

Migration museums' social and cultural offer for Ukrainian war refugees: A case study of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia

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With the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, many institutions and organisations have been faced with the challenge of integrating and including numerous refugees. Migration museums, statutorily responsible for informing and educating about migrations and asylum in both historical and contemporary contexts, have become notable actors in this regard. This article presents a case study of the Museum of Emigration in Gdynia (MEG) and the activities undertaken by this institution for war refugees from Ukraine. The text is based on participant observation, source documents, individual in-depth interviews and a literature review. The results of the analysis demonstrate that cultural institutions, including migration museums, can take over integration activities from NGOs in a crisis situation, relying on stable infrastructure and financial liquidity.

Keywords: migration museums; integration of migrants; social inclusion; war refugees from Ukraine; Emigration Museum in Gdynia

Introduction

In recent years, Poland has undergone a transformation from an emigration country to an immigration country. The main reasons for the significant increase in the number of foreigners in the country were (and remain) the need for workers and the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine starting 24 February 2022, which triggered a mass migration of war refugees. The latter situation in particular has resulted in many institutions and organisations, including those of a cultural nature, being confronted with new challenges. In the case of cultural institutions, the influx of refugees from Ukraine has raised new questions

about the social role of these actors, both in the context of *ad hoc* aid measures and long-term ones related to social integration and inclusion.

Margherita Sani notes that in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the social role of museums: from temples of knowledge to forums for debate and discussion, from a repository of objects to a socially responsible institution focused on people.¹ In turn, referring to the role of museums in shaping intercultural dialogue, Simona Bodo points to three main tasks that museum institutions can perform in the context of cultural flows and integration activities. These are:

1. informing audiences about other cultures, which have historically been misrepresented or completely ignored in museums;
2. integrating new citizens into mainstream culture by helping them learn about the history of the country of settlement, its language, values, and traditions; and
3. promoting cultural self-awareness in immigrant communities through their involvement in, for example, interpreting and preserving collections.²

Museums, and especially migrant museums, which should be seen as institutions with special social responsibilities, in conditions of increased mobility and growing crises, can carry out all of the above-mentioned activities. As this paper demonstrates, museums can also effectively replace other actors, including NGOs, by taking over from them activities of an integrative nature when these, for example, for financial reasons, are unable to continue them. Thus, in addition to their original aid projects, museums can ensure the continuity of other socially relevant projects.

This text is a case study of the activities undertaken by the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (MEG) for war refugees from Ukraine. It also describes MEG's takeover, following the blocking of US aid funds by President Trump's administration, of selected projects implemented by the Vchasno Centre, set up by an international NGO, the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

The article is based on participant observation, analysis of materials and documents produced by the MEG, individual in-depth interviews, and a literature review.

Theoretical Framework: Museums as Relational Institutions and Safe Spaces in the Context of Migration

Contemporary museum theory increasingly conceptualises museums not merely as repositories of heritage but as relational institutions embedded within social processes and community dynamics. This shift reflects broader transformations within museology, often described as the transition from authoritative, object-centred institutions towards socially responsive and participatory environments.³ Within this framework, the relationship between the museum and the community becomes a central analytical axis, particularly in contexts shaped by migration, displacement and social change.

¹ SANI, Margherita. Museums, migration and cultural diversity – Recommendations for museums. In: *Museum Studies*, 58, 2017, p. 12.

² BODO, Simona. The challenge of creating “third spaces”: guidelines for MAP for ID pilot projects. In: BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita (eds) *Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: selected practices from Europe*, MAP, 2009, p. 22.

³ ROSS, Max. Interpreting the new museology. In: *Museum and Society*, 2004, 2(2), pp. 84–103.

The theoretical reorientation of museums towards community engagement can be traced to early critiques of traditional museum authority, most notably the distinction between the museum as a “temple” and as a “forum”.⁴ The latter model positions museums as arenas for dialogue, negotiation and public participation, thereby redefining the institutional role from knowledge transmission to facilitation of social exchange. Subsequent developments within new museology further emphasised the social agency of museums and their capacity to shape cultural narratives and collective identities.⁵

This paradigmatic shift underpins the emergence of participatory approaches in which audiences are understood as co-producers of meaning rather than passive recipients. Simon’s model of the participatory museum conceptualises engagement as a structural principle that reshapes institutional practice through collaboration, shared authority and audience-driven contributions.⁶ Participation thus becomes both a methodological tool and an ethical stance, enabling museums to build sustained relationships with communities and to address issues of representation and inclusion.

