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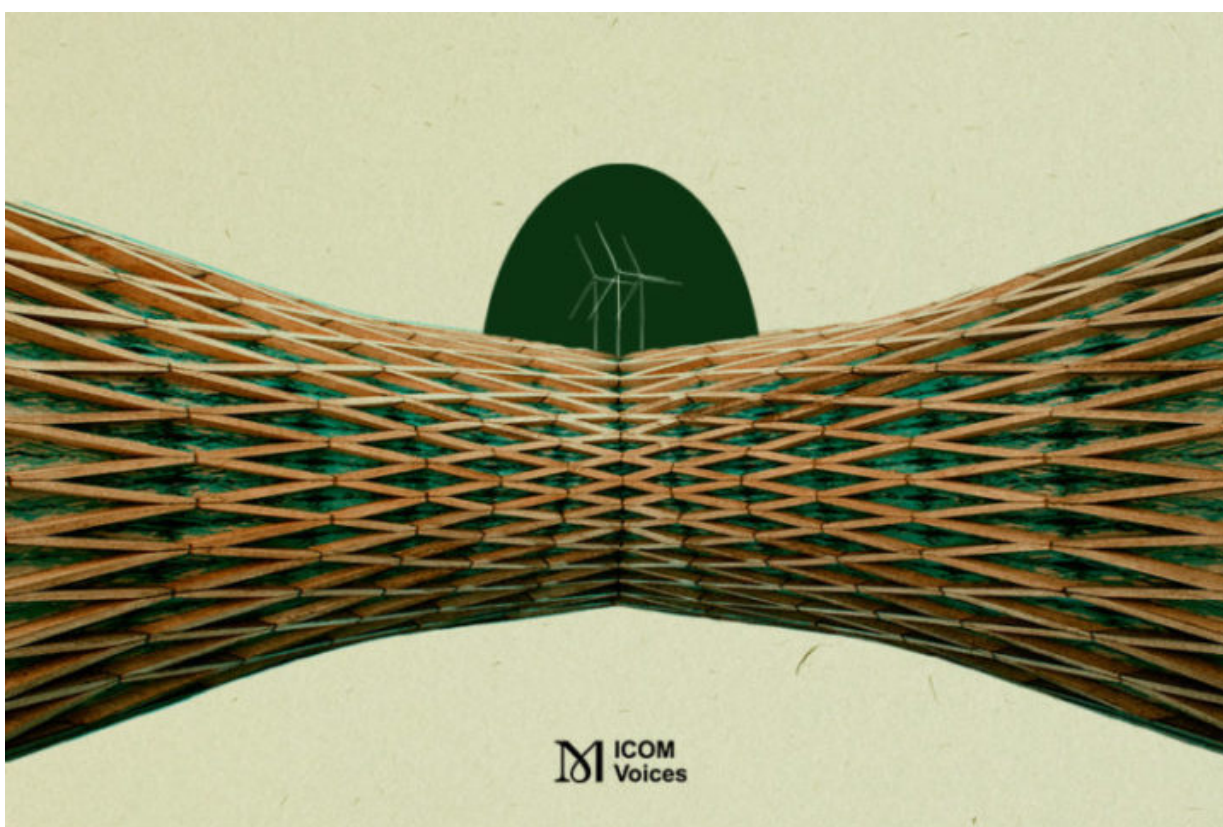
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January 16, 2023

ICOM VoicesThe sustainability star: a model for museums



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Keywords: sustainability, model, sustainable museum, green museum, benchmark

For more and more museums today, the question is no longer *whether* or *why* but *how* to become sustainable. Many museums start with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (e.g. McGhie 2019), but these are broad, not specifically made for museums and tackle different aspects of development (health, education, economic growth...), sometimes at the expense of the

planet (Liverman 2018). Other museums, calculate their carbon footprint, set emission reduction plans and ‘net zero’ objectives, but do not consider other aspects of sustainable development. A third group of museums focuses on hands-on actions: putting up recycling bins, installing LED lighting, launching ‘cycling to work’ initiatives and reminding people to think before they print, for example. Yet they often end up feeling that their actions are piecemeal and do not follow an overall strategy.

