

# Organizational structures and the museum's educative function

## Empty options at the Reykjavík Art Museum

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**Abstract:** *Museum education is a field in flux that faces continuous theoretical and practical challenges. We argue that formal museum organizational structures, the informal, and experiences of museum workers should be intertwined. We also argue that the influence of museum educators on shaping policies is relevant. Formal organizational structures in museums should be acknowledged and systematically embedded in the shaping and governance of sustainable museum education practices if museums are to succeed as learning institutions. We contend that museum organizational structures disempower the development of museum education as a profession, serving other purposes more rigorously. We interviewed twelve museum staff members for this paper. They all worked at the Reykjavík Art Museum's (RAM) education department as full-time and/or part-time employees from 1991 to 2018. Multiple meetings with the participants occurred from June 2011 until June 2018, resulting in twenty semi-structured interviews.*

**Key words:** Sustainable museum education practices, organizational structures.

Museum education<sup>1</sup> concerns the fields of museology and pedagogy. It has been characterized as an uncertain, vulnerable profession without clearly identified bodies of knowledge (theory) or skills (practice) and with fluctuating role definitions (Eisner & Dobbs 1986, Hooper-Greenhill 2007, Tran & King 2007, Nolan 2011, Hohenstein & Moussouri 2018).<sup>2</sup> The contested role of education in the overall mandate of museums has caused conflicting views on whether museum education is still an occupation in the process of professional-

ization (Tran 2008) or a profession (Hein 2012, Schep & Kintz 2017).

Etzioni 1969 (in Hargreaves & Fullan 2012:80) listed definitions of a profession paraphrased here as: specialized knowledge/expertise; shared standards of practice; a rigorous training processes; monopoly over the services provided; a sense of calling; self-regulation of conduct, discipline, and dismissals; autonomy to make informed discretionary judgments and commitment to professional upgrading and continuous

learning. As a profession, museum education is about sixty years old, but its practices are as old as museums (Hein 2012).

Museums' organizational structures, and authoritative directives within them, have been overlooked in the development of museum education as a profession, although Griffin *et al.* (2007) have argued that such structures can counteract museums' actions to become learning organizations and fulfil their educational roles. Museums are both external and internal learning organizations (Falk & Sheppard 2006). In practice, a museum's organizational structure has a "direct impact on the types of educational experiences it creates, and therefore ultimately on visitor learning itself" (Griffin *et al.* 2007:153). Such systems thinking can help museums become more agile learning organizations and affect their external work (Taylor 2017).

Organizational structures are formal and informal (Moore 1994). An organizational chart visualizes the formal structures of an institution's hierarchy, authority and communications. They can resemble a "genealogical kinship chart," suggesting a family and functions of togetherness (Macdonald *et al.* 2018:144). An organizational structure defines the formal division, grouping and coordination of tasks (Robbins & Judge 2014). The formal structure determines rules, job descriptions (power) and responsibilities (Falk & Sheppard 2006). Informal structures relate to the culture of the workplace or the "unexamined asset of museums as organizations" (Moore 1994:10), which is a complex entity of values, beliefs, behavioural norms, meanings and practices shared by personnel within an establishment (Robbins & Judge 2014).

A clear division between formal and informal organizational structures is complicated in practice since both structures are

important for innovation (Falk & Sheppard 2006; Smith *et al.* 2012). For instance, "key elements of an organization's structure: work specialization; departmentalization; chain of command; span of control; centralization and decentralization and formalization" (Robbins & Judge 2014:257) entail interactive aspects of informality that bend formal organizational structures. Although education is a museum-wide pursuit, education departments are the main agents of implementing the social value of museums in practice (Ng, Ware & Greenberg 2017).

Griffin *et al.* (2007:157) argue that features "typifying effective museums" are needed on all levels, including vision/core values, being people-focused, collaboration, and building the learning environment" for museums to become learning organizations. Additional features include "cohesive leadership" and "visitor-focused public programming" (Griffin *et al.* 2007:157). We concur and argue that the interactions between formal and informal museum organizational structures and the experiences of workers who implement the museum's educational mandate needs to be seen as intertwined. For instance, the mission of a museum as a driving force in decision-making needs to reflect sustainable practices (Martin 2012). The mission, vision and purpose of a museum collectively form the foundation upon which organizational structures are built.