The relational model situates community engagement at the core of contemporary museum practice. Research on social inclusion demonstrates that museums can act as agents of cultural democratisation by creating spaces where diverse voices are acknowledged and incorporated into institutional narratives.⁷ In this context, engagement is not limited to outreach activities but involves reconfiguring institutional structures to accommodate dialogue, co-creation and mutual learning.

Conceptualisations of the “social museum” emphasise reciprocity between institution and community, highlighting the shift from representing communities to collaborating with them.⁸ Empirical studies further demonstrate that visitor participation generates multi-vocal narratives that reshape interpretative frameworks and reinforce the museum’s role as a platform for collective expression.⁹ These developments position museums as socially embedded actors whose legitimacy depends on their ability to foster inclusive relationships and address contemporary social realities.

Migration museums provide a particularly salient example of this relational orientation. By engaging with narratives of mobility and belonging, they function as sites where historical interpretation intersects with present-day social engagement.¹⁰ Such institutions facilitate encounters between local populations and migrants, thereby contributing to broader processes of identity negotiation and public dialogue.

Parallel to the participatory turn, museum scholarship increasingly explores the notion of the museum as a safe space or space of care. Rather than conceptualising safety as an inherent property of institutional space, recent research frames it as an emergent outcome of relational

⁴ CAMERON, Duncan F. The museum, a temple or the forum. In: *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 14(1), 1971, pp. 11–24.

⁵ ROSS, Interpreting...

⁶ SIMON, Nina. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010.

⁷ DODD, Jocelyn, SANDELL, Richard (eds.). *Including Museums*. Leicester: RCMG, 2001.

⁸ NESSEL-LUKASIK, Beata. Muzeum społeczne. Żywa idea czy nowy model? In: *Polski Przegląd Migracyjny / The Polish Migration Review*, 10, 2025, pp. 40–53.

⁹ FILIPCZYK, Kamila. W muzealnym sztambuchu. Polifoniczny dialog zwiedzających w księgach pamiątkowych Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni. In: *Polski Przegląd Migracyjny / The Polish Migration Review*, 10, 2025, pp. 54–73.

¹⁰ SUTHERLAND, Claire. Leaving and longing: Migration museums as nation-building sites. In: *Museum and Society*, 12(2), 2014, pp. 118–131.

practices, ethical engagement, and participatory methodologies.¹¹ This perspective foregrounds the affective dimension of museum experience, emphasising emotional safety, recognition and belonging.

Studies of community engagement programmes demonstrate that museums may function as spaces of care by fostering supportive relationships and facilitating the expression of personal narratives.¹² Such environments are particularly significant when working with individuals affected by displacement, trauma or marginalisation. However, scholarship also cautions against idealised notions of safety, arguing that safe spaces must be understood as negotiated and contingent, shaped by power dynamics and institutional reflexivity.¹³

Participatory strategies play a crucial role in constructing safer environments, as they enable participants to exercise agency and reclaim narrative authority. Yet these approaches require careful ethical consideration, particularly in contexts involving forced migration, where issues of vulnerability and representation are central.

Migration museums exemplify the convergence of relational museology and care-oriented approaches. Their engagement with contested histories and lived experiences positions them as contact zones where multiple perspectives intersect.¹⁴ By integrating participatory practices with inclusive narrative strategies, these institutions can foster dialogue across cultural differences and support processes of social recognition.

Within this framework, the museum as a safe space should be understood not as a static condition but as a dynamic process grounded in relational ethics and community collaboration. This perspective highlights the importance of institutional reflexivity, long-term engagement, and sensitivity to the social and emotional dimensions of cultural participation. Consequently, analysing migration museums through the dual lenses of community relationship and safe-space practice provides a productive framework for examining their potential role in supporting refugees and facilitating inclusive social environments.

The role of migration museums in including people with asylum and migrant experience

The term “migration museums” refers primarily to museums that deal with the topic of migration in a holistic way. In their permanent and temporary exhibitions, as well as in their educational programmes and activities, they address historical and contemporary migration and explain who migrants and refugees are.¹⁵

In recent years, a number of such institutions have been established in different parts of the world. Among the best known are Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York (USA), the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (Australia), Pier 21 in Halifax (Canada), Deutsches Auswandererhaus Bremerhaven (Germany), Cité Nationale d'Histoire de l'Immigration (France), and the Red Star Line Museum (Belgium).

