
INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE IN CULTURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

FLEMMING JUST

Intercultural practice in a museum is not about national contrasts, but about the great differences, we see in the different population groups' use of museums. Half of the population do not consider museum visits an option. The museums allow themselves to be normative, to 'educate', and think – carried by the Enlightenment's mindset – that knowledge is every man's right and a step in democratisation and identity-creation processes. In addition, museums see themselves as a part of a local/regional development project. The Museum of South West Jutland's two main exhibition sites in Esbjerg and Ribe are different: The first is a traditional city museum, while the museum *Ribes Vikinger* (Ribe's Vikings) is also a tourist attraction. The result is a different composition of users, but basically the users of both museums, whether they are Danish or foreign tourists, can be characterised as traditional museum users. On the other hand, the museums have taken a whole string of initiatives to spread communication to new user groups. Add to this that in the coming years, the museums will undergo significant changes to become relevant to a greater part of the population.



INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE IN CULTURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

Intercultural practice is usually a term that describes relations between different groups, where the constituent dividing line is created by nationality, ethnicity, language and religion. In a globalised world, where the ability to understand customers and staff on many continents is a prerequisite for good sales and communication without conflicts, intercultural competences are very popular. Intercultural management and practice are therefore about the management of staff with a great variety of national backgrounds, etiquette and communication.

The unspoken presumption is that everybody from one particular country carries practically the same characteristics and behaves more or less the same. Handbooks in intercultural management, for instance, give the impression that Danish and German business cultures are diametrically opposed to each other. Danish workplace culture is very egalitarian, while there is a clear division between managers and employees in Germany. The Danes are informal, while the Germans are formal.¹

In what way do we come across intercultural, nationally conditioned differences at museums? The culturally conditioned *national* differences in communication, social conventions and other aspects do not appear to have an impact on the users' behaviour and expectations during their museum visits. Nor are they evident in the users' responses in user surveys, the front-end personnel's experience or in museum visitors' books.²

By contrast, the museums experience intercultural differences *within* the individual nationalities. The typical museum visitor at a cultural history museum – regardless of whether the visitor is Danish or foreign – has a medium-length or long higher education, is a middle-aged woman and a public employee. Americans have defined a group in society that they call WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). Similarly, the museums have a clear core group of 4Ws (White, Well-off Well-educated Women).³

By contrast, the following groups are underrepresented at the museums in Denmark: self-employed, unskilled and skilled workers, pensioners, people who are employed in private businesses, young people, men under 50, and 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants.

Gender and age are part of the explanation; differences in educational levels are a greater part of the explanation. What remains is an element that can widely be described as the cultural factor. It explains why greengrocer Mohammed Fellah at Stengårdsvej has a lot in common with pensioner Gerda Hansen on the third floor and mechanical engineer Børge Olsen in the suburb. In their view, museums are for the nobs and the educated, something elitist that is of interest to a minority in the population. A museum has nothing to offer them, and there are things in life that are much more enjoyable.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

Why do the museums care about the half of the population that cannot see why they should spend time and money on museum visits?

Museum professionals are marked by the ideals of the Enlightenment. We want to create and share knowledge. Knowledge sharing is a democratic project that contributes to developing citizenship. Insight into cultural heritage creates identity. The mindset of the American Declaration of Independence characterises our practice: All men are born equal and have equal rights, regardless of their background and social position. Everybody should therefore have equal opportunities for access to and insight into cultural heritage.

The museums carry out normative work. The academic's rational conversation with like-minded and equally educated peers is experienced as alienating and irrelevant to citizens who do not have an academic background.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The Danish Museum Act's preamble contributes to a redefinition of the museums' mission. The Museum Act from 2012 does not alter the 2003 Act's focus on the five sustaining pillars in the handling of tasks: collection, registration, preservation, research and education. However, there is a world of difference as regards what the handling of tasks is to be used for. In the 2003 Act's preamble, the objective is to:

1. Work to safeguard Denmark's cultural and natural heritage;
2. Illuminate cultural, natural and art history;
3. Enhance the collections and documentation within their respective areas of responsibility;
4. Make the collections and documentation accessible to the general public, and
5. Make the collections and documentation accessible for research, and communicate the results of such research.

The somewhat passive phrasing – to work for, to enhance, to illuminate, to make accessible – has been made decidedly more development-orientated in the 2012 Act:

Through the mutually connected tasks, collection, registration, preservation, research and education, and in a local, national and global perspective, the museums are to:

1. Update knowledge of cultural and natural heritage and make this accessible and meaningful;
2. Develop the use and significance of cultural and natural heritage for citizens and society, and
3. Safeguard cultural and natural heritage for future use.⁴

The Danish parliament thereby demands that the museums' handling of tasks must be directed at society and citizens, and that their knowledge must be democratised. In other words, be accessible and meaningful to the citizens.

Up until the turn of the millennium, the museums primarily focused on collection and dissemination out of the five pillars, while research was not given priority. Today, dissemination and research are the museums' prime tasks. The demands about the research effort have increased significantly, but the top priority is education that is meaningful and relevant in a societal context.

