

Аглядны артыкул

Як трансфармаваліся музеі і калекцыі Балонскага ўніверсітэта?

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Анотацыя. Даследаванні ўніверсітэцкіх музеяў часта засяроджваюцца на сучасных спробах пераасэнсаваць ролю гэтых устаноў праз пашырэнне грамадскага ўдзелу, асабліва ў той час, калі іх традыцыйныя функцыі ў адукацыі і навуковых даследаваннях паступова становяцца менш цэнтральнымі. Аднак доўгатэрміновыя вынікі такіх рэформаў і іх здольнасць заставацца ўстойлівымі пасля пачатковых этапаў рэалізацыі ўсё яшчэ недастаткова вывучаны. Гэта даследаванне разглядае адміністрацыйнае і інстытуцыйнае развіццё музеяў і калекцый Балонскага ўніверсітэта на працягу больш чым чатырох дзесяцігоддзяў, ахопліваючы перыяд ад канца 1970-х гадоў да 2015 года. Выкарыстоўваючы шырокі аналітычны падыход, даследаванне аналізуе змены ў інстытуцыйнай структуры, кіраванні чалавечымі і фінансавымі рэсурсамі, музейнай дзейнасці, а таксама ў профілях наведвальнікаў з цягам часу. Вынікі паказваюць, што стратэгічнае бачанне, сфармуляванае ў канцы 1970-х гадоў, было складана падтрымліваць, галоўным чынам праз разрыў паміж інстытуцыйнымі амбіцыямі і практычнымі рэсурсамі, неабходнымі для іх рэалізацыі. На аснове гэтага гістарычнага аналізу артыкул вызначае некалькі напрамкаў будучага развіцця, накіраваных на паляпшэнне доўгатэрміновай устойлівасці, бачнасці і актуальнасці ўніверсітэцкіх музеяў як у акадэмічным, так і ў грамадскім кантэксце.

Ключавыя словы: ўніверсітэцкія музеі; музейзнаўчыя даследаванні; інстытуцыйная трансфармацыя; музейнае кіраванне; калекцыі акадэмічнай спадчыны; грамадскі ўдзел.

Review Article

How Did Bologna University Museums and Collections Transform?

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Abstract. University museum studies often focus on contemporary attempts to reposition these institutions through broader public outreach, particularly as their conventional functions in education and research have become less central. However, the lasting effects of these reforms and their ability to remain sustainable after the early stages of implementation are still not fully understood. This study explores the administrative and institutional development of the University of Bologna's museums and collections over more than four decades, covering the period from the late 1970s to 2015. Using a broad analytical approach, the research examines changes in institutional structure, the management of human and financial resources, museum activities, and visitor characteristics over time. The results show that the strategic vision established in the late 1970s has been difficult to sustain, mainly because of the gap between institutional aspirations and the practical resources needed to support them. Drawing on this historical evaluation, the paper identifies several future directions to improve the long-term sustainability, visibility, and relevance of university museums in both academic and public spheres.

Keywords: university museums; museology studies; institutional transformation; museum governance; academic heritage collections; public engagement

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Introduction

During the last four decades, museums worldwide have undergone profound transformations that challenge traditional understandings of their institutional purpose (Vergo 1989; Lasser 2012; McCall and Gray 2014; Tzortzi 2014). Central to this shift is the emergence of the concept of “new museology,” which reorients museums from object-focused repositories toward institutions centred on people and social engagement (Murawski 2018; see also critiques in Cannon-Brookes 1998, 2012). Within this perspective, the conventional function of collecting and preserving objects as archival resources is increasingly connected with knowledge dissemination and community participation, marking a transition from simple custodianship to a broader framework encompassing conservation, research, accessibility, and public services. At the same time, museums and cultural organizations have faced growing attention to the strategic management of both human and financial resources (Lindqvist 2012; Zan et al. 2015).

University museums and collections (hereafter UM&C) have likewise participated in this process of redefining the purposes and audiences of their collections (Lourenço 2003, 321). Their close relationship with higher education institutions introduces distinctive dynamics, particularly as universities themselves have experienced significant shifts

in priorities and institutional missions. This article investigates these parallel transformations through an examination of the museums and collections of the University of Bologna (UNIBO).

Recognized as the oldest university in the Western world, UNIBO has accumulated extensive collections across numerous academic fields during more than nine centuries of existence. In the 1970s, these collections became central to initiatives aimed at revitalizing institutional memory and reinforcing connections between the university and the urban community. Evidence suggests that UNIBO acted as an early example of reconfiguring university museums and collections for broader public audiences. The present study evaluates the outcomes of these initiatives and related developments up to 2015, prior to the appointment of the current rector, with particular attention to contextual factors that enabled or constrained institutional change.

