American museums – an experience

Museum experiences

In November 2015 I was awarded a grant from the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland to spend six months in Saint Louis, USA at a science center and museum. I am not going to write about my job at this museum since I have made a confidentiality agreement with the museum I worked for. But I will share my thoughts on some of the other museums I visited during my time in USA in this text. I left my home country and headed “over there” in February 2016 expecting an adventure, and an adventure it surely was – a life changing adventure and experience. I am going to focus this text on main differences between American museums and Nordic museums I have visited.

I presented my master’s thesis in Museum and Heritage studies at Uppsala University in October 2014. The focus research questions were “what is a museum?”, “how does a museum operate?” and “how should a museum take care of its collections?”. My conclusions were shaped mainly by the ICOM definition of what a museum is and the Swedish National Heritage Board’s guidelines for how to preserve and take care of museum collections:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (ICOM statutes, article 3, section 1).

I also used the ICOM definition for museum professionals:

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Museum professionals consist the personnel (whether paid or unpaid) of museums or institutions...who have received specialised training, or possess an equivalent practical experience in any field relevant to the management and operations of a museum, and independent persons respecting the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums and working for museums or institutions as defined in the Statute quoted above, but not persons promoting or dealing with commercial products and equipment required for museums and museum services (ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums).

Before I arrived in Saint Louis my view of what a museum is was somewhat narrow – the museum should be operated by professionals, in a professional fashion, with the following basic functions included; collections, research, storage, conservation, preservation/care of objects, education and exhibits (Lundberg 2014 p. 39). My horizon has widened since then and in the following I am going to explain how.

The initial plan for my half-year stay in the US was to work at the same museum for the whole time, researching and cataloguing an archaeological and paleontological collection. But after my first weeks I realized that I would finish the project ahead of time. I renegotiated the terms and was granted a field trip every Friday to broaden my stay. This opened up a great opportunity for me and I got to see, exchange experiences, meet with and learn from over 35 other museum professionals in the Midwest and surrounding areas about what a museum is and how it can operate. I visited all kinds of museums, archives and libraries (science centers, museum ships, children’s museums, history museums and historic sites, cultural history museums, natural history museums, art museums, zoos and botanical gardens etcetera. I came in contact with private, corporate and federal institutions, non-profit and for-profit museums - all with different operational conditions and missions.

Many of the American museums are affiliated with the American Alliance of Museums, an organisation which was founded in 1906, “dedicated to promoting excellence within the museum community” (Constitution and Bylaws, American Alliance of Museums). According to the American Alliance of Museums a museum and its staff should:

...not only collect, preserve, and exhibit objects valuable to art, history and science but (museums) also are educational institutions, research agencies, and cultural centers... Museum professionals should share a common core of knowledge, sense of purpose, and code of ethics to enhance their educational and scholarly attainments... (Constitution and Bylaws, American Alliance of Museums)

These statements differ from the ICOM definitions mainly by not stating that a museum should be a non-profit, permanent institution serving the public. Also, there is no requirement for object collections; a museum in USA can serve as an educational institution for example, without collections.
So how do American museums preserve and collect? Are collections necessary? The museums, archives and libraries I visited had different approaches. Some had no catalogued object collections at all and focused on props and/or storytelling as tools for educational purpose and/or amusement. Other museums borrowed every item they exhibited from other museums or heritage institutions. Yet others had collections and followed the text book example of a collecting museum (with catalogues and/or databases). The limitation for the museum, library or archive – whether it was its mission statement, finances, physical space, staff, knowledge or other aspects – set the standard for that institution. Every institution had to do their best based on their resources. Not everything fits the ICOM textbook example. But the limitations some American museums struggle with do not mean that the museums are bad in any way – several of the museums were specialized and successful in management and museum operations. They were good at what they were doing. Some American museums are considered among the best in the world by the world’s largest travel site TripAdvisor (for example The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, The National 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York, The National WWII Museum in New Orleans, The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC) (Top 25 museums in the world, Trip Advisor’s site).

One of the best storytelling museums from both my field trips and from those I have ever seen was the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. This museum used stories from the American civil rights movement and brought the exhibit to life through video and audio recordings, life sized dolls portraying a historical event and hands on experiences where you played the role of Rosa Parks in the bus or participated as one of the students at the student sit-in protests in the 1960’s. The National Civil Rights Museum also used objects and texts but the museum’s main strength was its ability to engage the public by storytelling – the museum did not need collections.

Another type of museum was the City Museum in Saint Louis. It left no one unaffected with its amusement park or playground feeling, reused historical building details and steel scraps incorporated in the museum building. The shoe shaft with the spiral chutes, once serving as a mean to transport merchandise from the upper floors in the International Shoe Company, lined the center shaft in the museum. The chutes were shaped into seven and ten-story high slides that kids all ages could shoot themselves down while listening to At the Ballpark or the National Anthem playing loudly from the theatre organ built for the Rivoli Theater in New York City in 1924. The City Museum proudly resists definition and jokingly the museum is dubbed “The Museum of Things that Could Kill You” (Inside City Museum 2015). This is definitely not a traditional museum in the ICOM definition and I have not experienced anything like it elsewhere and probably never will either! The museum does not have a traditional collection and it works for-profit. Still it is one of the most interesting museums I have been to so far.
I visited the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois my very last weekend in USA. With the latest technology, staged dioramas and displays engaging all your senses this was also an example of a museum being very good at what it is doing. The museum staff mixed museum objects, props and modern technology – the technology made it possible to use holograms instead of real objects. The museum has two movie theatres where sound, sight and movement engage the audience. In the theatre you become a part of the Civil War, you see the gun powder smoke rise in the theatre and your chair shakes as the cannons are fired. The sound and light makes it feel like you are in the middle of a battle field. Another sense-related aspect of the museum was how the museum played with temperatures in the exhibitions; in one of the staged rooms portraying the widow Mary Lincoln sitting in a bay window in the White House, mourning the loss of her husband and son, you could feel a deep chill in your body as you approach the display – the temperature was much lower here than in the rest of the room. When leaving this area you entered a staged kitchen with a stove was to your right. Closing in on the stove you could feel the heat letting you (and Mary) warm up and comfort yourselves.