A mission statement essentially clarifies why a museum exists, whereas a museum's mandate defines the audience focus and "the fields or disciplines for which the museum claims responsibility" (Lord 2012:46). A vision statement "describes the impact that the museum aspires to make in the world", and a statement of purpose "articulates its functions in relation to its mandated discipline" and the

community the museum intends to serve with these functions (Lord 2012:46–47). Variances in a museum's organizational structures have a strong impact on the professional duties and responsibilities within them (Norton-Westbrook 2015). Consequently, they impact how a museum addresses the governance of creating its mission, vision and purpose. In that sense, every museum is an exception (Ong 2006).

Museum educators participate directly and indirectly in the formation of mission, vision and purpose policies. We argue that, particularly in smaller museums, the influence of museum educators on the formal organizational structures such as policies is relevant, as Falk and Sheppard (2006) have demonstrated. This matters since McCall and Gray (2014) found that practical implementation of activities in relation to change are hindered by current organizational structures, including unclear policy and role ambiguity.

In this paper, we explore two issues that relate to the discussion above. We argue that if museums are to succeed as learning institutions and fulfil their educational aims and purposes, the practical experiences of museum educators within the formal organizational structures of museums (cf. line departments Lord 2012) needs to be acknowledged and systematically embedded in the shaping and governance of sustainable museum education practices. Otherwise, museum education will fail to serve their visitors and educational mandate and, equally as important, prevent the development of museum education as a profession.

Our arguments are partly based on Phillips and Case's (2019) position that "the traditional hierarchical structure of museums works against them becoming learning organizations." The museum field should in other words abandon the getting-by agenda with mundane

day-to-day activities and focus instead on getting better by "resolving problems at their root; designing an organization that works for, not against, staff; harnessing and nurturing energy; and surfacing and challenging assumptions" (Griffin *et al.* 2007:157–158). We want to take this idea further to argue that formal museum organizational structures disempower (Eisner & Dobbs 1986:77–78) the development of museum education as a profession and serve other purposes, such as political and fiscal, more rigorously.

To support our argument, a case study on Reykjavík Art Museum (RAM hereafter) is presented. The methodology for the study is a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) that consists of simultaneously collecting and analysing data to construct concepts based on the process. We interviewed seven female and five male museum workers, between the ages of 31 and 62, to explore how organizational structures affect museums' educational role as public institutions.

Our informants have anywhere from a few years to decades worth of experience as full-time and/or part-time employees at the RAM's education department. The museum community in Iceland is close-knit, therefore, all details that could jeopardize the participants' identities were deliberately left out. Twenty, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Reykjavík 2011–2018 resulting in nearly twenty-five hours of recorded, transcribed and analysed data (Fig. 1).

Newspaper articles, mission statements, policy documents, annual reports and memos were also collected. The education department at RAM was established in 1991 and operated as a special unit until 2016, when it was integrated into the larger department of exhibitions and mediation/public engagement (RAM n.d. a). One of the authors (ADK) of this paper was

interview	pseudonym	occurrence	date	duration
no. 1	Anna	1of2	29 June 2011	00:56:46
no. 2	Beta	1of2	04 July 2011	01:32:14
no. 3	Anna	2of2	07 July 2011	01:37:19
no. 4	Beta	2of2	08 July 2011	01:24:41
no. 5	Axel	1of2	08 August 2011	01:28:33
no. 6	Axel	2of2	12 August 2011	01:52:55
no. 7	Dóra	1of2	30 January 2012	01:26:53
no. 8	Benni	1of2	14 February 2012	00:50:49
no. 9	Benni	2of2	14 February 2012	00:42:23
no. 10	Dóra	2of2	17 February 2012	01:11:31
no. 11	Erla	1of4	10 July 2013	01:12:00
no. 12	Eva	1of2	20 April 2015	01:23:53
no. 13	Erla	2of4	05 May 2015	01:22:47
no. 14	Eva	2of2	18 May 2015	00:57:27
no. 15	Davíð	1of2	08 May 2015	01:35:03
no. 16a	Erla	3of4	07 April 2016	00:59:23
no. 16b	Einar	1of1		00:00:00
no. 17	Davíð	2of2	19 May 2016	01:09:52
no. 18a	Guðrún	1of1	26 May 2016	00:50:49
no. 18b	Hildur	1of1		00:00:00
no. 19	Erla	4of4	08 May 2018	00:51:35
no. 20	Jón	1of1	20 June 2018	01:28:22
Fig. 1. Interview details.				24:55:15

a full-time employee of RAM's education department from 2006 to 2012.

