Museological shortcuts

Rethinking the museum

CHRISTINE BUHL ANDERSEN

The museum as an institution should never let go of its fundamental purpose: to collect, preserve and present our natural, artistic and cultural heritage, so as to allow it to pass on to future generations. What museology has helped us to understand is, however, that continuously reinventing and transforming the museum is crucial to its relevance and meaningfulness.

This is what I have learned from working 10 years as a Director of KØS, the Museum of Art in the Public Spaces. Together with my organisation, I succeeded in transforming KØS from being a kind of archive of sketches and models for works of art in the public space, to being an outward-turned, active, knowledge-producing organisation, the primary aim of which was to develop and inform society's consciousness of the significance and role of art in the public space and to involve a much broader audience in those issues. One of the ways we did this was by creating temporary art exhibitions in the public space in collaboration with many different interdisciplinary partners and artists, but also by delivering hardcore research. In my present activity as Director of the Glyptotek it is, however, clear that this is a museum which stands as a substantial, deeply respected academic organization, but at the same time in the analyses we have undertaken hitherto, the Glyptotek is not conceived as relevant for the present age by our stakeholders

and audiences. Considering the incredible collections it holds and the span of history it represents it is urgent that the Glyptotek rethinks itself towards the diverse publics of a globalized world, based on a reinvestigation and reunderstanding of its own identity in order to stay meaningful and regain relevance. In this context there is no doubt that the theoretical foundation of a conscious practice of change to that degree must be sought in the museological toolkit.

The history of museums – and from my own experience: the recent history of radical change at KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces – shows us that the museum as an institution has been undergoing a constant process of change and that this change has been both necessary and legitimate. Of crucial importance is the paradigmatic shift which has, in its recent history, taken the museum from being object and collection oriented, elitist in its form of reference and self-awareness, to a point where museums all over the world are focused on how objects can be included in enthralling narratives and memorable experiences (Hilde S. Hein talked about a move from object to experience already in 2000) with a broad, popular appeal, focused on how a diversity of visitors communicate and interact. During the last twenty years, museums as institutions of knowledge and education have learned

to distribute authority in a constructivist (possibly “constructive”?), dialogical learning space (Hein 1998; Eileen Hooper-Greenhill 1994). Indeed, we have gone so far as to speak of the participatory museum (Simon 2010) where value is created with people’s involvement right at the core of the museum, such as collecting, and research supported not least by the digital and social media’s widely expanded network of communication, which makes this crowd-thinking possible.

In museology we have been compelled to acknowledge something which is both epoch-making and difficult, namely that selecting, categorising and the framing of objects in our collections are neither objective nor neutral. Each will always reflect a historical, geographical, cultural – even political if you like – point of departure (Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Our inclusion or exclusion of objects in collections, and the narratives we construct in our juxtaposition of them, will express specific perceptions of the world which, when viewed from outside, in a historical light or through different theoretical/critical lenses, will reveal themselves as (consciously or unconsciously) ideological projects or norm systems loaded with cultural values.

During the post-colonial, globalised era, democratic dialogue, and, not least, the narratives of minorities have moved onto centre stage of the museum in questions of representation and the right to bestow designations and historicise the world, its objects and their history. Museums are left with a plethora of fundamental questions as to how to react when a range of historical mistakes in the museums’ own foundation, genesis and self-awareness are coming to light, whether this concerns gender representation in the collections of art museums, the demands for the repatriation of archaeological

objects collected from other nations, or the reformulation of controversial titles or even removal of objects which reflect views from former eras on race, gender, etc. In this context of political correctness, how do we avoid losing our courage to discuss issues openly and democratically?

In Scandinavia, we take the museum for granted as a form of public service and a natural part of the welfare-state society. Museum experiences are obligatory to qualify as a dutiful citizen. The museum functions as a setting for the development of the capacity for critical reflection and acculturation through information. But today, witnessing the pressure on the supporting pillars of the welfare-state, what was previously considered a matter of course has once again become a matter of debate: a situation in which our leadership and notion of museums are of historical significance in the sense that if we fail to re-actualise the museum, meaningfully and consistently, we risk leaving our economic and political stakeholders behind. We cannot offer up the argument that the museum must exist because it has always been there, we need to argue with new meaningful purposes. One argument is that while division in communities of interest, lifestyle, facebook-feeds etc. splits us into individualized segments, museums contribute strongly to establishing alternative communities and on a larger scale even the cohesion of societies! Who are the museums for, and who are we working to reach? As far as the public is concerned, we have learned a lot over the past decades – for instance that people are motivated to come to museums for a variety of reasons and that they show various behavioural patterns, that children and young people exhibit different learning styles which must be catered for by us (Falk 2013).