Overall, the enlightenment project is still going strong. However, it has been joined by a development project that focuses on the museums' societal orientation, including the creation of education that reaches a wide spectrum of users.

The societal orientation is also reflected in the Danish Agency for Culture's topmost advisory organ in the museum field, The Strategic Panel, which was appointed in 2013. The Panel has decided to focus, during its four-year period of work, on 'The museums' societal role' as the overall theme.⁵

THE MUSEUM OF SOUTH WEST JUTLAND

The ambitions contained in the new Museum Act correspond with the practice and mindset at the Museum of South West Jutland. Concurrent with the negotiations about the new Museum Act, the museum carried out a vision and strategy process. Our mission is that the Museum of South West Jutland – taking South-West Jutland as the starting point:

- Preserve and make cultural heritage accessible
- Create knowledge, experiences and food for thought
- Contribute to local and sustainable development

The museum considers itself a local development factor and accepts an obligation to contribute to local and sustainable development. This is practised partly by playing a key role in tourism development and by contributing to the creation of local development projects in close collaboration with many types of institutions, companies and associations.

The Museum of South West Jutland are a cultural history museum with a basic grant from Esbjerg Municipality, and from 2014 also from Fanø Municipality. The museum's two main exhibition sites are Esbjerg Museum and the museum *Ribes Viker*. In total, the museum receives some 70,000 visitors per year. In the museum's *Vision 2020*, the goal is to reach 200,000 visitors, partly by attracting more people to the existing sites, and partly by opening new exhibition sites. As an example, the Cathedral Museum was opened in 2013 in collaboration with Ribe Cathedral Parish's church council.⁶

THE MUSEUM USERS' PROFILES

It is a privilege to have exhibition sites in two cities as different as Ribe and Esbjerg. Ribe is Denmark's oldest city with a population composition that is characterised by the fact that the city has been a cathedral city since 948 as well as an administrative centre and home to many intellectuals. The city has a well-preserved historical city centre. In 1855, the Antiquarian Collection opened here as Denmark's first museum outside Copenhagen. In 1995, the collection moved from a number of renaissance houses at the city centre to a former power plant outside the centre. With a grant from the VELUX FOUNDATION, the power plant was converted, redesigned and given the name *Ribes Vikinger. Museum for vikingetid og middelalder* (Ribe's Vikings. Viking Age and Medieval Museum). As the name indicates, the museum is a specialist museum with a focus on the city's prosperous years during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages.⁷

By virtue of the city's values, and not least the cathedral, the museum attracts many tourists, both Danish and foreign. The User Survey from 2013 shows that 69% of the users come to the museum from a holiday address. This group makes up 41% across the cultural history museums as a whole. Half of the tourists come from abroad – twice as many as the nationwide level. The survey also shows that 51% of the museum's users are men, while men on average make up 39% at all cultural history museums.⁸

Esbjerg is one of Denmark's youngest cities. It was founded in the 1870s, was awarded borough status in 1899, and has since then developed into Denmark's fifth-largest city. The city was created by workers, poor people and fishermen. Community solutions were therefore a necessity, and this meant that in a number of welfare areas, Esbjerg was a pioneering city even from the early 1900s. Although the city now has universities and other large educational institutions, and is undergoing rapid economic developments, the city is characterised – according to its own branding values – by straightforwardness and a lack of snobbery. This means that it is not a tourist city as such, but because of its size and proximity to the North Sea, it receives a large number of one-day tourists from the holiday home areas along the coastline. Whereas Ribe is an old public service city, Esbjerg is a modern industrial city.

Esbjerg Museum was inaugurated in 1941. The fishery part was made separate in 1968 when the large Fisheries and Maritime Museum was founded. The museum is located in a former library building close to the city centre. 70% of the museum's users live in Denmark. The gender distribution follows the nationwide distribution for cultural history museums.⁹

In terms of age, the visitors are younger in both Ribe and Esbjerg than the average for cultural history museums, approximately 40 and 50 years, respectively. As regards education, a clear difference can be seen between Esbjerg and the national average. At Esbjerg Museum, 47% of the users have a primary, upper secondary or vocational background. At a national level, these groups make up

37% at the cultural history museums in 2010. By contrast, only 18% of the visitors at Esbjerg Museum have a long higher education as compared to 27% at the cultural history museums as a whole in 2010.

Although our two largest exhibition sites are very different, they have the same imbalanced distribution as all other museums as regards the users' socio-cultural composition. As a part of the overall enlightenment and development project, we are working at creating museums, exhibitions and activities that will make our communication reach as wide a population group as possible. This ambition is primarily aimed at citizens who live in Denmark. In relation to foreign users, we would like to create a good and educational experience that provides insight into local Danish cultural heritage, leaving visitors with a positive impression of their holiday in Denmark.

INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE

The most important activity for museums is learning and communication in relation to children and young people. Children who during their childhood and youth encounter a museum that gives them exciting and educational experiences will grow up to have a clear understanding of what a museum is. The School Service's and the new Primary Education Act's intentions for closer collaboration between schools and cultural institutions are therefore a democratic enlightenment project that makes children and young people familiar with cultural heritage.

