Museums and museology in Denmark in the twenty-first century

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Abstract: *The article discusses the role of the legal framework in Denmark in the development of Danish museums and identifies a shift in the administration through a new museum act implemented in 2002 as a turning point through the establishment of an agency under the Ministry of Culture. At the same time museology was strengthened at the universities and since then research, education and museum practices have been focusing on improving the role of museums for visitors and for society.*

Keywords: museum act, professionalization, museology, Denmark.

Since the turn of the millennium Danish museums have been engaged in a continuing process of change, reflecting a complex society in which change and willingness to adapt have been keywords in both private and public institutions. The need to legitimise public funding, the wish to contribute to a better society, and the passion both to preserve and to show how cultural heritage and art are fundamental constituents in a rich welfare society are some of the driving forces in this process. International research has highlighted how these new demands and wishes have facilitated change both for museum professionals and for visitors, focusing on making the museums “from being about something to being for somebody”, to use Stephen Weil’s famous quote (Weil 1999). In this article, I will focus on external influences, arguing that a major change in the administration of Danish museums at the turn of the millennium has been paramount

in the evolving development of the Danish museum landscape. Denmark is one of the few countries with a museum law that defines the role of museums and regulates their work. In 2001, the Danish government passed a new museum law, which entered into force in January 2002. The law consolidated the administration of museums and heritage in a new ministerial agency, the Danish Heritage Agency, now the Agency of Culture and Palaces. This change established a very influential civil service that has been an important agent in defining the new direction of Danish museums.

I will first give a short historical introduction to describe the museum landscape as it looked before the turn of the millennium, then discuss the incentives for restructuring the administrative system, and finally go deeper into the consequences of this process for the role of museums and the professional training of museum employees.

90 THE DANISH MUSEUM LANDSCAPE BEFORE 2001

The development of Danish museums after the Second World War was characterised by a focus on professionalisation. The state museums, especially the National Museum and the National Gallery, were closely interlinked with the University of Copenhagen: for instance, the university's department of archaeology was housed at the National Museum until 1976/1977. However, in the provincial museums, the situation was very different. Here museums were founded by private citizens and often run by volunteers. In 1958, the first Museum Subvention Act introduced a system where the state grant to local museums was directly related to local support, starting from the baseline of one to one. The aim was to stimulate local and regional support and engagement in cultural heritage. The system greatly encouraged local funding but it became very expensive for the Danish state, leading to a regulation setting a maximum total sum to be divided among the recognised museums (Lundbæk 1985:21).

A driving force in the post war development was the Association of Danish Cultural History Museums, which had been founded in 1929 (Strandgaard 2010:433–435). During the 1960s this organisation developed courses and seminars for museum employees to improve their professional training, facilitate knowledge exchange, and maximise influence on the legal and financial policies in the ministries. This led to a revision of the Museum Act in 1976 and the establishment of the National Council of Museums, which consisted of appointed and elected museum employees and representing a high degree of 'self-governance'. These changes were part of a general decentralisation and democratisation of museums during the 1960s

and 1970s (Lundbæk 1985:21). The appointed members were representatives from the state museums, while the elected members were from the county museum councils, which were composed of museum employees from all museums in the county. This secured a strong representation for the provincial museums in the National Council of Museums (Lundbæk 1985:25).

The 1976 law was Denmark's first common law for art museums and cultural historical museums. There has been and still is an interesting discourse concerning the identity and legitimisation of art museums and cultural historical museums in Denmark (Larsen & Nørskov 2013). Since the nineteenth century, art museums have been defining their functions and purposes by reference to a national and international art scene, unlike the cultural historical museums, which have been oriented towards local history and engagement. This can for instance be seen in Aarhus, where the board of the art museum in the 1870s acquired more than one hundred casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. A move to fill the space in a new museum building in order to avoid the cultural historical collections moving into the same building (Larsen et al. 2008:518).

A revision of the museum law in 1984 made several important changes. For the first time, the purpose and tasks of the museums were now embedded in the law covering both local and state museums. Secondly, appointing a professional director, meaning a full-time employee with a master's degree in a relevant subject such as art history or ethnography, now became one of the conditions for receiving state funding. Many smaller museums needed to upgrade the professional qualification of their staff, and new museums applying for recognition needed to employ an academic curator as director. This was an essential part of

the professionalization that focused on securing staff knowledge regarding the collections, a key component of the conceptualisation of museums as collection-driven institutions that was prevalent during this period. Museum qualifications were defined as having knowledge about the objects in the collections.