This research contributes to existing scholarship addressing university museum and collection management (Boylan 1999; Tirrell 2000a, 2000b; De Clercq 2003a, 2003b; OECD 2001; Council of Europe 2005; Were 2010; Simpson 2017). Compared with earlier studies, the paper offers three main contributions. First, it reconstructs the administrative history of UNIBO museums and collections over more than forty years, enabling a long-term evaluation of innovations discussed in the literature on UM&C management (e.g., Kozak 2016) by considering both implementation processes and outcomes, aspects often overlooked in current debates. Second, whereas previous empirical research has tended to examine museum management dimensions separately such as visitor engagement (Marstine 2007; Were 2010), institutional restructuring (De Clercq 2003b), or human and financial resource management (Munktel 2003) this study adopts a holistic approach, analysing these elements as interrelated processes (see Simpson 2017). Consequently, the paper provides integrated evidence of the interaction between institutional change, resource management trends, institutional activities, and visitor profiles over an extended timeframe. Third, unlike many studies written from the perspective of museum directors or curators, this research adopts a position situated “nearby” rather than fully “inside” institutional management. Although the authors are current or former members of UNIBO, they were not directly responsible for managing UM&C during most of the period analysed (see Section 3). This partially embedded position facilitated access to sources while supporting a more critical and analytically detached perspective.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the historical background and patterns of change affecting UM&C. The methodology section describes sources, access procedures, and analytical methods. The findings are structured into five phases, each defined by specific institutional arrangements, activity patterns, and developments in human and financial resources as well as visitor profiles. Following a synthesis of results, the discussion considers broader implications for debates on UM&C management, and the conclusion proposes directions for future research.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative historical approach to investigate the institutional evolution of University Museums and Collections (UM&C) at the University of Bologna between 1970 and 2015. The research is framed within broader scholarly debates concerning the transformation of museums during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly the intellectual shift associated with the emergence of the “new museology,” which reconsidered the traditional foundations of museum institutions (Vergo 1989; Lasser 2012; McCall and Gray 2014; Tzortzi 2014).

Within this perspective, museums are no longer interpreted solely as repositories of objects but increasingly as socially oriented institutions centred on audiences, knowledge circulation, and community engagement (Murawski 2018). Critical reflections on this transition are also considered, acknowledging debates regarding the limits and implications of new museological approaches (Cannon-Brookes 1998, 2012). Consequently, collecting and

preservation practices are examined alongside expanding institutional responsibilities, including research dissemination, accessibility, and public service.

The study analyses university museums as hybrid entities positioned between academic and public spheres. Following Lourenço's (2003, 321) interpretation, UM&C are understood as institutions continuously reassessing both the purposes of their collections and their intended audiences. This transformation is examined in parallel with broader organizational changes affecting cultural institutions, especially shifts in the management of human and financial resources (Lindqvist 2012; Zan et al. 2015).

Empirical evidence derives from institutional archives, administrative documentation, governance records, financial reports, and personnel data produced by the University of Bologna. These materials enable reconstruction of leadership structures, policy initiatives, organizational reforms, and operational practices across more than four decades. A holistic analytical framework is employed, integrating institutional change, resource allocation, activities, and visitor dynamics into a unified interpretative model rather than treating these elements separately (Simpson 2017).

Table 1. Rectors, UMC Managing Bodies, and Presidents (1970–2015)

Phase	Year	Rector	Managing Body	Director / President
1	1970s–1988	Prof. Rizzoli (1976–1985); Prof. Roversi Monaco (1986–)	CMA	Prof. Predi (early 1970s–1988)
2	1989–1998	Prof. Roversi Monaco	CISMA	Prof. Minelli (1989–1993); Prof. D'Amico (1993–1995); Prof. Cristofolini (1995–)
3	1999–2002	Prof. Roversi Monaco (–2000); Prof. Calzolari (2000–)	SMA	Prof. Cristofolini (–2001); Prof. Predi (2001–2003)
4	2003–2012	Prof. Calzolari (–2009); Prof. Dionigi (2009–)	SMA / Palazzo Poggi	Prof. Marcato (2003–2004); Prof. Predi (2004–2010); Prof. Varni (2010–); Prof. Tega (2003–2011)
5	2013–2015	Prof. Dionigi (–2015)	SMA	Prof. Varni (–2014); Prof. Ferrari (2015); Prof. Balzani (2015–)

Quantitative indicators, including staffing composition and financial expenditures, are examined comparatively across selected academic years in order to identify long-term institutional trends.

