten reflections served as a form of affective annotation, allowing participants' voices to enter the proceedings with immediacy and authenticity. They offer a method of documentation that honours both intellectual and emotional knowledge. In this way, *Collecting with(in) the City* itself became a model of inclusive curating—where the event, like the museum, was shaped by those who experienced it. As one card eloquently noted, “Time is collective heritage.” Let us listen more deeply, act more boldly, and imagine more collectively.

This text is an effort to reflect on the rich and multifaceted insights shared on the conference cards, weaving a narrative around the lived experiences, questions, and tensions that emerged across sessions. It aims to articulate new perspectives for the future of museum collecting practices, rooted in collaboration and care. But not without the disclaimer that this synthesis is not a neutral effort nor a complete reflection of the depthness or maybe other meanings behind the words written on the card. They are interpretations through the eye of the writer.

## Museums Are Not Neutral: Positioning and Politics

“Be more political because museums are not neutral!” read one of the more urgent notes scribbled after a session on collecting activism. The movement “Museums Are Not Neutral”, started in 2017 by art worker La Tanya S. Autry and museum educator Mike Murawski, changed the way museums are seen by both museum professionals and visitors.<sup>1</sup> It also forces us to define what we mean by this. The sentiment of non-neutrality echoed widely throughout the conference. Discussions on collecting politically charged materials—whether from progressive or conservative movements—highlighted the reality that museums cannot pretend neutrality. One

participant remarked, “The museum is a political institution, born to it as a base of modernity.” Another contributor expressed concern about double standards: “I found it typical to hear that museums have no problems publishing materials from the left but find it difficult to work with right-wing protests.” This sparked deeper reflection on the ethics and implications of platforming activism. “What story do you want to tell?” one asked. “Even documenting is not neutral.” The debates pointed toward the need for value-based curatorship and open dialogue, especially in cities facing political polarization.

## Care Is Also Collecting: Ethics and Emotional Labor

Several sessions explored the invisible yet essential emotional labor behind inclusive museum practices. “Emotional labor is rarely included in our job descriptions,” a participant observed. Another wrote, “We don’t save lives, but we save memories.” These sentiments framed care not just as a theme, but as a core practice in museum work.

Participants emphasized the responsibility of museums to welcome diverse communities—not just through programming, but by cultivating trust and emotional safety. “A challenge for everyone: How can there be value for the groups we co-create with if they don’t feel welcome in the museum space?” one asked. Others underscored the importance of continuity: “The knowledge I gained from this session is to remember to care for the relationship when the museum moves on to new projects.”

This sense of emotional investment extended to the role of museums in moments of crisis. “It was emotional to hear that museums are needed in pandemics like COVID,” one participant shared. “We are no doctors, but we keep memories safe.” Another observed, “We pressure people’s memories”—a powerful reminder of the responsibility institutions bear when shaping narratives.

## Digital Collecting: Technology as a Bridge Builder

Digital innovation stood out as both opportunity and challenge. Tools such as mobile apps and AI-driven archives help broaden access and participation. Yet various reflections struck a cautionary tone: “Personal contact and trust are always needed to take full advantage of digital collecting.” And “Question: The use of AI when making living histories and communities. Is AI inclusive? Is AI problematic?” Technology, while powerful, must be grounded in human connection and inclusivity. Or in poetry: “I loved to experience the projects from China and Japan. I loved the poetic way they presented their cities in the digitally animated world.”

Participants pointed to disparities in institutional resources, noting that “we have vastly different budgets, expertise, and experience.” There was a clear desire for collaborative networks that pool expertise to develop digital strategies that are accessible, sustainable, and community-centered.

### Decolonisation: Revaluating and Redistributing Knowledge

Decolonisation of museums has become a container concept in recent years. However, the meaning of decolonizing is being debated. It may refer to research into and repatriation of objects, expanding the perspectives beyond those of the dominant cultural group as well as recognizing and valuing different forms of knowledge and expertise.<sup>2</sup>

“80 percent of the Earth is taken care of by Indigenous peoples,” one participant noted. This statistic anchored many reflections on the urgency of decolonizing museum practices. “We are not there yet—still talking more about them instead of with them,” one card stated. But act in a careful way: “Don’t pressure people to represent an entire community”. And be aware of the harm museums can do: “Do museums play a role/ have a part in making communities a minority by presenting them as such and thereby making their position more difficult?”

Decolonizing efforts must go beyond repatriation to involve Indigenous groups in decision-making and interpretation. As another participant wrote, “The process of repatriation should be handled in a manner that involves Indigenous leaders... Museums should make it a priority.” Another asked provocatively, “Can you pray in a museum?”—challenging institutions to reconsider how objects function and are experienced in space. These discussions called for museums to rethink ownership, replace “object-based” logics with “relationship-based” models, and center the concept of stewardship.