### REYKJAVÍK ART MUSEUM (RAM)

In 1973 RAM was founded by the City of Reykjavík (Þorláksson 2019). RAM is located in three distinct buildings within the city and has a staff of around forty people, sixteen full-time employees with freelancers who implement technical and educational aspects of exhibitions. Although a relatively small museum, RAM is the largest art museum in Iceland with an international vision of being "a world-class venue for visual arts, committed to purposefully serving diverse audiences, and to be an inviting destination in the daily lives of the community" (RAM n.d. b). Over 17,000 artworks are in RAM's database, and around twenty exhibitions are produced each year.

RAM is a part of the City of Reykjavík and is managed by the Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT), along with several cultural institutions that bid for annual operating allocations from the larger city budget. The DCT answers directly to the mayor and the Culture, Sport and Leisure committee that has a political supervision role. RAM's director is responsible for managing professional operations of the museum and implementing the DCT's resolutions from the mayor and city council (RAM n.d. c). "Professional conduct and quality is emphasized in all of RAM's practices" (Pálsdóttir 2018:56).

A single position of a museum educator was the very first publicly announced job description in RAM's official name, Listasafn Reykjavíkur, "thirty six years after it was first formally proposed (*Morgunblaðið* 1990, Þorláksson 2019:214). The advertised position was full-time, with an emphasis on guiding groups at Kjarvalsstaðir (designated

to artist Jóhannes S. Kjarval 1885–1972) and Ásmundarsafn (the former home and studio of sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson 1893–1982), requiring a background in art education or art history. Hafnarhús, a renovated warehouse dedicated to the works of contemporary pop artist Erró (b. 1932), was acquired as RAM's third location in 2000.

RAM's organizational structure has changed through the years. Until 2016, RAM was divided into four departments: Collections, Education, Exhibitions and PR/Marketing, and management. Under the leadership of the current director and with the aid of a Nordic management consulting company, changes were made with the aim of creating a more efficient internal collaboration and simplifying the decision making processes (Sigurðardóttir 2016). These elements were stated as key components in "defining the roles and objectives of the museum staff" (Pálsdóttir 2017:49). The current organizational structure is perceived as supporting the director's leadership role by clarifying the chain of command and purview of control for further managing initiatives and closely monitoring progress (Sigurðardóttir 2016).

RAM is the only museum in Iceland that has been awarded the highest honour from ICOM specifically for their educational efforts. The award is given to one museum that is thought to exceed expectations in introducing the cultural heritage of the nation in a progressive and interesting manner. The jury found that RAM's education department was highly successful in providing professional museum education to the public in an outstanding manner, fulfilling the museum's educational role (*Morgunblaðið* 2001).

RAM (n.d. d) and Ásgeirsdóttir (2019) affirm that education is a vital part of the museum's activities with 10–13,000 schoolchildren

receiving free educational programs at the museum's exhibitions each year, indicating how success is measured. RAM's agenda includes powerful mediation to "entwine exhibitions, research, education, lectures and other events with the aim of creating an informative platform that stimulates interest in art and its role in society" (Pálsdóttir 2018:54). One of RAM's main objectives is to "encourage visitors of all ages to think critically and learn about art" (Pálsdóttir 2017:49). The goals of RAM's education department are "to encourage visitors to contemplate art, assist them in enjoying the artwork on their own terms, and to create an increasingly comprehensive vision and understanding of Icelandic and international visual arts" (RAM n.d. d).

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Five main categories emerged from the data. They are authoritative directives, education policy and vision(s), measurement of success, professional development and museum education as a springboard.

#### *Authoritative directives*

Museum education as a profession is vulnerable to change from policies and directors and "from too much interference and indifference" (Reeve & Woollard 2015:552). Since the first museum educator was hired at RAM in 1991, four people have served as the director of the museum. They all put great energy into making the operations more visible by emphasizing innovative practices, novelties, exhibitions and programs. Allocation of resources is one of the main decisions directors make that greatly impacts a museum's educative function. Educational practices have become more critical for museums that have the goal

of making themselves more accessible and working from the perspective of a diversity of museum guests and communities (Roberts 1997, Hein 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1999, Munley & Roberts 2006). New museology challenged the traditional pedagogic approaches of museums where museum visitors receive information passively and brought a stronger focus to the museums' social function, rather than focusing solely on collections. One of the RAM informants explained that they "tried a lot of great ideas and would have liked to continue with many of them on a regular basis, but we just needed more staff", indicating stagnation due to a lack of resources. Contradictory to the above statement, museum educators are in the best position to demonstrate public value (Munley & Roberts 2006). They can "activate diversity and inclusion to create social change" through allyship practices (Ng, Ware & Greenberg 2017:142). A lack of resources in museum education departments means that visitors are not valued, contradicting the ethical and socially responsible museum of the twenty-first century that "recognizes identities of its staff and its publics as hybrid and fluid, rather than simply boxes to be ticked" (Marstine 2012:11).