Developing a sustainability model

For us, the lack of a coherent understanding of sustainability in the museal field made clear the need for developing a research-based sustainability model for museums. By model, we mean a condensed, simplified representation of sustainability that could guide action for museums. Creating such a model became one of the main goals of our ongoing research project, [Culture for the Planet](#) at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. Because museums are not the only cultural institutions struggling to make headway in sustainability, we also involved drama and opera theatres in this project.

We wanted our sustainability model to reflect the key aspects of sustainability for museums and other cultural institutions. To achieve this, we adopted a three-step methodology (see Figure 1).

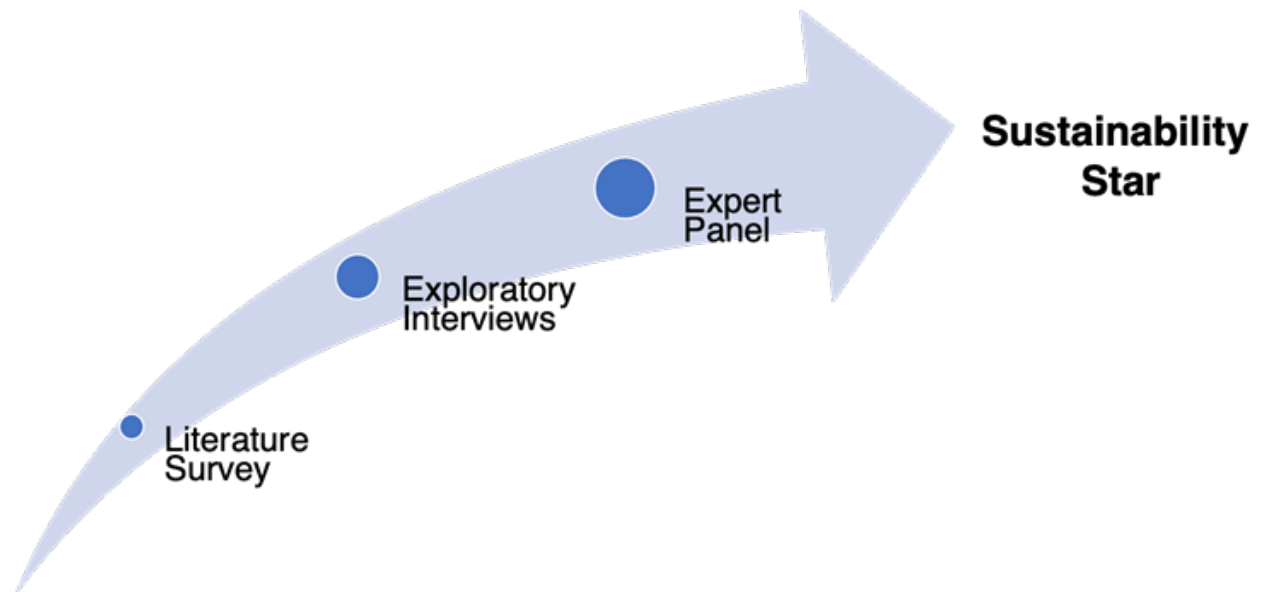


Figure 1: Research process for creating the sustainability star

We first carried out a survey of professional and academic literature on cultural institutions and sustainability to constitute a comprehensive bibliography.

We then conducted a series of exploratory interviews with seven key actors in the sustainability field, from consultancies and associations, such as ICOM and [Ibermuseos/Ibermuseus](#), to social movements such as [Museums for Future](#).

In a third and final step, we compiled an expert panel with representatives from seven museums, two drama theatres, two opera houses and two associations from around the world. We asked panel members to comment on a draft list of relevant aspects to consider when aiming to become a sustainable cultural institution. Finally, we reworked our model, incorporating feedback from the panel.