In collaboration with Esbjerg Municipality's education authority, we have set up a joint unit, the School Service at Quedens Gaard, with staff from the School Service, the museum, day-care services and the National Network of School Services, respectively. The partners have developed a comprehensive material for schoolchildren, and they are conducting many practical courses.¹⁰

The museum also offers informal learning courses in connection with holidays and festive seasons. Furthermore, they attract kindergartens and day-care mothers. One example of an activity is *Dagmar and Valdemar*, which takes place in a medieval universe.

The museums have something to offer the youth education programmes, too, for instance in relation to interdisciplinary and practice-orientated approaches. Aalborg University has documented that problem-based learning can contribute to increasing social mobility. In the *Intrface* project, we have developed courses along with ordinary upper secondary schools and technical upper secondary schools.¹¹ In addition to the subject of history, the courses have been related to biology and chemistry at advanced levels in the final year of the upper secondary school. In both cases, the upper secondary school students have given positive feedback about doing practical work and contributing to solving concrete tasks. The same goes for the *Learning Museum* project, in which we have a formal collaboration with University College South Denmark's teacher training programme, which means that several trainee teachers gain a close relation with museums.

The museum also gives high priority to outreach. Among other things, we are involved in the development of Ribe by Night and *Peters Jul* (Danish traditional Christmas story) in Ribe, as well as the Culture Night in collaboration with the trade associations in both Ribe and Esbjerg. We also carry out open archaeological excavations and participate in the Festival of Research, which opens for other possibilities of creating relations to citizens who do not normally visit museums.

A traditional museum visit often poses demands on the visitor about involvement, a certain level of prior knowledge and a desire to immerse oneself. Among Gallup's nine compass segments, the well-educated, *community-orientated* users are able to decode the museums' communication, while other segments find the museums' communication alienating and elitist. In addition to guided tours at the museum *Ribes Vikinger*, the museum offers guided walks around the city. We have also been successful in developing ghost walks and Viking walks. This constitutes development of intercultural practice.

INTERCULTURAL PRACTICE IN A FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

In both Esbjerg and Ribe, the permanent exhibitions are about 20 years old. Esbjerg Museum is in the process of being redefined. We have enlisted the help of a Danish architectural firm and a Norwegian concept development firm, and we have involved the city's residents in the development of the new museum. Whereas Ribe is to create an even better experience for the large number of tourists and schoolchildren, Esbjerg Museum is to be a citizen-orientated culture communication site where all population groups can feel at home at cultural events, political meetings, association events etc. This will be reflected in the communication forms and in the exhibition activities, which will all take their starting point in the modern city, the pioneering city, and in the period of occupation (World War II). Last year's theme, Rock in Esbjerg, which focused on the 60s' electric pop music, was a foretaste of this. This involved collaboration with Esbjerg Upper Secondary School's music line, the festival week, local musicians, a visual artist, sale of vinyl records etc. As a result, we have experienced a 25% rise in the number of visitors, and we have seen many people who would otherwise never visit the museum, and who are proud to be given recognition and exposure.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/intercultural/management/germany.html>
- 2 As a director, I read all visitors' books from our exhibition sites in order to get an impression of museum visitors' attitudes and experiences.
- 3 This typical museum visitor is found at all museums in the western world. At the world's most rapidly expanding museum market, China, the picture is completely different. The Museum of South West Jutland's twin museum in China, the Suzhou Museum, has 1.45 million visitors per year. 46% of these are under the age of 24, and 48% are aged between 25 and 60. The latter group includes a particularly high number of couples under the age of 40.
- 4 Both Acts are quoted from *Retsinformation.dk*, see <http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk/institutioner/museer/ny-museumslov/>
- 5 See <http://www.kulturstyrelsen.dk/institutioner/museer/strategisk-panel/>
- 6 The Cathedral Museum opened on 1 July 2013 and had about 50,000 visitors during the first six months.
- 7 The museum is on the list of national attractions, which are assigned the brown St John's Cross.
- 8 National User Survey 2013, the museum Ribes Vikinger. In the User Survey from 2010, men made up 49% of the visitors.
- 9 National User Survey 2010, Esbjerg Museum. Unfortunately, the number of responses to the survey in 2013 at Esbjerg Museum was insufficient as a basis for a report.
- 10 See <http://skoletjenesten.esbjergkommune.dk/besoegssteder/quedens-gaard--ribe.aspx>.
- 11 *Intrface* is a collaboration between upper secondary schools and educational programmes. The purpose is to "develop academically relevant museum experiences and teaching that will bring the children at eye level with their own cultural heritage and the institution that manages it". www.intrface.dk

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MUSEUMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: THE INSIDE EXHIBITION AND FORGOTTEN AUSTRALIANS

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Researchers have argued that Australia has the highest rate of institutionalisation of children in the world.¹ Of the estimated 500,000 children who experienced institutionalised 'care' in Australia in the twentieth century, approximately 50,000 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children who are known as the 'Stolen Generations' and 10,000 were Former Child Migrants from Britain or Malta. However, there is little acknowledgement that the vast majority of institutionalised children were Australian-born, non-Indigenous children: the 'Forgotten Australians'.