Authoritative directives at RAM have given priority to art as the content of its collections and the subject of the museum. Less effort has gone into the professional development of those who implement the museum's educational mandate and duties concerning the museum's role in society as a public institution. Because museum education is an uncertain and vulnerable profession, it often replicates the practices of other professions, such as when art history (Prottas 2017) is listed as part of the job description. One of RAM's directors emphasized "an advantage in every area" and felt strongly that knowledge of the

Icelandic art scene was the main focus of the museum's staff (Ingvarsdóttir 2006:3), attesting to content expertise as a priority within RAM's organizational structures.

Children visiting in school groups and Sunday tours for the general public were mostly emphasized in the early years of RAM's education department. The work environment was described as completely open to formation. "It all basically happened along the way", said one of our informants, implying that museum education was considered to be a process of learning through experience. This was affirmed by the majority of our respondents.

No museum education resources except books related to art were available in the beginning, making factual learning a priority.

Information about museum education services abroad, acquired through exchanging letters and travels, became influential in the formation of the education department's approach at RAM. One participant acknowledged that "handbooks for US docents shaped how we approached our guests, how we introduced ourselves and supervised the guided tours." Influences for Icelandic museum educators are, therefore, not only from Nordic countries, as previously stated by Sverrisdóttir (2015). Awareness of international debates in museum studies was evident. "We knew about the museum revolution with the strong educational focus people were aware of in the 1970s, but that did not happen in Iceland until the 1990s", as one participant stated. This awareness has deteriorated over the years and has not translated into a clear definition of the museum's educational role.

The majority of our respondents acknowledged that the responsibilities of RAM's education department were often dispersed with other duties in the museum. One of the participants confessed: "I cannot remember

identifying [the full-time museum educator] as having specifically educational responsibilities, because s/he was just really busy doing all kinds of museum work", demonstrating that despite a clear job description, the responsibilities in practice were unclear.

Our respondents were mostly silent about the theoretical aspects of their jobs as educators. One participant explained that it was "absolutely necessary for museum educators to be intensely interested, full of inspiration and excited each and every day." Another informant added that "the job keeps expanding [...]" and it has become very clear [...] that this is not a job for one person."

The current director of RAM, Ólöf K. Sigurðardóttir, returned to the museum in 2015. One of her first directives was to revive a program for young artists called the D-series (Ingólfsson 2016). From 1997 until she left in 2008, she had simultaneously been the curator for this program, the editor of its publication and RAM's head of education. This career vignette indicates that professional development within RAM's organizational structure is encouraged through exhibition practices rather than the development and sustainability of its museum education practices. In a recent interview with director Sigurðardóttir, she confirms this indication and states, "I was the head of education for eleven years along with curatorial work" yet minimizes the importance of the educational aspect of her career throughout the interview (Ásgeirsdóttir 2019:14).

Her predecessor, Hafþór Yngvason, directed RAM 2005–2015. He tied the D-series into a project called The Apostles' Clubhouse (*Pakkhús postulanna*) to introduce a new generation of artists (Yngvason & Ævarsdóttir 2008) and to implement a new exhibition policy for Hafnarhús that emphasized "the

latest trends and waves in visual arts” (RAM 2006). Yngvason invited eleven young artists to perform a museum takeover. The purpose was to “highlight the museum’s role and the role of the different departments within it, how a museum operates”, as an informant explained. The interviewee went on to say that “often the institution thinks about itself more than its role and doesn’t research this role with the aim to change it.” The process proved to be rather painful since the museum did not have the flexibility to allow for and participate in an honest critique of its own organizational structures. RAM did not want to be exposed as an organization.

