



KENEN MUSEO?

Museoalan Teemapäivät 11.9.–12.9.2014

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Perjantai 12.9.2014 Ravintola Lämpö

4. "Wonderful things or wonderful stories." What communities really want from museums?

Discussion moderated by Iain Watson, TWAM (Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums)

Objects are what make museums special. They are what make museums different to cinemas, to theatres, to schools, social clubs or leisure centres. Therefore objects must be the most important thing about museums and the 'quality' and 'significance' of objects must define the quality and significance of the museum. Therefore the best museums are those with the best collections!

Whilst I absolutely believe in the power of the objects, their ability to inspire awe and the connection people feel with objects this experience only comes into play once the connection is made between the individual (or the community) and the object or objects. A 2000 year old piece of pottery in someone's hand could as well be a bit of modern plant pot until the story starts coming out. If it is a stamped piece of Roman pottery that allows us to identify the potter and start building the story and connection we have a real human link over 2000 years and emotional and intellectual learning can take place.

I believe there are no right ideas as to whether communities want 'wonderful things' or 'wonderful stories' – they probably want both! - but I am convinced that 'wonderful stories' are what make museums great and these 'wonderful stories' spring from, encapsulate and bring to life our collections.

What is a museum (about)?

"valuable old things, such as old money"

"diamonds"

"something you can admire, but not touch"

"national treasures"

"wonderful things"

Quite opposite to the "lay-man" descriptions above, museum professionals usually agree that museums are not just about physical objects but great stories that they intrigue and the ideas we can learn from them, thus, "wonderful stories". Or more precisely, a well-balanced combination of things and stories. However, there's still a gap between what the public(s) see and what professionals feel. Through words, museums are able to create a link between visitors and objects that suddenly become alive, inspirational and intellectually stimulating. But in which ways could museums develop their story-telling devices and bring the idea of wonderful stories more out to the people? What is the role of objects in this? Do objects (and museums) have intrinsic value or have they become story-containers? Are objects without stories and a provenience in danger to be dismissed from our collections? And how do we find out peoples desires and needs in the first place? These were among the key questions in our discussion.

Museums have a huge potential via multimedial and multidisciplinary interaction. Museums bring stories alive in a physical space with both virtual and physical objects and this makes museums special. There are promising examples where the exhibition media has been used in a fresh way to get the visitors participate in the overall story, but there could be many more. Iain Watson mentioned one of his favorites – the German Emigration Center – where visitors become part of the exhibition design. Together the visitors create a story and a sense of travel across the oceans. The story may not be one that actually happened, but it gives credible enough information of how it might have been. The emphasis is on the personal experience, empathy and imagination. At its best, an engaging exhibition space becomes a platform for memories – or, an interactive setup where the visitors may learn something about themselves in the exhibition.

We discussed the various ways museums tell their stories. Could we bring something new to the narrating devices that have been quite underused in many museums? Could museums learn something from contemporary fiction, for instance? Do stories always have to be true? Narrating is always about making a choice and this aspect could still be more visible in the way that museums present their "facts". Like Julian Spalding puts it in his book *The Poetic Museum* (2002), "museums are interpreters of the past and they need to develop this aspect of their work positively and creatively". Providing that the use of fiction is recognisable, using some drama might provide an interesting and probable story that visitors can remember – rather than telling nothing memorable at all. The yearn for good stories has already lead to interesting projects where professional writers have worked in cooperation with exhibition designers. There might be good potential in this kind of approach! Museums are filled with amazing stories that deserve some thrive for story-telling. We should also keep in mind that asking questions and activating the people seem to be the most efficace pedagogical tool (enquiry based learning and visual thinking strategies).

Where do stories start – and what comes after them? Just as a school is not about the walls around it, a museum is not about the building anymore. It should respond to the needs of communities and develop actively along with the people. In today's libraries you find more than books: you can rent skis, play games and try 3D-printing. It's about giving everyone an equal opportunity to learn new things. Museums should also want to be places of urban interaction: non-commercial places to get together and even relax without having to perform. This is why we need to have a good idea of what benefits the public hopes to gain from their use of museums. On the

other hand, the visitors too should be better informed of what museums have to offer. Our discussion finally lead to a sci-fi-ish idea of museums as an ecosystem, a mother ship that would send its remote satellites of various scales into different areas of the cities. This metaphor draws a picture that by taking those steps closer to where the people are museums will find new communities, voices, fresh ideas and plots.

Notes: Sanna-Mari Niemi (Helsinki University Museum)