The sustainability star for museums

Our model for the sustainable museum carries the name of ‘sustainability star’, because of its shape (see Fig. 2). The sustainability star has three spheres:

- The Core Sphere: four essentials that each sustainable museum needs to cover
- The Social Sphere: eight dimensions that cover people-related challenges
- The Ecological Sphere: eight dimensions that cover environment-related challenges

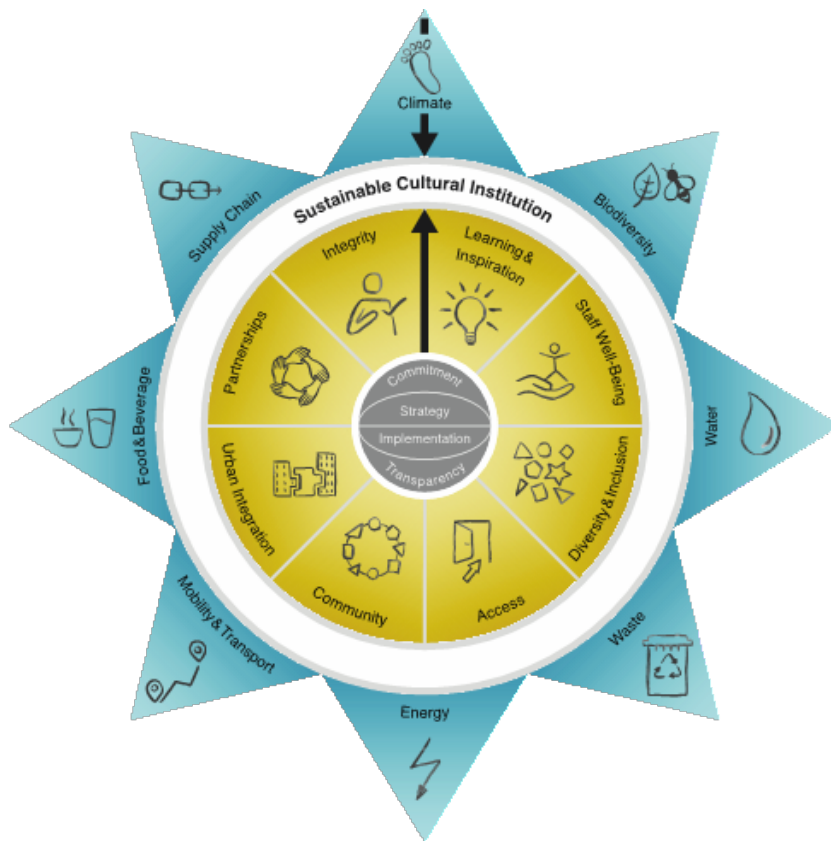


Figure 2: The sustainability star: a model for sustainable museums with three spheres: core sphere (= centre), social sphere (= inner circle), environmental sphere (= star points). The closer it is to the white ring, the more an institution has made progress towards sustainability. © Martin Müller and Julie Grieshaber | University of Lausanne

The four essentials and sixteen dimensions of the sustainability star give equal weight to the social sphere and the ecological sphere, emphasising that tackling environmental issues should move in lockstep with improving people's well-being.

The three spheres

Core Sphere: The core sphere contains four essentials, without which a journey towards sustainability is compromised: public and internal *commitment* to verifiable sustainability goals, inclusion of sustainability into the *strategy* of the museum, systematic *monitoring* of what we call Key Sustainability Indicators (KSI), and finally regular *reporting* on progress made.

Social Sphere: The social sphere puts social justice and human well-being on centre stage. Its dimensions cover the internal processes in the museum (Staff Well-Being), the relationships to visitors and the larger community (Diversity & Inclusion, Access, Community and Learning & Inspiration) and the larger public and other organisations (Urban Integration, Partnerships, Integrity).

Environmental Sphere: The environmental sphere covers the museum's relationship to the biophysical part of the planet. It includes planetary boundaries closely impacted by the activities of cultural institutions (Climate, Biodiversity, Water) as well as activities with potential adverse impacts on the environment (Waste, Energy, Mobility & Transport, Food and Beverage, Supply Chain).

The eight social dimensions expand from the centre, whereas the eight dimensions of the environmental sphere start from the perimeter. Social and environmental dimensions converge to reach the "Sustainable Cultural Institution". This star shape enables the representation of progress in both social and environmental aspects of sustainability.

The sustainability star as guiding star

The sustainability star can guide the sustainability actions of museums and help develop sustainability management (Garthe 2020).

Covering the seventeen dimensions of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Sustainability Star offers a research-based sustainability framework with broad input from practitioners in museums and other cultural institutions.

