

LOCAL MUSEUMS AS HISTORY WORKSHOPS. A 'KUNSTKAMMER' FOR THE 21TH CENTURY? AN EXAMPLE FROM A CITY MUSEUM IN SWEDEN

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INTRODUCTION

The article wants to present and discuss a development project in a local Swedish museum. The project started after a period of financial problems as well as a crisis in societal credibility with the aim to find new ways of looking at museums as public institutions, a way we have called "history workshop". By this we mean both a new way of organising collections, inspired by the old "Kunstskammer"-concept, and exhibitions and more important a new way of how we look upon our visitors. Our aim is to promote a more active role of the visitors, being more like a partner of the museum than a customer. The new and more demanding role for visitors will make it necessary to change our own professional role as museum curators.

A GENERAL BACKGROUND TO MUSEUMS

Before going into the "History workshop" project I will give a background to idea of museum in general and more specific to museums in Sweden. Museums as institutions reflect the society which they are part of. The idea of the museum can be traced back to the early royal and princely collections, the so called 'Kunstskammer', established to prove the legitimacy of a family or lineage. The authority of a museum is its power to select the cultural heritage of a society as well as its privilege of interpreting the objects in its care. Museums are thus often instruments of power in non-democratic societies.

The museum idea in Europe is closely linked to the concept of the

nation state. Museums as public institutions emerged as national institutions in many European countries during the late 19th century. They have sometimes been linked to a romantic search for a cultural identity in a time when modern industrial societies were born. The similarities between modern museums and the comprehensive 'Kunstskammers' of former days has been shown by Mogens Bencard. He argues against the tendency to overlook the rationale behind the 'Kunstskammers' and to consider them merely as haphazard collections of curiosities. The contents of these 'Kunstskammers', with early examples from the 16th Century in Vienna, Dresden and Munich, varied according to their owners' tastes, but basically they have the same aim: "to be comprehensive and encyclopaedic, to be a microcosm of the whole world gathered under one roof. Furthermore they were created for the glory of prince and country, while at the same time having an educational purpose" (Bencard 1993). Beginning in the 1820's, the 'Kunstskammer' museums were dissolved, and new museum organisations were created. Many European major state museums have the 'Kunstskammer' as one common basic source. Both modern museums as well as the 'Kunstskammer'-museums demonstrate to society the cultural identity of a nation, and intend to educate the specialist as well as the general public.

In the 20th Century new kinds of museums closely linked to the local society have emerged and many

museums have played an active role in community development. Experiences of Scandinavian open air museums, neighbourhood museums in the United States, Mexican school museums and the French ecomuseum idea (Le Creusot museum, 1971) are all examples of local museums as instruments of social and cultural development.

The present structure of the Swedish museum system was established around 1940, with the setting up of a state-supported regional museum in each administrative region. Together with the already existing central museums and a variety of local museums they make up the basic structure of Swedish museums today. More recently we see signs that this structure is losing its grip. After entering the European Union and following other changes in Swedish post-industrial society the role of the museum and its public funding has been questioned. The crisis in societal credibility is foreshadowed by the real or imminent bankruptcy of museums.

Over the last two centuries museums have been important institutions of the European societies. In most countries the museums are organised in a hierarchical structure, where most working methods are shaped out of the big national institutions often created in the 19th century.

MUSEUMS IN SWEDEN

The museum structure of Sweden is similar to most European countries. Museums are in general organized in a kind of museum hierarchy, which gives very different situations to museums in

different categories. Swedish museums, and I am now referring to the official statistics from 2003 which includes 198 museums, can be divided into three main groups. The first category consists of museums with a nation-wide ambition in a special subject, often characterised as 'central or national museums'. In this first category we find by example the National [Art] museum, The Museum of Natural History and The National Museum of History. A total number of 24 museums have been labelled 'central museums', all mainly paid by government funding. Most of these often rather big institutions are placed in the capital area, in or around Stockholm. A second group of museums are labelled 'regional museums'. Existing geographical divisions made up of the counties often bound their working-area. They normally have a very broad task mostly made up of a mix of cultural history as well as art. The 25 regional museums are partly financed by the government but the main part of the funding is covered by the local county administration. The last and largest group of museums is made up of 70 small and medium sized museums funded by local municipalities or communities.

There are big differences in how financial subsidies from the public sector are given to different categories of museums in Sweden. In 2003 the 24 central museums shared more than 800 million Swedish kronors, which can be compared to the 70 local museums sharing less than half of this sum. These figures tell us something about how the Swedish cultural policy reinforces the regional imbalance in Sweden where

most of the institutions and the financial and personnel resources are located in the vicinity of the capital. In 2002 there were 198 Swedish museums in the official statistics, 54 of them were located in Stockholm.