Results

The analysis reveals that the transformation of the University Museums and Collections of the University of Bologna developed through a complex and non-linear trajectory shaped by institutional ambitions, governance changes, and resource constraints. As the oldest university in the Western world, the University of Bologna accumulated extensive collections across multiple disciplines over more than nine centuries. During the 1970s, these collections became

central to initiatives aimed at revitalizing institutional memory while strengthening the university's relationship with the urban community.

The reforms introduced during this period anticipated broader developments associated with new museology, promoting public accessibility and redefining the cultural role of university heritage. Evidence suggests that the University of Bologna functioned as an early adopter in opening academic collections to wider audiences beyond the university environment. A longitudinal perspective allows innovations to be evaluated not only in terms of implementation but also regarding their long-term outcomes, an aspect often underexplored in studies addressing university museum strategies (Kozak 2016). Across the decades examined, institutional reforms produced uneven results, reflecting tensions between ambitious cultural objectives and changing administrative priorities.

Governance structures played a decisive role in shaping institutional continuity. Leadership transitions and evolving administrative bodies influenced strategic direction and affected the sustainability of reform initiatives, as illustrated in the institutional chronology. Human resource analysis highlights fluctuating levels of professionalization among museum units. Staffing availability varied significantly across institutional phases, directly influencing operational capacity and program continuity.

Table 2. Human resources at CISMA, SMA and Palazzo Poggi (Academic Years 1989–90 to 2014–15)

Phase	Academic Year	Admin	Curators	Gardeners	Educational	Janitors	Total
2	1989–90	1	–	–	–	–	1
2	1990–91	1	–	–	–	–	1
2	1991–92	1	–	–	–	–	1
2	1992–93	3	–	–	–	2	5
2	1993–94	3	–	–	–	1	4
2	1994–95	3	–	–	–	1	4
2	1995–96	2	–	–	–	1	3
2	1996–97	2	–	–	–	1	3
2	1997–98	2	–	–	–	1	3
3	1998–99	3	2	6	–	2	13
3	1999–00	3	2	6	–	2	13
3	2000–01	3	2	6	–	2	13
3	2001–02	5	3	8	1	1	18
4	2002–03	5	3	8	1	1	18
4	2003–04	6	3	7	1	1	18

Phase	Academic Year	Admin	Curators	Gardeners	Educational	Janitors	Total
4	2004–05	6	3	7	1	1	18
4	2005–06	7	3	6	1	1	18
4	2006–07	7	3	6	1	1	18
4	2007–08	7	3	6	1	1	18
4	2008–09	9	3	7	2	1	22
4	2009–10	9	3	7	2	1	22
4	2010–11	Data not available	–	–	–	–	–
4	2011–12	Data not available	–	–	–	–	–
5	2012–13	10	4	4	3	1	22
5	2013–14	10	4	4	3	1	22
5	2014–15	14	4	3	3	1	25

Note: The university yearbooks on which this table is based report information on personnel areas (technical or administrative) and wage levels. Interviews allowed reconstruction of personnel tasks and the aggregation of human resources into functional museum categories.

The workforce composition further demonstrates the hybrid nature of UM&C governance, combining university personnel with external collaborators. Changes in this balance affected management practices, project implementation, and institutional stability. Financial resources constituted another determining factor in institutional development. Budget allocation patterns reveal alternating periods of expansion and contraction closely aligned with broader university priorities rather than consistent long-term museum strategies.

Table 3. University and non-university staff involved in UMCs (selected academic years)

Category	1991–92	1996–97	2002–03	2006–07	2009–10
UNIBO staff (CISMA/SMA/Palazzo Poggi)	3	3	18	18	22
Municipality teachers	18	18	23	20	16
Conscientious objectors / civil service	0	7	7	24	36
Part-time students	NA	24	41	43	43

Category	1991–92	1996–97	2002–03	2006–07	2009–10
Non-university staff	18	49	71	87	95
Total staff	21	52	89	105	117

Note: Data on non-university staff are not available for every academic year. A complete picture is available only for the years displayed in the table. Part-time students were already employed by UMCs in 1992, but data are missing for that year. Data for part-time students in 1996–97 refer to the academic year 1994–95.