The curators of the Apostles’ Clubhouse takeover viewed the museum “as a sick person”

and themselves as “co-dependents nurturing an old machine with the poison it needs to function” (Yngvason & Ævarsdóttir 2008:12). They were interested in “the idea of how information is distributed to museum visitors based on discussions with the education department” (Yngvason & Ævarsdóttir 2008: 23). One of the participants commented that:

This type of research is time consuming and it’s a part of institutional critique [...]. It’s difficult to answer if the institution learned something from this process because its educational domain would have needed to be much bigger for that to happen [...]. Education is its main role because through education you deliver to the community

*Fig. 2. The outside entrance of Hafnarhús in 2006. Photo by Helgi Hjaltalín Eyjólfsson with RAM’s permission.*



Interviews with RAM’s staff were a part of the takeover project (Ævarsdóttir 2006). The head of education at the time spoke of the museum’s need for constant renewal, saying that museums are dead if they are without provocations and challenges, and they need to function in their own present (Ævarsdóttir 2006). The problem with this statement is that something needs to first exist for it to be renewed. The head of education was referring to art as RAM’s subject matter, not pedagogical or museum education practices.

Our data show that the professional development of museum education practices at RAM have emphasized art as a subject. Confusion about what profession was being discussed in our interviews was indisputable. To elaborate on categories, memo-writing was a part of our analysis. One memo, dramatically stated that “the museum educator’s profession has been sacrificed on the altar of art.” Similarly, Sigurðardóttir (2008:15) argued that, in order to thrive, “a museum must maintain an active dialogue with its environment.” According to Nielsen (2015:366), relevance is “the creation





Fig. 3. The inside entrance of Hafnarhúsið during the Apostles' Clubhouse takeover in 2006. Photo by Helgi Hjaltalín Eyjólfsson with RAM's permission.

of meaningful practices” subject to the passage of time. Although the Apostles' Clubhouse takeover perhaps failed to show the latest trends in visual arts, it was an important experiment that revealed attitudes and structures that do not necessarily interact, taking organizations as structures for granted (Macdonald *et al.* 2018). The curators of the Apostles' Clubhouse were more aware of the museum's educative function than was the museum itself. Sigurðardóttir still finds it important to be in vigorous dialogue with the community and accessible to all because the museum has “so much to offer” (Ingólfsson 2016:49). This indicates that the museum staff has been very

active in producing opportunities to engage with visitors through exhibitions and public programming.

Our data show that RAM determines what to offer for whom and has yet to adapt to the participatory museum model proposed by Simon (2010). Cultural institutions need to be comfortable managing platforms and content, yet “one of the primary fears museum professionals (and all professionals) have about entering new relationships with audiences is the fear of losing control” (Simon 2010:121), a challenge RAM faces. Yngvason aimed to push RAM's professionalism to the same level as elsewhere in the international forum.

86 He was unafraid of changing the emphasis of the institution and job descriptions if necessary (Ingvarsdóttir 2006). True to this statement, Yngvason eliminated the head of education position in 2008 and appointed two project managers that reported directly to him. One managed educational programs and the other public events, undermining the museums' educational practices considerably by decreasing the staff's autonomy, since other departments within the organization each had a leadership position for their work specializations.

The education department was dismantled altogether in 2016 in the name of organizational change, erasing most traces of the word education or learning from the organizational structure and public presence. One of our informants said that, "we cannot call it the education department anymore, just exhibitions and mediation team or something like that."

One respondent described their new reality thusly:

I would say that the educational program defines our job as well as label-writing and all information about exhibitions, so mediation [...]. We have contemplated whether the word education would cover all those different aspects; there has been no better word to use except mediation, yet it isn't as descriptive [...]. There have been many discussions about this and mediation was chosen as the closest to covering all aspects of our work such as mediation through lectures, courses and with the increase in public programs and diverse groups, so mediation it is.

An informal conversation in 2019 with one of our informants revealed that the education staff of the department of exhibitions and mediation/public engagement have not only lost their leadership position within

the museum but also their enclosed office workspace, perhaps the most obvious sign of disrespect for their work.

### *Education policy and vision(s)*

Formation of RAM's public education policy is contested, according to our interviewee. No official education policy is available at RAM and plans to formulate such a vision have faded. In 2013, RAM's education policy was "not quite fully formed yet, but in progress", according to one interviewee. The overall thinking in RAM's educational approach was summed up by a participant in the context of the missing education policy.