As a rule, migration museums carry out a variety of activities to support social inclusion processes, as discussed above. In this article, we refer as well to the outputs of the research project

¹¹ BOERSMA, Susanne. The Museum as a 'Safe Space'. In: *The Aftermaths of Participation*. Transcript Verlag, 2022.

¹² MUNRO, Ealasaid. Recognising museums' community engagement programmes as spaces of care. In: *Geoforum*, 48, 2013, pp. 54–62.

¹³ BOERSMA, The Museum...

¹⁴ SUTHERLAND, Leaving and longing...

¹⁵ PETELSKA, Michalina. Migration museums: A proposed typology. In: *Muzeologia a Kulturne Dedicstvo*. 4, 2022, p. 28.

entitled “Along the route of migration museums in the European Union – towards multicultural societies, where mobility is a fundamental right. Good practices and recommendations concerning social inclusion in receiving countries”.¹⁶ The project aimed to analyse cultural and social measures for migrants, undertaken by migration museums in European Union countries.

The project was conducted between September and December 2024 and analysed the offer of a dozen migration museums in the EU. The methodology used was mixed-method combining desk research with empirical elements: in-depth individual interviews (IDI) and workshops with representatives of cultural institutions and researchers working in the field of culture, migration and mobility. The project also encompassed study visits to selected institutions (mainly migration museums). The activities undertaken aimed to identify good practice in the field of integration and inclusion of migrants. A review of the offer of selected museums made it possible to create a catalogue of activities that can serve as inspiration for various entities from the cultural sector in terms of creating an active and inclusive community. Examples of good practice include, among others:

- migration museums and other cultural institutions functioning as a friendly, safe space for regular meetings for a local community of migrants and non-migrants (e.g. artistic, culinary, linguistic);
- working on projects that include second- and third-generation migrants as well as people from the local community with experience of migration contributing to the common narrative;
- cultural institutions operating as meeting and discussion platforms for local communities (including people with experience of migration), where attention is paid to diversity of ideas and viewpoints;
- making space for a different narrative on migration, art and culture from the one dominant in the country of settlement – in this way, people from other cultures identify with the institutions, recognising them as their own or at least familiar;
- inviting international communities to co-create the narrative and the offer of cultural institutions – part of the concept of co-creators;
- involving the so-called gatekeepers (introducers from migrant communities) in cultural institutions, as well as appointing foreign ambassadors for these institutions, creating migrant councils and establishing cooperation with multicultural associations; and
- constructing a message that shows migration (and as a consequence, also migrants) as part of the history of the host country. This bridges the gap between “visitors” and “natives”, as mobility is embedded in the identity of a nation.¹⁷

As the above-mentioned good practices demonstrate, cultural institutions (and especially migration museums) can use a variety of instruments and tools to integrate migrants and refugees into local communities. This is well summarised in the words of Bodo, Gibbs and

¹⁶ The project was carried as a grant from the National Plan for Reconstruction and Increased Resilience – Programme for supporting the activities of cultural and creative industries to stimulate their development. The main objectives of the project were to become acquainted with good practice in EU museums and other cultural institutions regarding migration, such as promoting mobility and multiculturalism, creating an inclusive offer for male and female migrants (as audiences, creators, employees), and acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to create and promote an inclusive multicultural offer. For more information, see www.mmue.online.

¹⁷ Museums of migration in the EU, <https://mmue.online/en/good-practices/>.

Sani:

We are aware that museums and other cultural institutions play only a small role in the complex process of promoting integration and respectful coexistence of different communities and cultural practices. But we also believe that this contribution has a remarkable potential to challenge prejudices and stereotypes and create shared spaces and a sense of belonging.¹⁸

Case study: the MEG

In Poland, the first and, so far, the only museum that seeks to tell the story of emigration from the Polish lands in a comprehensive way, as well as to spread knowledge about the Polish diaspora, is the Emigration Museum in Gdynia (MEG). It is a self-governing cultural institution organised by the Municipality of the City of Gdynia. The ceremonial opening of the institution took place on 16 May 2015.