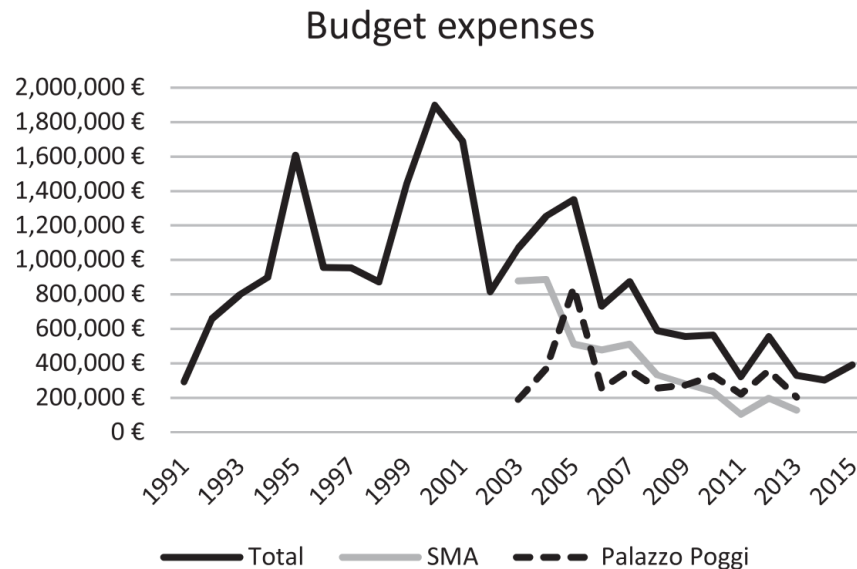


Figure 1. Budget expenses.

Visitor engagement and program diversification indicate partial success in repositioning university museums toward broader publics. However, the findings demonstrate persistent structural challenges. Institutional ambitions frequently exceeded available resources, limiting the consolidation of reforms initiated in earlier decades.

Compared with existing literature addressing university museum management (Boylan 1999; Tirrell 2000a, 2000b; De Clercq 2003a, 2003b; OECD 2001; Council of Europe 2005; Were 2010; Simpson 2017), the extended chronological scope adopted here reveals how innovations evolve unevenly over time. Rather than examining visitor engagement (Marstine 2007; Were 2010), institutional restructuring (De Clercq 2003b), or human and financial resource issues (Munktell 2003) independently, the results demonstrate the strong interdependence among governance transformation, staffing dynamics, financial investment, and audience development.

Overall, the findings underline the persistent tension between traditional academic priorities teaching and research and emerging expectations associated with public engagement and the university’s broader social mission. Sustainable institutional transformation appears dependent on stable governance frameworks and long-term strategic commitment rather than isolated reform initiatives.

Discussion

The longitudinal analysis of the University Museums and Collections (UM&C) at the University of Bologna provides insight into the broader historical transformation of university-based heritage institutions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While theoretical debates surrounding the “new museology” emphasized a paradigmatic shift from object-centred to audience-oriented institutions (Vergo 1989; Lasser 2012; McCall and Gray 2014; Tzortzi 2014), the case examined here demonstrates that institutional change within university contexts unfolds more gradually and unevenly than theoretical models might suggest.

The reform initiatives launched in the 1970s anticipated principles later associated with socially engaged museums (Murawski 2018). However, as critics have noted, the implementation of new museological approaches often encounters structural and epistemological tensions (Cannon-Brookes 1998, 2012). In Bologna’s case, these tensions manifested in the coexistence of traditional academic priorities teaching and research with emerging expectations related to public accessibility and outreach.

The findings also support Lourenço’s (2003, 321) argument that university collections must be continuously reassessed in relation to their users and institutional functions. Rather than undergoing a linear transformation, the UM&C experienced phases of expansion, consolidation, and partial retrenchment. This cyclical pattern reflects broader organizational dynamics affecting cultural institutions, particularly in relation to resource dependency and administrative restructuring (Lindqvist 2012; Zan et al. 2015).

Compared with studies focusing on specific dimensions of museum reform such as visitor participation (Marstine 2007; Were 2010), governance restructuring (De Clercq 2003b), or financial and human resource management (Munktell 2003) the Bologna case underscores the interdependence of these elements. Governance changes influenced staffing patterns; staffing levels affected programming capacity; financial fluctuations shaped both institutional autonomy and strategic continuity. This interconnectedness complicates simplified narratives of reform success or failure.

Moreover, when situated alongside comparative discussions of university museum development (Boylan 1999; Tirrell 2000a, 2000b; De Clercq 2003a, 2003b; OECD 2001; Council of Europe 2005; Were 2010; Simpson 2017), the Bologna experience highlights the importance of temporal depth. As suggested by Kozak (2016), short-term evaluations of innovation risk overlooking long-term institutional consequences. The extended timeframe examined here reveals how early visionary reforms may lose momentum without stable governance frameworks and sustained investment.