There is great emphasis on an open dialogue [...]. The heart of our educational practices lies in arts, artists' ideas and that we [the museum] are perhaps a platform for this open dialogue where we [the education staff and/or the museum], however, lead the discussion. This is something that has been practiced for so long that it serves as our policy, although it hasn't been made public.

This statement reveals the assumption that museums are neutral. However, they are neither neutral nor apolitical (Janes 2015). An open dialogue on the museum's premises or the staff who lead discussions about art can never be neutral and "education is inevitably political" (Hein 2012:19).

There were plans in 2014 to use the museum's new and improved website and put forward "some kind of a statement from the education department [...] not too many details, but perhaps the overall thinking that is already present in our work", as one informant put it. The launch of the website, and thus the statement, was delayed. In 2018, one of our participant commented that "there has been no education policy formed and there is no

interest in doing so [...]. It just isn't discussed anymore." Linking the education policy to the website signifies a focus on information processing rather than theories about learning. In 2018, the head of exhibitions and public engagement at RAM disclosed a continued apprehension about the museum's website lacking an educational focus.

There is no way for our guests to figure out what is being offered to them on a regular basis. We have a pop-up with events that grab attention regarding what's happening today or tomorrow, but there is no concise overview, so people become familiar with the repeated offers whether or not they are marketed towards specific groups, focused on a series of events or generally what is available to diverse groups. People don't realize what services we offer [...]. We hardly realize it ourselves.

The main focus is on organizing exhibition related educational programs and events and managing the freelancers to keep them up-to-date about what is happening in the museum. One participant offered a glimpse of an ideological foundation. "Museum education was based on the idea that our role was to enrich the museum visit and make art work more accessible." Another informant explained the working process and argued that the educational role needed to be constantly developing.

You need to look at the community, look at who would possibly be interested in this exhibition, who is attending and what the community is interested in and how do you get the aim across within the atmosphere that exists. This has to be constantly in formation.

If the aim of the museum is to promote exhibitions, this approach works well. However, this

view ignores the field of museum education as a profession in its own right. An awareness of responsibilities is strong nonetheless. "We are using public money and the education department is doing things that are supposed to construct knowledge, increase understanding, develop the scope [of the job], and approach new audiences", as one interviewee stated. Participants also revealed a general strategy and development.

What we are talking about here [the educational work of museums] has never been put on paper. Working around the exhibitions that are on display as a departure has been the general strategy of the museum, but less focus has been on analysing the needs of the community to find out, for example, what groups have gotten sufficient access to the cultural capital [of museums]. This is perhaps a sign of positive development. We just aren't further along than this.

#### *Measurement of success*

The measuring tool of success embedded in the organizational structure of RAM is rooted in the larger department of Culture and Tourism (DCT). Museum education is clearly stated as a vital part of RAM's legacy on its website, yet this is validated only by the annual number of visiting pupils. One of the informants explained that "headcount has always been a measuring tool for museum education and how well it is conducted or not." DCT uses a performance measurement called a balanced scorecard. The scorecard is used in the non-profit and public sectors to measure effectiveness in providing benefits to constituents. It is a strategic plan that sets the agenda and demands attention from operating managers at all levels of the organization (Kaplan 2009). The DCT framework, however, only focuses on the

number of events in public programs and the number of school-visits.

RAM's education success and initiatives are measured by whether or not they meet the numerical goals set by the DCT each year. The scorecard monitors how many school-aged children and families come to the museum but ignores the actual work of preparing diverse educational programs for a multitude of museum guests of all ages with different needs and capabilities. The scorecard neither measures the quality of programs nor the time it takes to create them.

One of our informants, though, explained the limitations of this method.

The only measure of success is how many people attend our educational programs. This number is checked each year [in the scorecard] to see whether or not we have improved our number of museum visitors. That's how it's been in the past. Of course, success could be measured in a much more varied manner [...]. We have diverse offerings and we don't exactly know how they are working or how our museum visitors spend their time once they are here or online. There are plenty of educational offers that cannot be measured by numbers like the museum-belt [art exploration for families] or the Rover Show [a mobile art exhibition and teachers' packet for compulsory schools]. So this measurement number is not all inclusive.

Museum education at RAM was initially thought of as an add-on feature "that is a vital addition to the art and cultural offerings within the school system" with a strong emphasis on head count (Ingólfsson 1991). This legacy is still intact (Ásgeirsdóttir 2019).