Discussing the role of museum in the contemporary society must therefore also make clear what type of museum and which resources, both financial and personnel, the particular museum possess. To the public this imbalance is reinforced by the fact that Sweden has a population, which is very much spread out over a vast geographical space. Urbanization as a process of migration occurred later in Sweden than in most other western European countries. After the Second World War it has accelerated but still Sweden lack more than a few urban centres with more than 500 000 inhabitants. This particular situation with a very outspread population and with a very centralised museum structure did in the late 1960's give the impulse to start the institution of 'Riksställningar' (=Swedish travelling exhibitions), which purpose was to distribute exhibitions from Stockholm to the rest of the country. The ideological basis of this policy is very much founded in the movement of the Swedish Social-Democratic Party, which since the 1930's has been in favour of large-scale solutions from a national perspective. A key idea to this ideology is to give equal opportunities to all people independent of where they live. A strong belief in national institutions and the role of the cultural institutions as 'senders' in a communication process which in many ways had only one direction. But as some sort of contradiction, the ideology

of the Social Democratic Party also included a belief in local popular movements, which was how the Party itself was organized. The different views of how a society was to be organized created tensions and gave rise to a public debate from the 1970's and onwards on the relation between local communities and the central power in Stockholm. This debate has also led to on-going debate on the relation between central, regional and local level in the public administration in Sweden. A debate, which also had great implications to the cultural sector in general and to museums in particular.

SKÖVDE CITY MUSEUM – AN EXAMPLE OF MUSEUMS IN CHANGE

Many Swedish museums have in recent years experienced a period of reconsidering much of the goals and methods in use in the museum work. Much has been due to changing economical realities but also a change in expectations from the public. This article will focus on a small city museum in Sweden, which during the last couple of years has been forced to rethink the whole purpose of running the museum, all what has been done, why and for whom. This process of change has resulted in a project named "Skövde city museum – a history workshop" which is the main focus of the article. The process of change can also be an example of a development similar in many smaller museums.

Skövde is located in the inland part of western Sweden, about 150 kilometres to the East of Göteborg, the second largest city of Sweden. The city is a regional centre in a rural region

dominated by farming and small towns. Skövde has a population of 50 000 and since the early 20th century it has been dominated by military regiments and industrial plants. During the last 40 years the city, as Sweden in general, has changed very much. The number of people has increased much due to migration from other parts of Sweden as well as from abroad. Today 15% of the population derive from foreign countries. The largest employer today is Volvo with three factories making car and truck engines, with a total of 5000 employees.

The city museum was founded in 1924 by the local history association and was 1952 made into an official city museum under the rule of the city council. Today the museum belongs to the category of local museums where almost all subsidies comes from the local municipality. For more than 50 years the city museum has been a very traditional local museum emphasising on the history of the city and its folklore.

Exhibitions have been very traditional and the size of the museum building with only 350 square meters of exhibition space made it impossible to show more than a very restricted number of objects. Most of the objects were stored in other parts of the city and were never put on display. The exhibitions had their focus on different handicrafts and local history from times before the industrial revolution. The exhibitions were kept very similar over the years with only a few changes. The displays were all over very simple and many people thought they were rather boring. This was one of the reasons why

the support for the museum was diminishing. Only a few people took interest in the museum. The visitors were mostly elderly and belonged to a large extent to the local history association. The museum, located in the former 18th Century town hall, was in many ways similar to many other small local museums in Sweden. As a small museum it had only a few employees with university degrees. The number of visitors was all the time only somewhere in between 7 000 -10 000 a year, mostly local citizens of Swedish birth.

In many years there was a growing dissatisfaction over the museum situation. Proposals were made to enlarge the old building and to make it available to disabled people. But the political support were lacking even though a supporting organisation of museum friends were started.

In the year 2001 the city experienced an economic crisis that had severe consequences. The city museum was one of many institutions that had to cut the expenses by drastic measures. The number of employees had to be reduced and to reduce the cost of rent, the cultural committee decided to close the old museum building. It became necessary to concentrate the museum work to the museum's storage building. This building was situated in a former industrial plant in the outskirts of the town and here most of the collections of about 40 000 objects were kept. At the time of the move the former director of the museum also left.

This totally new situation made it necessary to start discussing the purpose of the museum.

We had to start questioning what we were doing, for what reason and for whom we were doing the museum work. This discussion led to the starting up of the project we called "The museum as a History Workshop". We applied and received money for the project from a cultural foundation.

The starting point for the project was an analysis of the role of the museum in the contemporary local society. We found that the museum had failed to adjust itself to a changing society. The city of Skövde had changed radically during the later part of the 20th century. New groups had moved in, both from other parts of Sweden and from abroad. Among the latter group there are quite a few refugees. The whole identity of the city had changed during the 20th century but still the museum had been reflecting only what could be called the middle-class or bourgeoisie life of the 19th century town. The old museum building, the former city hall, was also in itself a symbol of the old city life.