The museum was inspired by the historic Marine Station, a key element of the emigration infrastructure created in Gdynia in the interwar period. It is a place inextricably linked to the history of emigrants who left Poland in search of a better life. The French Quay, where the station building is located and where famous Polish transatlantic liners, led by the MS Batory, once moored, is a symbolic place for Polish emigration. Many famous Poles, including Witold Gombrowicz¹⁹ and Zbigniew Brzeziński,²⁰ departed from this place. In 2007, the local government decided to give a new purpose to a building that had formerly served, among other things, the emigration movement.²¹

According to the Functional and Programme Framework of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia – which was drawn up to facilitate a competition to design the artistic and spatial concept of the permanent exhibition – the institution was to pursue four basic objectives: education about migration and its benefits, permanent and temporary exhibitions, inclusive social activities and integration, and research on migration, emigration, inclusion and integration. The main audiences for the Museum were defined as school-age children and adolescents, inhabitants of Gdynia, tourists from Poland and abroad, and the Polish community.²²

The statute identifies two basic scopes of the institution's operation: presenting the history of emigration from Polish lands and disseminating knowledge about the phenomenon of

¹⁸ BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita. Introduction, In: BODO, Simona, GIBBS, Kirsten, SANI, Margherita (ed.) *Museums as places...*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Born in 1904, Witold Gombrowicz was a Polish novelist, short story writer, playwright, and philosopher. He is one of the most frequently translated Polish-language authors and has been named one of the most outstanding Polish writers of the twentieth century. He lived in exile from 1939 onwards.

²⁰ Born in 1928 in Warsaw (left Poland in 1938), Zbigniew Brzeziński was a Polish–American political scientist, a Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and Johns Hopkins University, a geostrategist and diplomat, National Security Advisor to the US during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, and an advisor to presidents Lyndon Baines Johnson and John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

²¹ SZERLE, Marcin. Konieczność a przymus. Zagadnienia migracyjne w założeniach ekspozycji stałej Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni. In: *Studia Historica Gedanensia*, 5, 2014, pp. 395–407.

²² MEG. Functional and programme framework of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia. Appendix No. 6 to the Rules and Regulations of the competition for the artistic and spatial concept of the permanent exhibition of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, www.gdynia.pl, http://www.gdynia.pl/g2/2012_06/55765_fileot.pdf.

migration in the world.²³ However, the institution's mission and vision has an important role in shaping MEG's profile and activities. The mission and vision were established in 2021, before the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation and the resulting influx of war refugees. They are contained in these sentences:

We connect stories, we bring people together. The Emigration Museum in Gdynia is a place open to the world. This is where the stories of emigrants and immigrants, human experiences, hopes, and fears meet. To understand who we are today and who we can be tomorrow. [...] We want to create a reality in which there is room for everyone. No matter who they are, where they come from, or where they live.²⁴

Following the mission and vision, the museum began work on developing a new offer for people who had experienced migration. It aimed to create a space to facilitate dialogue and integration, the exchange of experiences and a better understanding of the cultures of migrants' countries of origin. This activity was significantly intensified after 24 February 2022.

Support to war refugees from Ukraine: MEG's offer

In response to the arrival in Gdynia of a large number of war refugees from Ukraine, the museum almost immediately launched ad hoc support activities. Some of the staff also became involved in activities at the reception points set up by the Polish Government. A special play and rest area for Ukrainian families was created on the museum grounds – cosy space was created, where LEGO® sets, games, picture books and art supplies awaited children and young people, and Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking animators offered creative activities. Parents, meanwhile, could relax, access the internet and deal with bureaucratic matters relating to settling into a new country. More than 300 people benefited from this support.²⁵

Later on, a more comprehensive social and cultural offer was developed for migrants, including, in particular, people from Ukraine. For example, the project "Museum Shares! Ukraine",²⁶ a guided exhibition tour (in English, Russian and Ukrainian) was developed, and Polish language courses for war refugees were initiated.²⁷

In addition, an offer aimed at integrating the local and migrant communities was introduced. It included projects such as "SUPPLEMENT" – "Purpose of Stay"²⁸, a series of "Everyday Hospitality" events²⁹ ("Incoming Connections" city walks guided by migrants' stories, "At the Shared Table" meetings, "Everyone will fit in" family workshops, and "Mural" art project), a children's exhibition called "Removals"³⁰, a pop-quiz overlooking the Baltic Sea³¹ and the Gdynia Language Swap.³²

The above programmes were part of a wide range of integration activities for migrant men and women, carried out by various entities in Poland in general and in Gdynia in particular.

²³ MEG. Statute of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, Annex to Resolution No. XXII/533/16 of the Gdynia City Council of 22 June 2016. Public Information Bulletin of the City Hall of Gdynia, <https://bip.um.gdynia.pl/status-i-organizacja,1223/statut-muzeum,387459>.

²⁴ MEG. *Idea*, <https://polska1.pl/wiedza/idea/>.

²⁵ MEG. *Report on the Activities of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia 2022*, p. 11.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Polish language course! <https://polska1.pl/kurs-na-jezyk-polski-bezplatny-kurs-jezyka-polskiego>.