FROM COUNCIL TO AGENCY

During the 1990s, a growing awareness of a need to further revise the Museum Act produced a number of reports and discussions (for instance Jeppesen 1995). There were a number of issues that needed attention. Firstly, a large working area for the museums in their remit was not accounted for in the law, the area of the recent past. The archaeological heritage was regulated and secured, but there was no mention of objects not found in archaeological excavations. As for archaeological heritage management, the discussion was about financing. Growth in the financial sector meant more building activities, and consequently more archaeological investigations that could not be covered by the budgets of the state antiquary; hence, another model was needed. A third important issue was the management of the law and the coordination of the work in the network. During the 1990s the idea of creating a state-level agency to take over the work of the committee was developed. One reason was that an agency would secure the obligations of the state to maintain and support professional and highly qualified museums (Buus 2000:9). This had been questioned by previous experiments intended to strengthen engagement of the regions and communities in the museums. There was a very strong interest and wish in the Danish museums to keep and nourish the national cooperation and networks that had been developed by the National Council of Museums.

The new Museum Act of 2001 initiated a new political, economic and social landscape for the museums to operate in. The comments to the bill when presented to the parliament defined the changes as the following: (1) clearer demands for quality and a higher economic basis for museums; (2) better frameworks for development and cross-disciplinary networks; (3) enhanced concern for cultural heritage in physical planning and building activities; (4) a new financial model for archaeological investigations; (5) the establishment of an agency; and (6) increased focus on disabled visitors and children (Bemærkninger 2000). The overall agenda was centralisation and control on the grounds that this should generate a better framework for the protection of cultural heritage, the development of museums, and for preservation. In 2002 the Agency of Cultural Heritage was established, bringing together a number of administrative tasks in the cultural heritage sector under the same roof: the administration of the Museum Act, that of the archaeological investigations formerly under the director of the National Museum in his role as state antiquary, and that of the protection of physical heritage in the landscape. This meant that the work previously done by museum employees through the National Council of Museums was now placed in the hands of officials. The influence of the museums was secured through a number of specialist boards. The new law also modernised the first two paragraphs defining the purpose of museums (Museum Act 2001, §1):

The purpose of this Act shall be to promote the activities and cooperation of museums with a view to safeguarding Denmark's cultural and natural heritage and ensuring access to and knowledge about this heritage and its interaction with the world around us.

For the museums, it was essential that they were considered an integrated part of society. In an analysis of the law in 2007, Dam Christensen argues that the law still subscribed to the traditional museum concept whereby the museum was defined through its collection and preservation work (Dam Christensen 2007). Whereas the reality and practice in the museums had been ever more defined by communication and visitor focus, the administrative framework still operated with an idea of museum processes taking its point of departure in collecting and ending with exhibitions, communication and learning. The museum definition in the law was thus not adequate.

This is a point that was taken up in the latest in-depth analysis of the Danish museum landscape, undertaken in 2010 and published the following year as a result of major organisational changes in the Danish local political landscape. In 2007 the counties were abolished and the number of municipalities was reduced through mergers. Local and regional engagement in the museum administration was changed and this called for changes in the legal framework (Midtvejsrapporten 2010). The representation and networks of the former county museum councils and their funds were transferred to the state and thus to the Agency of Cultural Heritage. Museums with annual support from the counties kept the grant, but in the counties where the funds had been distributed through project money, the funds went to the state. This resulted in very uneven state support, with for instance the art museum Arken south of Copenhagen today receiving very high levels of state support because it was initiated and financed by the county. The final report on the museum landscape for the future was published in 2011, and it suggested a number of changes in the organisation and redefinition of the museum in the Museum

Act (Fremtidens Museumslandskab 2011). In the process, larger restructuring models were discussed, but the final changes were few and did not solve some of the embedded dilemmas within the Danish museum organisation, such as the rather huge differences in levels of state support. This led to calls for a new process, which was initiated by the minister of culture in autumn 2017 and has resulted in two reports suggesting how to proceed with the redefinition of the state organisation of museums.

Over and above administrative and organisational processes, the Agency's enhanced focus on developing communication and exhibitions, especially the digital, has also impacted significantly on work in the museum. One of the key changes in the Agency's administration was the development of national strategies. The first area to look at was conservation. An increase in both numbers of objects on display and the costs of conservation demanded a new approach. A report was produced introducing a valuation system for museum objects, inspired by work in Holland (Bevaringsrapporten 2003). In 2005 a group of scholars and museum directors produced a report on communication and dissemination. Like its predecessor, this report formed the basis for the economic support for the development of new communication tools in the years to come (Formidlingsrapporten 2006). One of the important tools generated by this strategy was a national user survey, conducted by all state-funded museums between 2009 and 2015, which has provided a unique collection of data on museum visits in Denmark.¹ By defining specific areas for development and setting up special funds to support this, the Agency has taken on a defining role in the strategic future of Danish museums.

There has also been a focus on management,

for instance through mergers, as a large wave of these was triggered by the restructuring of the counties and municipalities. Even if mergers were not directly promoted by the Agency, indirectly they were received very positively as a general tool in the public service that would combine cost reduction with a strengthening of efficiency and higher quality (Kulturstyrelsen 2010).

