

INTERVIEW WITH JETTE SANDAHL

Chair of Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP)

Why is the museum definition important?

What I think is the importance of a museum definition is that it functions as a shared framework for museums across the world. Which is itself quite miraculous – that we have **a framework that, if not all museums, then many, many museums relate to and have as the basis for their work and activities.**

If you look at museums they are incredibly different. Sometimes we say that they are as different as your corner grocery store and the big chain department chain stores. So **we have a huge variation in what a museum is, but somehow, at the core of that great diversity there is a shared core.**

The definition also functions as a basis of some of our partnerships with other big global organisations, in some countries it functions as some part of their legislation around museums. **It puts certain obligations but it also defends museums in certain contexts.** For example, when people say “oh you don’t need to do research”, say “yes, we actually do research; it is a fundamental part of what it is to be a museum”. The definition is part of shaping that very basic identity on which we then have huge differences.

Why should we consider changing it?

The changes in the museum definition is something that happens every once in a while. By five years intervals or so there is a little adjustment in the definition. But if you look at it over time, I could be tempted to say it has been almost unchanged for half a century.

If we look at the current definition through the needs and perspectives of the 21st century, **and if you begin to scratch a little bit on the surface of the definition, you will see that in many ways it speaks from values and assumptions that really belong to much earlier historic periods. It doesn’t speak the language of the 21st century.** It doesn’t address a number of the situations in which museums find themselves today.

We have a museum that is quite sovereign. The museum does “this and this and this”, and the public is allowed to come in and do “this and this and this”. So there is no real equal footing between the museum and the community. **You don’t feel any of the current demands or expectations of cultural democracy, equal exchange, and coproduction.** There is a subject, which is the museum, and then there’s the public out there, somewhere.

We have a concept of society, as if the society is a homogenous thing, not something that is full of conflict, contradiction and great variances. **All the conflictual side of society and**

museum relationships in that society we don't see reflected in the current definition, which is not described by saying “we are open to the public”. That concept is way too small. It can be interpreted as a certain number of hours each week or free access to school children... But, does it speak to that whole relationship between the museum and the community? Can the community actually pose demands on the museums? When communities start posing demands on museums, so many new things happen, which is what we have seen often in the indigenous context.

There is another one that I find quite important and it is “the humanity and its environment”, as if there is a split between humans and the rest of the world. And I think that's really important in the setting of the current challenges around the climate, global warming, where **I think museums could be way more influential and have a much greater impact in that discussion if we knew we were speaking from a stronger position**. So once you start unpicking one thing, a whole set of concepts or assumptions changes, which I think is so incredibly interesting about this, but also what is difficult, because I can't even begin to imagine what a new definition would be.

What does the Committee of Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials do?

The committee is called Museum Definition: Prospects and Potentials and it was created by ICOM as a new standing committee, which signals that ICOM thinks that this is something we should be looking at, we should constantly be monitoring what's happening out there in the larger global museum landscape.

So in the committee we're being really careful. **We've sort of given ourselves a year where we listen, explore, analyse, collect data and we refuse to talk about the definition. We just try to document the whole field**. And then after a year we will begin to try to put this information together and advice ICOM as to if we should really open this whole question of the definition and think about changing it.

When we got created as a committee one of the big challenges for me as the chair was to **create a committee that transcended the European-Western systemic dominance which we often have in this kind of contexts, like any other global organisation**. Very carefully we are recruiting for our core group and for the working groups people from each continent, so we try to create that balance in our work.

One of the working groups we have is one that we call round tables. We try to do these round tables across the globe, where people sit together around the table and they address four questions, which are the same for every group. **Each person gets two minutes for each question, so it is not a discussion. You do not start contradicting each other or arguing. Each person makes a clear statement. We have done that in a number of contexts now and it gives a very personal and very succinct professional interpretation to these questions** which are: “What do you think are the most important contributions museum can make to society? What do you think are the most important challenges we face? What do you think are the most important societies face? And how do you think we can change our practices and principles to better maximise our contributions?”

It is a very wide listening device. It is a very broad hearing –I don't know if any other global organisation has been out there so far out and hearing their members. Ideally at some point

we will make this accessible on the ICOM website and people go in and listen to what did the other people in Korea said about this. **This is not just one shot at changing a definition. This is a continuous activity of looking at what is the relationship between museums and societies in which we live and work and we are, which are the context of our activities.**