The conference was attended by people from countries. One card called for discussion of regional differences: “How we in Western Europe work in a privileged position in what we can collect and exhibit. How can we as CAMOC encourage discussion on ‘bubbles’ and getting out of them.”

### New Forms of Collecting: Fluid, Participatory, Iterative

“Collect now, determine relevance later,” one participant suggested, highlighting a shift toward more open-ended, responsive collecting. Many called for structures that allow museums to act in real time and evaluate significance collaboratively over time, such as this urgent appeal: “That we need to document activism in Slovakia actively, right now! Don’t wait 2 or 3 years! We have culture strike in Slovakia right now, we have to collect it – that can be our role”

Questions were raised about accountability and selection: “Are choices collaborative? Who is at the table? How do we ensure broad and fair coverage?” Another noted that “deaccessioning should be seen as a strength—it lets us collect more courageously.”

This experimental attitude extended to the idea of in situ collections—where objects stay embedded in communities rather than entering traditional storage. “Try to collect in a participatory way and with an open mind,” one comment urged. “Not first museum-worthy affects.” Another participant emphasized, “We should keep collecting because urbanization and political shifts can change everything quickly.”

Throughout the conference ethical questions were raised: “How do we care for intimate collections; how do we keep a robust policy on sensitive stories we share and are shared with us?”

### Sensory Experience, Emotions, and the Feeling of Home

“Your fullness is my happiness,” read one particularly moving comment from the session *Senses of Home*. Participants explored how heritage lives not only in objects but in sensory memory, shared meals, gardens, and gestures of care.

Workshops engaged deeply with questions such as, “Why is the sense of touch or smell considered less than the sense of seeing?” Another participant shared, “why is the sense of touch or smell, less than the sense of seeing? Could the dress be worth more if the audience can touch the dress?” referring to incorporating sensory interpretation into exhibitions and workshops, rather than the usual ‘don’t touch’. These reflections reinforced the need for museums to create environments that are emotionally resonant and sensorially inclusive.

### Conflict, Trauma, and Representation

“History or now? Nations or different populations?” These questions surfaced in sessions exploring how museums represent conflict. One card asked, “How can we connect past and present conflicts without traumatizing those who come directly from these areas?”

The idea of “implicated communities”—those indirectly affected by conflict—was discussed as an ethical frame for representation (Rothberg 2019). “Narrative and memory can implicate communities connected to conflict,” one attendee observed. Others probed how to handle opposing narratives: “What do we do with interpretations that conflict with the larger goals we’re working toward?”

Another reflection drew attention to linguistic diversity in urban representation: “Languages, social/cultural languages—these shape how we understand each other and the past.” One participant asked, “Who has the power to define a community?”—a question that resonates deeply in cities shaped by migration and plural histories.

### Revisiting Collections: Who Decides and Why?

Who has the power to define what gets collected? “Who decides on what, how, and to whom?” a participant asked pointedly. The call for transparency and co-ownership resonated throughout the sessions.

Several participants suggested public storage visits and collaborative cataloguing as ways to democratize collection practices. “To collect in another way—not in a (museum) depot, but with the people themselves,” one noted. Others advocated for incorporating sustainability and inclusivity into collection policies: “Using the platform of the city as a working desk,” as one speaker vividly put it.

Another emphasized: “Meaningful: senior community groups, co-curation and museum staff.” There was also reflection on invisibility: “Many interventions assume visibility is always good, but stories are often intimate, sensitive, and complex. Can we accommodate for this?”

### Conclusion

*Collecting with(in) the City* revealed museums not only as spaces of memory, but as catalysts of imagination, care, and transformation. “We are made of memories,” one participant wrote. “And preserving memories is to preserve the community.” Throughout the conference however various examples were presented of the importance of memories initiating dialogues to give meaning in the now and for the future. Many participants stressed the need to be bold as well as playful. “The main message is: don’t be afraid of playful topics of exhibitions.”

As museums navigate the complexities of contemporary cities—polarization, inequality, migration, digital acceleration—they are called to act not as neutral observers, but as ethical actors, collaborators, and listeners. The conference offered clear directions: be more political, more caring, more responsive, and more transparent.

### Notes

- 1 *Museums are Not Neutral with Movement* Co-Founders La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, Podcast Monument Lab, episode 26 <<https://monumentlab.com/podcast/museums-are-not-neutral-with-movement-co-founders-la-tanya-s-autry-and-mike-murawski>> accessed, 4 August 2025
- 2 <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums>  
<https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>  
<https://icom.museum/en/committee/working-group-on-decolonisation/>

### References

Rothberg, M. (2019), *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press

## Co-Creation Conference Card

Break-Out session: 1. Collecting activism

What new insight, perspective and/or knowledge did you gain from this session that you would like to share?

-> We have to be more  
courageous  
-> more political  
because =  
museums are not  
neutral!

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