#### *Professional development*

The first hiring of a museum educator came about because of a changing emphasis in the

museum operations. The educational practices were to meet the increasing demand for public service, access and information from a broader audience within in the community. One informant explained that, "museum education was clearly viewed as a part of the services offered by the museum." Considerable guesswork was apparent in the early years though. "We just had to obtain the knowledge ourselves until we heard about a profession called museum studies" one respondent reported.

Based on our data, museum education as a profession is unclear in the organizational structures of Icelandic museums. One of the interviewees pointed out that the National Museum of Iceland only hired trained teachers and spoke of museum educators (*safnukennarar*) but not of people who are professionally trained in the subject of the museum. The hiring procedures at RAM, that have emphasized artists-as-instructors, is explained as an influence from the Norwegian Henie-Onstad Art Centre and the writings of Susanna Rajka (1994:31), who stated much in contradiction to current developments that "educational programs in museums are more dependent upon the museum's collection and guidelines than upon established pedagogical principles."

Educational activities were systematically increased at RAM, and for a few years, there were two, full-time positions in the education department justified and directly linked to attendance records. City-supported bus rides were secured for school groups and streamlined educational materials were developed with specific offerings aligned with the national curriculum. Freelance educators who were on-call for school groups and events had more security and a stable income while implementing the Sunday program along with



Fig. 4. The outside entrance of Hafnarhús in 2016. Photo by Pétur Thomsen with RAM's permission. The statement above the museum's entrance in Icelandic translates as "The museum is a school: the artist learns how to express himself; the public learns how to make connections".

groups during the week. This changed in 2011 when the Sunday program was discontinued because it didn't serve the museum's image and visibility of events well enough and was found difficult to promote. High profile events gradually became a more prominent feature of RAM's organizational structure. More resources are allocated for events since they offer more visibility than the behind the scenes work of educators.

One respondent explained that "longer standing exhibitions were the prerequisite for

educational activities to develop and become more focused." Another respondent described a constant battle for money. "The main goal was to produce carefully designed, timeless and beautiful education material that students could take with them so knowledge about RAM's collection was being disseminated to their homes. This project format is still used today."

Several restrictions were found in the implementation processes of fulfilling RAM's educational role. An informant described how insufficient funds to support the organizational structure of people on call as freelance-educators are "a barrier to progress."

We always need resources to fund additional positions [...]. There are funds for projects, but we need people to implement them [...]. What is difficult about having people temporarily hired is that you can't just hand over projects and say "now you just finish this" because they have no commitment to the museum [...]. They are always in the role of the contractor.

Viewed from the museum's organizational structure, there is also considerably less commitment toward contractors than to staff. Yet, this hiring structure has been in place for decades, indicating that emphasis is on implementing services rather than professional development.

#### *Museum education as a springboard*

Two threads were commonly mentioned in our interviews. The first was how much the job benefited the educators themselves as a form of self-empowerment. The second emphasized on art or exhibitions, not pedagogy or the museum education literature, indicating that museum education is considered to be a springboard to other museum related jobs.

Many respondents started their museum careers as Sunday tour guides at RAM. Some

of them moved on to become full-time staff in the education department and later moved on to other positions. Working for RAM's education department was described as such by one participant.

The main advantage of the job was first and foremost knowledge for myself [...]. This was casual work for an hour and I got paid for four [...]. The preparation was just a bonus for me and something that was directly and immediately useful for me [...]. My interest was not so much in the area of education or museum education practices, although I had my opinions about it, but the job was useful for me on many levels and has benefited me in other teaching jobs[...]. I never knew pedagogy well enough to know what I was doing while conducting my tours [...]. I approached this as an amateur and an artist [...] trying to get people to understand art [...]. I never know what I am doing while I teach other than, just working from my own premises [...]. That's perhaps the dangerous part but perhaps necessary with other things, or I hope so.

Another informant described the process as a combination of memorizing facts and "a private interpretation of the art in front of you" although every tour is different yet he/she viewed the experience as "some kind of performance. You have to constantly adjust to the circumstances."

When asked what would have made them stay at RAM's education department at the point the informants decided to leave, the answers were unanimous: a much bigger education department, more resources and more people to implement the educational role. One informant put it this way. "When I quit at RAM, I felt like I had emptied all options, not all the possibilities but all the options available", suggesting that there is not much room for sustaining museum education

practices or growth and development in the organizational structure. Possibilities, but not opportunities, exist, so people leave. One of the interviewees told us that "it was a really hurtful conclusion for me to leave this job because it was so rewarding[...]. I would have loved to work full-time, but there was just no leeway." Another participant reported feeling that "the job was rewarding in many ways, often difficult but also restorative yet very frustrating to have to continually justify it."