Moving out of the city centre to a former industry building into an area that is now becoming a popular shopping area gave us inspiration to remodel the museum after a more commercial model making the exposition of the objects the main focus. But the financial resources were still very limited and we had to transform the storage building into a public space without getting any more subsidies from the city council. It was still made possible largely thanks to private funding.

The idea of the History workshop has five major implications:

- open up the collection, make them accessible to a larger public as far as it goes.
- let visitors (school classes, study groups etc) make use of the collections in their own projects
- take a more active interest in starting dialogues with people in the local society
- let museum activities and exhibitions to a larger extent take place outside the museum building
- try to make the museum reflect the contemporary society more than being a place of nostalgia

Parts of the new museum opened up in April 2005 and we have since then invited organisations, non-profit associations, schools and companies to the museum in order to start a dialogue and to encourage new ways of using the museum collections. To this day we have also been out at different occasions talking and discussing how the museum could be a platform for contact between different ethnic groups, 10 percent of the population in Skövde being born in another country. We have put special effort in reaching different groups of disabled. The new museum gives much better possibilities in giving access to the collections. We have also a group of mentally retarded people working in the museum that gives us a special opportunity to make the museum a meaningful place to them as well.

Our collections are our main resource. We are trying to make use of the new situation being in what was formerly a storage building. Just

walking around among thousands of objects make people interested in material culture as well as the lives of the people behind the objects.

Letting people see the 40 000 objects, the archives with 100 000 pictures and other documents is a good start discussing how we can start making use of these resources, together. As a small size museum with a staff varying between 8-10 people we must find new methods in trying to be something worth paying attention to by ordinary citizens. I believe we must dare to reorganize the collections, making most objects easily accessible to the public. Valuable and especially sensitive objects may be put aside or in special displays, the rest can be used in more active way both by the museum staff as well as by the public.

During last year the museum building has being changed and adjusted to its new purpose. In the figures you will be able to see what the collections looked like before we transferred it in the "History Workshop"-project. Now we have some kind of storage exhibition and we will over some time reorganise the 1800 square meters we have at our disposal making three different rooms. The first room the visitor approaches will focus on the history of the city and will also function as an introduction to the city and the museum. The second room is made to function in different temporary exhibitions or other activities. It is very flexible and easily changed. The third room is at the moment being rebuilt and will hopefully be finished during coming year. Here we will be able to make the archives as well as the majority of museum items more

accessible. Here we will try to make a modern version of the "Kunstkammer" of the 17th century. As a consequence the new reorganized museum will be ready to meet the new needs of a more flexible and active use of the museum collections.

So, what have we achieved so far?

The project History workshop wants to change the role of the museum staff, from being mostly educational and eager teaching what we believe to be the essential knowledge of the museum, to being more of a cooperating and listening partner, working differently with different groups in the society. Being a very small museum this also means to stop trying to control the process in detail and even accept some losses of objects! Opening up our collections is not done without taking a risk. We must accept that we sometimes will fail when we cooperate with people not used to museum institutions. This will be hard but I think it will be necessary making our museum an interesting and vital partner in the process of activating the city. Many people in Swedish countryside lack experience in how to make use of museums. Very often it has to do with lack of education and that few pupils from schools visit museums. This situation makes up a sharp contrast to the situation in the major cities. By making necessary changes in the local museum we will be a more active partner stimulating a closer cooperation between schools and the museum. During the last year we have also started cooperation projects with homes for elderly people as well as with different organisations and companies.

SUMMING UP

I have in this article tried to give some examples of how we have followed our new principles. If we seriously want to make the city museum a centre of civic dialogue we must, in my opinion, invite people to create histories and comments on the contemporary society on their own premises by the use of the museums collections and archive. I am convinced that a reflexive dialogue with institutions as museums can empower people to make changes in their everyday life. But first of all we need to let them in and open up our institutions.

My aim with presenting some of our experiences has been to discuss some of the problems, reflections and working methods we have come across when trying to reshape a small rather sleepy museum. We strive to achieve a museum that is open, flexible and

possible to use as a tool of a 'history workshop'. The new exhibitions that have been made are in many ways inspired by the old "Kunstskammer"-concept, but in a more accessible way. By questioning much of what has been done in the past at the museum (as well as our own earlier working methods) we are looking for new methods of cooperation with people (individuals and organizations alike) outside our institution. I believe that this means we must redefine the role of the museum curator. We must put more effort to be a listening partner and much less effort in trying to educate our audience. Like a librarian helping you to find the right literature we can as museum workers be active partners in helping people make their own history out of the jungle of artefacts, pictures and various written sources found in the museum.

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