Our ongoing research aims to develop a global benchmark for museums and other cultural institutions based on the sustainability star by making the sixteen dimensions and four essentials operational for everyday practice and long-term strategy.

Museums directors and sustainability managers can use it as a tool to systematically guide their engagement for sustainability, starting from the core and moving through every dimension. For each museum, we plan to develop Key Sustainability Indicators and actions to enable them to continuously improve and to become the most sustainable version of themselves. The eventual goal is to create a certification system to guide museums on their sustainability journey. This will be the next step in our research.

Acknowledgements

We thank our interviewees and panel members for their precious time and input. Professionals affiliated with the following institutions participated in the expert panel: The Field Museum, Ibermuseos/Ibermuseum, Jockey Club Museum of Climate Change, La Monnaie / De Munt Opera House, Museo delle Scienze Trento, Museums Association (UK), Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Palais de Lomé, Sydney Opera House, Tate Modern, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum

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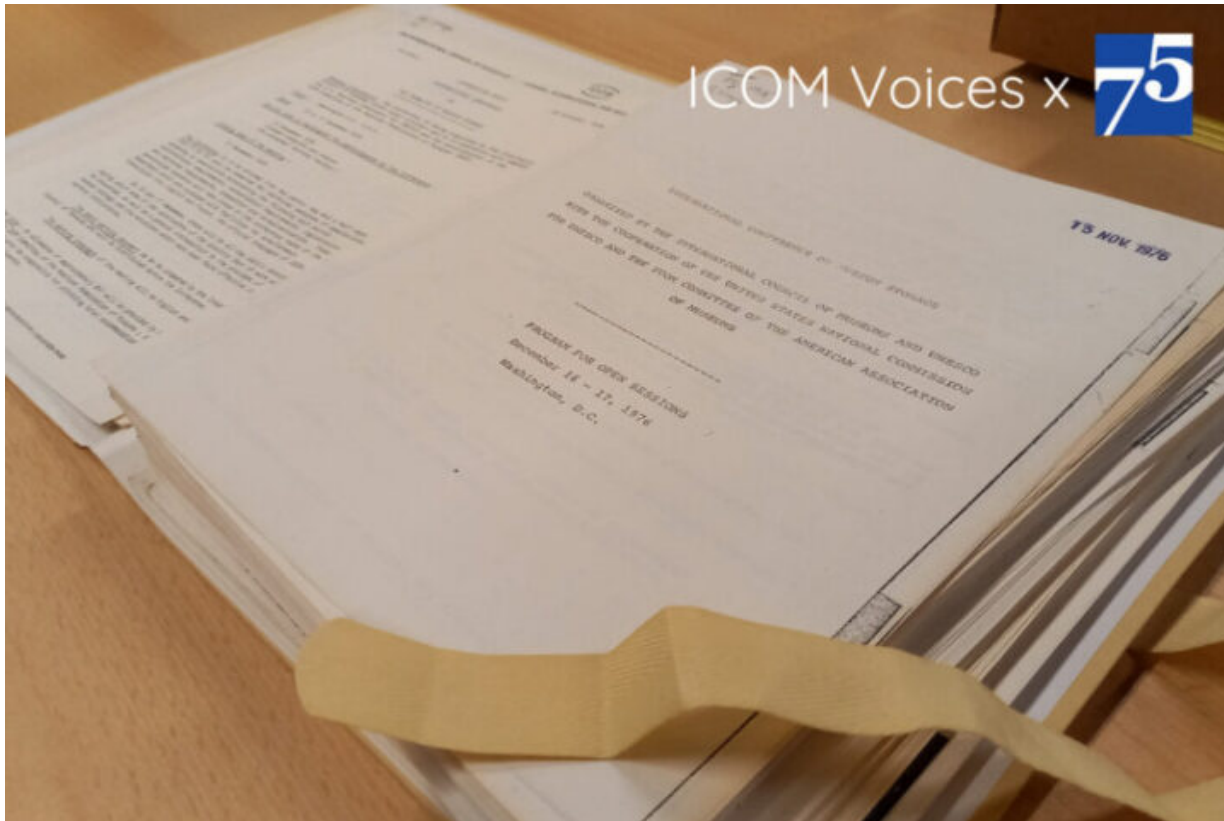
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