

Translation, Transmission and Interacting

Making the Museum of World Culture Relevant to Local Culture

Peter Zackariasson, Ph.D.

University of Gothenburg

+46 707 197171

www.zackariasson.com

peter.zackariasson@handels.gu.se

Abstract

In a world where consumers are becoming all the more engaged in both the production and consumption of cultural goods museums have found their roles challenged and under renegotiation. Demands made on museum from funding bodies are many times those of serving a larger part of society, an view on these cultural institutions in line with what museums, generally speaking, used to be: "...a not-for-profitmaking, permanent institution, in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment." (McLean, 1997, p. 268). But as the relation between producers and consumers of culture are changing, is "service of society" and being "open to the public" any longer relational possible – or do museums need to become part of society, part of the public?

Following a social constructivist approach, as developed in Science and Technology Studies, It is my belief that the distinction between society and museum is but an artificial one, just like any other organization it is made up of the network created by actors (Latour, 1999; 2005) and the actions made (Czarniawska, 2004). What happens in a museum is part of society, as shows through my studies of two art pieces that created much friction between different actors (Zackariasson, 2009). The definition of inside museum – outside museum were in these cases irrelevant as the networks created paid no attention to these.

This study builds on the work of Carnegie (2010) in exploring the relation between society and museum. "Museums have the potential to explore the global through exploration of the local and to reach beyond the production of dark heritage or romanticized views that shape much heritage provision to offer the potential for engagement at a deeper level." (Carnegie, 2010, p. 239) The potential of these institutions are immense, and making these relevant for local communities is pivotal.

The aim of this article is to present a case study from one museum working to make themselves part of society, and in that blurring the borders between producers and consumers – the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. "The museum [of World Culture] wants to be an arena for discussion and reflection in which many and

Non-profit, Arts, Heritage, and Social Marketing

different voices will be heard, where the controversial and conflict-filled topics can be addressed, as well as a place where people can feel at home across borders.” (Museums webpage¹) The case is based on interviews with persons working in the marketing department. In redefining the aim of the museum they have been instrumental in carving out a space for discussions on topics, thus in no mean presenting isolating exhibitions but part of many activities to engage with different actors. This is done both in physical and digital spaces, using both traditional and non-traditional images of a museum. At this point the museum have acquired some success in its quest, but in doing so found themselves challenged with existential issues such as “what is a museum”?

It is my belief that this case have the potential of offering insights in how it is possible to act for dissolvent of the society/museum dichotomy. This museum, just as many others, are still trying to find ways to make themselves relevant. In communicating experiences from this endeavour it is possible for other museums to learn from this.

References

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¹ <http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/varldskulturmuseet/om-museet/in-english/>, accessed 17 July 2012.

Non-profit, Arts, Heritage, and Social Marketing

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