One informant said: "I think it's always good [for this job] to get new blood and someone with new thinking." Another informant admitted that he/she quit as soon as the performance aspect of museum education caused anxiety.

I didn't lose interest, I just quit [...]. The pay wasn't great and it didn't bother me to work on weekends, but it was uncomfortable [...]. I missed it a lot when I quit because it was like intensive lifelong learning not only with every exhibition but to have to rethink the approach each and every time I mediated.

This description implies a lack of emotional and practical support in practice. One informant revealed more interest in exhibitions after working as a museum educator for many years, signifying stagnation in creative educational approaches within RAM and more opportunities in exhibition related work.

I personally wanted to work more in exhibitions rather than in education, and I have envisioned exhibition making and mediation as needing to work closer together [...]. The museum educators are working with the schools and all that [...] but we all form the approach, you know, this conversation with the curators and artists.

After almost thirty years of practice, RAM does not have a clear professional ground on which

to build its educational practices. Continual turnover seems to be the norm and decisions are made on a personal level rather than on the level of the museum as an educational organization or a cultural institution. A lack of respect for educational responsibilities within the museum could be one reason people jump to other museum jobs. As one informant plainly put it, "I think the work of the education department doesn't get the respect it deserves within the museum." RAM's current director, states that she has more influence in the role of a museum director (Ásgeirsdóttir 2019), yet is reluctant to speak about her extensive experience and influence in the museum's education department.

## CONCLUSION

We set out to explore how the organizational structures of museums affect their educational role as public institutions and found that the impact of RAM's organizational structure on museum education practices directly diminishes its educational role. The mission, vision and purpose of a museum collectively form the foundation upon which organizational structures are built, yet at RAM, no time seemed available to form an education policy or set an overall agenda. The current director states clearly that she is interested in the social aspect of museums yet the role of the education departments as the main agent of implementing the social value of museums in practice is overlooked (Ásgeirsdóttir 2019, Ng, Ware & Greenberg 2017).

Authoritative directives within the organizational structures cause serious practical and theoretical challenges and have left the now defunct education department in a position of stagnation. This is mainly the consequence of limited resources, resulting in a lack of initiative

to improve the educational practices and lack of research (Eisner & Dobbs 1986). The job is usually too hectic for reflection, according to Reid (2013), and the twenty interviews in this study confirm this. Museum educators are called upon to make time for theory and research in order to be successful at their jobs (Twiss Houting *et al.* 2010). Therefore, practical experiences of museum educators need to be acknowledged and systematically embedded within the organizational structures of museums if they are to succeed as learning organizations. Progress in the education department and the city's organizational structures has solely been measured by a score card – a driving force of RAM's educational operations – grounded in counting museum visitors according to predetermined categories. The educational resources used for museum education were never questioned by our interviewees, indicating that a reflective and critical disposition is not encouraged in RAM's organizational structure. The pedagogical and museological aspects of museum education as a distinct field involving embodied, enactive and immersive learning (Hooper-Greenhill 2007) as well as emotional, aspirational and attitudinal learning (Hohenstein & Moussouri 2018) have been overlooked. Instead, RAM focuses on supporting the novelty of exhibitions and events. The staff look elsewhere for satisfaction by taking on other museum duties or simply leaving, suggesting that museum education is viewed as a springboard towards jobs that have more clout. Bailey (2006:183) found that many museum educators, are "drawn to supporting other organizational concerns" such as "housekeeping aspects of the organization." This issue was clearly evident in our data. Museum education is considered to be the invisible (house)work of serving museum audiences of all ages with vastly different ages

and needs. The education department, once full of hope and promise, has emptied all its options unless it finds a way to empower the long-term development of museum education as a profession instead of focusing on short-term visibility and media attention.

## NOTER

1. The authors acknowledge that the term has gradually changed to museum learning, emphasizing the learner over the teacher with the aim of offering engaging and participatory learning experiences. This paper highlights the internal practices of museum professionals implementing a museum's educational mandate. Thus the term museum education fits the topic better, since knowledge of teaching and learning is critical for the job.
2. Nolan (2011) identified seven job titles used interchangeably for museums educators.

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