My reflections from my field trips are that you do not need a collection to be a good museum. It all depends on how you use the intangible heritage, which limitations you have and how you use them to your advantage – a museum can still be a museum without any traditional collections. With museum objects I believe it all comes down to understanding and accepting that every object will age, and museum professionals need to focus on letting the objects age gracefully based on the best conditions and practice the museum caring for the object can offer.

Collection storage
How do American museums store their collections, if they have any? It depends on limitations, resources and the mission of the museum. The museum should be able to preserve and secure the safety of the objects it exhibits, unless the objects are props that can and shall be used. Museum objects should be kept in both exhibits and storage rooms in the best conditions the museums can maintain. There are standards for preservation which most of the American museum staff I met strived to attain. They did their best in preserving the heritage for generations to come, originating from limitations and resources each museum has.

I volunteered at the conservation lab at the Missouri History Museum’s Research and Library Center a few days where I met a conservator who got me thinking outside the box. She had been in a desert area where the objects had been kept in a climate of circa 20-30 % Relative Humidity (RH) for their entire existence. The museum standard and text book examples state that you should keep most cultural history objects in a RH of 45-55 %. This is also how I have been taught to think. But this square way of thinking and preserving objects would have been a catastrophe for the objects at that
particular museum. You would have had a mold explosion, the objects would have cracked or rotted. “We got the humidity up at circa 30 %, but no more than that and that particular humidity was just right for that area and those objects” (Pack, personal communication 2016.07.07). Everything does not fit in the text book example. The conditions set by the preserving museum due to limitations and other challenges were in this case good enough.

Sometimes the tangible heritage is not the main focus either. Sometimes the intangible heritage is more valuable and the traditions, methods or oral information could be more worth keeping than objects. Intangible heritage is the reason that the National Blues Museum in Saint Louis was founded. At the National Blues Museum the stories are the main focus and as a visitor you participate in interactive exhibits. The museum objects are second priority and this newly opened museum does not have any storage room or climate controlled exhibit areas. The exhibit developers focus on storytelling with person portraits and stories of the voices of blues (Dace, personal communication 2016.06.17). Once again museum staff need to understand and accept that every museum object will age and by doing so letting the objects age based on the best conditions and practice the museum caring for the object can offer. With the particular example of the National Blues Museum in Saint Louis, it would mean to lower the temperature and light while processing further investments to install a climate controlled system in the future.

Reflections on the essence of the American museums I visited

How does American museums operate? I have concentrated mainly on the obvious differences between how American and Nordic museums operate. Several of the institutions I visited during my half-year offered different programs and events. Also volunteer programs and intern programs were conducted. And the heritage institutions held fundraisers, were included in a tax sponsoring program, raised money from memberships, or had private donors (individuals or companies) sponsoring their institution. The American museums I visited also depend on volunteers. Whether it is to keep the museum open during weekends, to host events, welcome guests at the front desk or help a child with an experiment at an interactive station in the gallery, the whole system is built on volunteers or interns. The main benefit from using volunteers is that it is free. I can also see a knowledge benefit some of the museums made from a former staff member who after retiring volunteer at his/her old work place, or from a former professional in a specific field. The fact that you are retired does not mean that you lose all the knowledge you have. This is something the Nordic museums should incorporate more in their operations to offer meaningful spare time for volunteers at the same time as the museum staff can learn from former employees or professionals. The American museums I came in contact with
often had a department or a staff member responsible for the volunteers. If Nordic museums would like to start a volunteering programme the American model would be a good example to follow. It takes time and effort to guide volunteers but the museums can gain a lot in return.

A membership or donation program with different benefits for members or donors could also be something to look into for Nordic museums – a lot of projects in the Midwest were made possible by crowd funding. An example of this is the conversion of the ore carrier William G. Mather into a museum ship. The Great Lakes Historical Society raised over $800,000 in three years (1987-1990) to renovate the ship into a museum. Members, trustees, corporations and foundations donated funds to the Mather through a vivid fundraising campaign (Runyan, 1990 p. 92-96).

Concluding remarks

What is a museum? What did my six months long experience of American museums leave me with? American museums can collect, but it is not a criteria. The museums exhibit and tell stories (storytelling and intangible heritage). Many museums act educationally but it is not a criteria. Museums can also provide enjoyment, experiments, showing and engaging the public with interactive displays. Museums can act as sources of knowledge but it is not a criteria. Many museums want the public to react, reflect and engage with suggested “answers” that the museum provides. My experience is also that American museums want to engage the public to form an interest and curiosity for learning more. A museum works/operates/stores and exhibit its possible collections according to its resources, in the best way it can. You got to do your best with what you got – not everything fits the text book example. American museums uses volunteers and different ways of crowd funding.

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PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Dace, Jacqueline, director internal affairs, National Blues Museum in Saint Louis, 2016.06.17.

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