THE ROLE OF MUSEOLOGY

Professionalisation was a key issue for the museum organisations in the twentieth century. It was the Association of Cultural History Museums that initiated museum education – first in the shape of summer courses from 1967, and then from 1989 through *Museumshøjskolen* (the Museum High School), an institution for further education for museum personnel. The summer courses offered courses on a large range of subjects from excavation techniques to ethnography, accounting, and object registration. They were extremely popular, and as they were arranged at a folk high school, people were living together for ten-day periods at a time and this generated a highly social event which was instrumental in creating a very like-minded museum community during this period of professionalization in Denmark (Strandgaard 1995:191–193).

When *Museumshøjskolen* was founded, it was included in the Museum Act of 1988 and received support from the ministry of culture. Courses were offered to curatorial staff but also to the other employees selling tickets, outputting communication, designing exhibitions and so on but the course offerings gradually changed to many smaller courses answering to different demands among the museum employees, thus no longer mixing the staff as had happened at

the summer courses (Strandgaard 1995:195, Larsen forthcoming). This approach was continued when the school was taken over by a new joint museum organisation, the Association of Danish Museums, in 2005. The school provided courses for Danish and Nordic colleagues in all areas of museum work and also in management, setting up the first museum leadership course.

At university level, museology was introduced at the University of Aarhus as optional, interdisciplinary subject already in the 1970s, and this generated a number of master's theses with quite progressive studies. Many of the students became museum directors and transformed this into practice, but their theoretical research was not maintained (Larsen forthcoming). A real change can be observed from about the year 2000, with a general recognition of museology as an academic field. The first initiative had been taken by the former head of communication at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Jette Sandahl, in 1998, who sparked the discussion of museology in Denmark at two seminars to which both museum employees and scholars were invited.² The growing ranks of scholars with museological interests led to the establishment of the Danish Museological Research Network. In 2005, Bruno Ingemann and Ane Hejlskov Larsen edited one of the fruits of this network, the anthology *Ny Dansk Museologi*, presenting a number of articles reinterpreting museum studies in Denmark.

In Aarhus, the Centre for Museology was founded in 2001, providing a supplementary subject of one year's of study on museology, and later also developing further education through a master's in museums studies. At Copenhagen University, supplementary subjects on collecting and communication were offered as single courses. There is no university offering

a degree in museology, but the subjects are embedded in traditional museum degrees and offered as interdisciplinary subjects.

Research in museology is currently carried out at all universities in Denmark. At several universities, centres have been established to further cooperation between researchers and museums – at Unimus in Aalborg, RUCMUS in Roskilde, Uses of the Past in Aarhus.³ Museological research was greatly furthered by the establishment of the Danish Centre for Museum Research, initiated by Kirsten Drotner in 2011. Involvement of university departments at all five universities in Denmark secured a nationwide cooperation to strengthen and energise museum research. In 2012 and 2014, the centre published two reports quantifying museum research in Denmark. They document an increase in studies on communication and dissemination in these years. In fact, the statistics show that in 2013 only two per cent of the studies dealt with collecting, nine per cent with organisation, and none with preservation, economy or evaluation. 56 per cent of the projects studied learning, dissemination, and exhibitions, and the remaining 35 per cent were grouped as “other” and included visitor studies, participation, research, and museum communication (Granskov, *et al.* 2014:25). Popular research subjects include the digital, natural science, learning, exhibition design, user involvement, and young people as target group. These subjects are very much in line with the focus that was developed by the Agency of Cultural Heritage since the report on dissemination in 2005, and they illustrate how a national strategy that is backed by financial support through special funds can influence the direction of the field.

The members of the Centre for Museum Research has also been fundamental in the development of the largest museological

research project in Danish history – Our Museum – which is co-funded by the universities and two private foundations and runs from 2016 to 2020 (Drotner 2017). This project is exemplary for the way museology has developed in the twenty-first century in Denmark. The presentation of the project homepage emphasises the focus on the role of museums as places that change lives:

Through the programme’s 13 projects we design, document and evaluate how forms of public interaction and societal engagement have changed – and can change – to benefit citizens and society at large.

This illustrates how the global change in research from object-centred to grounded in user perception is shaped in a Danish context where the Museum Act and the administrative framework of a strong public service agency to coordinate the work have pushed certain agendas. It underlines how research aims are quite instrumental – looking for better ways to support learning, to attract visitors, to improve experiences. Even in the historical projects in Our Museum, the aim is to investigate the history in order to look for tools to improve the present. Put to the point, research in the museum field is conditional on legitimation by the instrumental approach of improving the general public’s experience and learning.

NOTES

1. The reports are published in Danish and English and can be found on the webpage of the Agency: <https://slks.dk/museer/fakta-om-museerne/statistik-om-museer/brugerundersoegelsen/> (accessed 6.3.2018).
2. Ingemann & Larsen 2005: 12, note 4.
3. For UNIMUS Aalborg University, see <http://www.cgs.aau.dk/forskning/faglige-netvaerk/>

unimus (13.3.2018), RUCMUS at Roskilde University, see <http://ruc-mus.dk> (29.3.2018), and Uses of the Past at Aarhus University, see <http://usesofthepast.au.dk> (29.3.2018)

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