Very importantly, today the curriculums established for museology studies are often combined with studies in leadership, organisation theory and business strategy. More is required than art historical or archaeological skills on the part of museum leadership which, more than ever, is about meeting the various stakeholders' conflicting expectations of what a museum is and will be able to achieve (Cornelissen 2004). Some of the most powerful influences are to be found inside the organisation itself, including the management and the employees. Another issue concerns the fact that, in strategic terms, the individual museum is part of an international community based on peer relationships and at the same time participates in the fierce competition between museums, as well as with other cultural attractions. These are examples of the challenges that make it important for museum leaderships to be able to work with strategy as an everyday device, not something which can only be handled by consultants from outside who have little understanding of museums, but to train museum professionals to be able to think with strategic tools, and thereby to operationalise strategic theory meaningfully in the individual organisation.

As a toolkit for these dilemmas and challenging decisions museum managements are facing, it is important that museology as a field of study, research and training continues to be thought of as an eclectic range of skills and competences which reflect the engine room of the museum, even if it connotes the development of a 'bastard' of a science. A museology of today should develop and offer tools inside the organisation and management; strategy, communication, history of collections, cultural politics, cultural economy, theories of presentation and exposition, curating, education, outreach,

social media etc. Everything must be applicable to the context so that a meaningful cohesion is established. One internal challenge in a museum organisation is that the well-intended initiative often ends up being dismissed and rejected out of hand by an organisation which, not least when it concerns curators and scholars, is most often wary of anything that has a whiff of smart management and communication tricks. It takes time to make the organisation accept the new paradigms and to implement new ways of working strategically with professional communication, including a range of new competences from other businesses, even bringing in people from TV- and film production, marketing, architecture, computer game industries etc. to the museum organization in order to make up the best teams for creating great exhibitions and experiences (Kjeldsen 2012).

As a museum director one should be equipped to be able to involve one's staff, starting from within with the museum's most profound and deepest *raison d'être* to build up strategy and communication from there making sure that the organisation becomes open and trustful towards change and new ideas. How organisational culture works and can be changed has been very well described by the anthropologist Edgar H. Schein (2004) and can usefully be adapted to function in a museum context. The reinvented museum is challenged in the hyper-complex late modernity, where use and function of media have been transformed; where phenomena of migration and globalisation have altered the basis of the cultures which we, as museums, represent, while new digital technology has created new preconditions for the museum's opportunities to communicate and our visitors' experience becomes the resonator of all that we have to

offer and to talk about. At the same time it can be argued that the museum is more potent than ever with the development of our ability to serve a number of different purposes at the same time: The museum can be a powerful attraction in the experience industry, for everyday customers and tourists on the hunt for selfie-spots alike, and on a larger scale, as a sturdy vehicle for city development and city branding. It can be an educational institution offering an alternative learning space, with room for types of intelligence other than those which thrive in a classroom, for creativity, cultural formation and critical reflection on the part of children and young people; it can be the forum for discussion of current questions of society, it can yield new knowledge comparable with that of universities; it can be a social space reaching across generations etc. And for some of the same reasons the museum often becomes an important battleground of issues concerning national identity, gender politics and ethnicity. Because of its importance. If museums master the many identities well and communicate with an understanding of the various potential stakeholders, it leaves the museum in a strong position to stay relevant in the future.

“Museums change lives”, says the UK Museums Association in its vision statement with the emphasis on museums being able to, and obliged to, participate actively in society, claiming that museum experiences can change a person’s life when they succeed in involving them. With a risk of instrumentalising art and culture this seems to be an ambitious vision for museums and as an important reminder for museology as a field of theory.

LITERATURE

- Cornelissen, Joep 2004. *Corporate Communication. A Guide to Theory and Practice*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Falk, John H. 2013. “Understanding museum visitors’ motivations and learning”. In *Museums. Social Learning Spaces and Knowledge Producing Processes*. Copenhagen: Danish Agency for Culture, 106-127.
- Hein, George E. 1998. *Learning in the Museum*. New York: Routledge.
- Hein, Hilde S. 2000. *The Museum in Transition. A Philosophical Perspective*. Washington: Smithsonian Books.
- Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean 1992. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean 1994. *The Educational Role of the Museum*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kjeldsen, Anna Karina 2012. *Forandring eller fernis. Museale translationer af strategisk kommunikation*. PhD dissertation. Aarhus University, Department of Business Communication.
- Schein, Edgar H. 2004. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Simon, Nina 2012. *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz: MUSEUM 90.
- <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives>, website visited January 13, 2018.

Christine Buhl Andersen, Director
info@glyptoteket.dk

Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek
 Dantes Plads 7
 DK-6 København V, Denmark