²⁸ "SUPPLEMENT – Purpose of stay" <https://polska1.pl/suplement-wystawa-czasowa-cel-pobytu/>.

²⁹ Everyday Hospitality, accessed 10.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/codzienna-goscinnosc/>.

³⁰ Removals, accessed: 11.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/wystawa-czasowa-przeprowadzki/>.

³¹ Pop-quiz overlooking the Baltic, accessed: 11.08.2025, <https://polska1.pl/pop-quiz-z-widokiem-na-baltyk>.

³² Gdynia Language Swap. <https://polska1.pl/projects/gdynia-language-swap/>, 2023–2025,

However, the scope and catalogue of these initiatives was reduced in the first months of 2025 as a result of USAID funds being blocked by President Trump's administration. Several actors, most notably NGOs, were forced to cease or limit their ongoing activities benefiting migrants and war refugees. One of these was the aforementioned international humanitarian aid organisation the IRC, which used to run the Vchasno Centre in Gdynia. The IRC is an organisation that supports people in need both directly on the ground and in partnership with local organisations. In Poland it provides financial assistance to those most in need, offering legal and psychosocial support, including safe spaces for women and children.

Gdynia's Vchasno was created as a meeting place. The centre's team sought to help rebuild a sense of community and provide a place where war refugees could find respite from the challenges of everyday life and get the support and information they needed.³³ The centre provided a diverse range of activities: workshops and courses for children, a toddler's club, a female seniors' club, girls' and women's meetings, a discussion book club, art meetings, a speaking club (in Polish and English) and creative workshops. All services offered were free of charge. The centre operated until 15 March 2025, when it was closed due to the withdrawal of funding.

The prospect of the facility's closure caused anxiety among both staff and the beneficiaries of the support. There were fears of the disintegration of the community created and the destabilisation of the life situation of those benefiting from activities at the Centre. Under these conditions, the proposal put forward by the MEG during a meeting with the coordinator of Vchasno to utilise the available funds and space to relocate some activities to the Museum was received with enthusiasm. In the next step, discussions began with the Centre's staff to identify transferable activities and their approach to establishing cooperation with MEG. Once the arrangements were made, at the meeting closing Vchasno's activities, the Museum staff presented a proposal to the community around the Centre to continue some of the projects in the museum space. In the following weeks, using equipment donated by Vchasno, rooms were prepared for workshops and meetings. On the last weekend of April 2025, the first events took place. In this way, the MEG supplemented its offer aimed at migrants from Ukraine with a Book Club and a Senior Women's Club, which were relocated from Vchasno Centre.

The Book Club is a space for conversation, sharing passions, and building a community around literature. Meetings are held once a month to discuss a book chosen by the participants' vote. It is a great opportunity to share impressions after reading, hear different interpretations and make new friends. The Book Club is conducted in Ukrainian and is open to anyone who wishes to join this initiative. As for the Senior Women's Club, it is not only about casual conversations between neighbours, acquaintances and friends; it also offers art workshops, which are an integral part of the meetings. The club meets every two weeks on Saturdays and is conducted in Ukrainian. Both the Book Club and the Senior Women's Club have enabled the ongoing initiatives and the communities created around them to continue. A key element of success was establishing cooperation with animators from the Vchasno Centre, which guaranteed the stability of the groups and continuing forms of support.

All these activities are part of MEG's constantly expanding offer aimed at people with migration experience, called "Our Home". The purpose of the "Our Home" project is to create a space at the Emigration Museum in Gdynia to promote dialogue and integration, an exchange of experiences, and a better understanding of the history of migration and the cultures of

³³ SZYPELT, Karolina. Centrum Społecznościowe "Vchasno" zaprasza, www.gdynia.pl.

countries from which we all come. The project is aimed not only at migrant communities and people with migration experience but also at the host society, that is, at anybody (from the neighbourhood) who wants to participate. It involves numerous initiatives and activities: networking, groups and initiatives run or co-run by migrants and those working on their behalf; information-sharing sessions, such as thematic meetings and workshops; and consultations, providing ongoing discussions with migrants to ensure that the museum's offer is best suited to the real needs of the target community. One of the flagship projects in this regard, already mentioned before, is the Gdynia Language Swap (GLS). It is a space for meeting, spending time in an international group, sharing experiences and learning language in sessions where participants can be either students or teachers. During meetings held every two weeks on Saturdays, participants can learn a foreign language, practice conversations and familiarise foreigners with the secrets of the Polish language. Participants are assigned a conversation partner based on their experience, individual needs and language skills; everyone may come to the meeting with friends or invite someone who has recently arrived in the city from another country.