From a historical perspective, the transformation of UM&C can therefore be interpreted not simply as an adoption of new museological principles but as a negotiation between inherited academic structures and evolving cultural policies. The university museum emerges as a liminal institution embedded within academic hierarchies yet increasingly expected to operate according to public cultural logics.

Ultimately, the Bologna case suggests that sustainable reform of university museums depends less on rhetorical alignment with new museology and more on durable institutional integration. Without consistent administrative support, financial continuity, and professionalized staffing structures, reform initiatives remain vulnerable to cyclical institutional change. The historical trajectory analyzed here thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how university heritage institutions adapt incrementally and sometimes inconsistently to shifting cultural paradigms.

Conclusions

Over time, the effort to redefine the role and function of university museums and collections (UM&C) has itself become a historical process worthy of scholarly examination. This study has reconstructed the long-term institutional trajectory of a pioneering case the University of Bologna (UNIBO) documenting the ambitions, initiatives, achievements, and limitations that characterized approximately forty-five years of transformation.

Two contextual factors limit the broader generalization of the findings. First, the analysis relied on incomplete archival material, particularly regarding financial data, staffing records, and visitor statistics, reflecting the persistent absence of systematic documentation and institutional accountability surrounding UM&C. Second, UNIBO represents a highly distinctive case. As the oldest continuously operating university in the Western world, hosting around 90,000 students across multiple campuses and disciplines, its collections are unusually extensive and administratively complex. Furthermore, the Italian higher education system presents governance characteristics that may differ substantially from other national contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study allows several implications for future research and practice. First, there is a clear need for longitudinal administrative histories of UM&C. While numerous initiatives implemented during the 1990s and early 2000s are well documented such as the renovation of Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala (Worley 2010; Munktell and Ödman 2012), the redevelopment of the University of Manchester Museum (Alberti 2009), and organizational reforms at Strasbourg (Soubiran 2007), St Andrews (Kozak 2006), and University College London (Were 2010) scholarly attention rarely follows these projects over extended periods. Future studies should revisit earlier cases to evaluate how initial visions evolved, identifying the factors that enabled or constrained long-term outcomes. Institutional change must ultimately be assessed through practice rather than intention alone.

Second, the holistic analytical framework adopted here integrating institutional change, curatorial practices, visitor engagement, and human and financial resources offers a comparative model for future investigations. Such an approach shifts attention away from exceptional transformation projects toward the everyday operational conditions that sustain museum activity over time.

Third, the “nearby” analytical perspective employed in this study may provide a useful methodological model. Researchers working within their own institutional environments can generate deeper understanding of organizational trajectories while contributing to improved sustainability and effectiveness. Greater engagement of management scholars with UM&C contexts is therefore encouraged.

More broadly, the findings invite reconsideration of the challenges inherent in maintaining museums within university administrative systems. The Bologna experience suggests that certain collections might achieve stronger development prospects outside direct university governance structures. This notion of operating “outside,” however, should not be interpreted as deaccessioning or commercialization of collections (Fisher-Jones 2020). Rather, alternative governance arrangements may be considered.

One historical precedent exists within UNIBO itself. In 1881, the collections of the University Museum of Antiquities were transferred to the Civic Archaeological Museum of Bologna (Tovoli 1984). Subsequently, their management followed municipal administrative logics combined with curatorial expertise, free from shifting university priorities. Over the following century, these collections received substantially greater investment in preservation, research, and public presentation compared with collections retained within university administration (Zan 2000).

Another possibility involves establishing autonomous administrative entities capable of addressing contemporary museum challenges. Simple outsourcing mechanisms proved ineffective in Bologna; initiatives such as the proposed limited liability company for event management in 1997 or the outsourced exhibition “The Whale” failed to achieve long-term sustainability due to entrenched institutional routines.

In the Italian cultural sector, an alternative governance model has emerged through the establishment of foundations (Zan, Bonini Baraldi, and Gordon 2007). These structures maintain public ownership while adopting

managerial flexibility resembling private organizations. Such reforms reflect processes of “de-statization,” understood not as privatization but as a controlled relaxation of bureaucratic constraints within public administration (Van Hemel and van der Wielen 1997; Zan, Bonini Baraldi, and Gordon 2007). Public responsibility for cultural heritage is preserved while enabling operational autonomy adapted to museum-specific needs.

A comparable arrangement could be envisioned for UM&C in Bologna, whereby museums remain owned by the university yet operate through governance mechanisms less constrained by academic bureaucratic structures. The university would remain a central partner, preserving historical links with teaching and research, while local authorities and societal stakeholders could participate to reinforce civic engagement, as suggested by Boylan (1999). Whether such governance solutions could be successfully transferred to other university environments remains an open and promising question for future research.

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