These activities fit within the context of writings by Peter Dahlgren and Joke Hermes, who emphasise that contemporary museums must strive to engage their audiences by offering the right mix of aesthetics, experience, information and fun, while maintaining a sense of community.³⁴ The activities of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia are in line with this vision of a modern cultural institution.

Conclusion

The case of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia demonstrates that migration museums can act as relational institutions whose social significance extends beyond traditional exhibitionary functions. As outlined in the theoretical framework, contemporary museology increasingly interprets museums as socially embedded actors that facilitate dialogue, participation and community-building rather than merely preserving heritage.³⁵ The activities undertaken by MEG confirm this shift from the museum as an authoritative space toward the museum as a relational forum, where cultural participation becomes intertwined with social responsibility.

The empirical findings suggest that the relationship between the museum and the community is not limited to symbolic representation but is constructed through sustained interaction, co-creation and responsiveness to emerging social needs. The museum's response to the arrival of war refugees from Ukraine illustrates how participatory and community-oriented approaches enable cultural institutions to adapt rapidly in crisis situations. By creating programs that involve language exchange, social gatherings and collaborative cultural activities, the has institution moved beyond traditional outreach toward practices aligned with the participatory museum paradigm.³⁶ In this sense, MEG exemplifies how community engagement becomes a structural principle shaping institutional identity and practice, rather than a supplementary activity.

Moreover, the transfer of selected initiatives from the Vchasno Centre to the museum space demonstrates how cultural institutions can function as stabilising infrastructures during periods of institutional disruption. The ability to sustain community initiatives when NGO-led projects

³⁴ DAHLGREN, Peter, HERMES, Joke. (2015). The Democratic Horizons of the Museum. Citizenship and Culture. In: WITCOMB, Andrea, MESSAGE, Kylie (eds) *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 117–138.

³⁵ ROSS, Interpreting...; CAMERON, The museum...

³⁶ SIMON, The Participatory...

were discontinued highlights the potential of museums to act as long-term anchors within local social ecosystems. This capacity reflects the broader theoretical understanding of museums as socially responsive actors capable of supporting inclusion and facilitating collective resilience.³⁷

The analysis also supports the conceptualisation of museums as spaces of care and potential safe spaces. Importantly, safety should not be understood as an inherent characteristic of the physical environment but as an outcome of relational practices, ethical engagement and participatory methodologies.³⁸ MEG's initiatives – such as the creation of informal meeting environments, language-based social interaction and community-led clubs – have fostered conditions that enable participants to experience recognition, belonging and continuity despite displacement. These findings align with scholarship emphasising that museums can create affective and supportive environments by facilitating storytelling, shared experience and mutual learning.³⁹

At the same time, the case study confirms that safe-space practices emerge through negotiation rather than institutional declaration. The success of the relocated Vchasno activities depended on collaboration with community facilitators and continuity of social networks, illustrating that safety and trust are relational processes shaped by ongoing engagement and institutional reflexivity.⁴⁰ This observation reinforces critiques of idealised notions of safe space, suggesting instead that museums can create “safer” environments through inclusive structures and attentive care practices.

From a broader perspective, migration museums appear particularly suited to this relational and care-oriented role. Their thematic focus on mobility, identity and belonging positions them as contact zones where diverse social experiences intersect and where narratives of migration can be negotiated collectively.⁴¹ The case of MEG illustrates that when museums embrace participatory and community-driven approaches, they can contribute not only to cultural interpretation but also to social cohesion and integration processes.

In conclusion, analysing migration museums through the dual lenses of relational museology and safe-space theory provides a productive framework for understanding their role in contemporary migration contexts. The example of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia suggests that cultural institutions can complement – and in certain crisis conditions temporarily replace – other social actors by offering stable infrastructures, participatory environments, and ethically grounded spaces of care. Rather than functioning solely as sites of representation, migration museums may therefore operate as active social agents that foster inclusion, sustain communities, and support people with migration experience in rebuilding social connections within host societies.

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³⁷ DODD, SANDELL, *Including Museums...*; SILVERMAN, Lois H. *The Social Work of Museums*. London: Routledge, 2010.

³⁸ BOERSMA, The Museum as...

³⁹ MUNRO, Recognising museums'...

⁴⁰ BOERSMA, The Museum as...

⁴¹ SUTHERLAND, Leaving and longing...

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