

Administrative, Social and Cultural Space – Three aspects of a regional museum dilemma

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Résumé

Il est difficile de définir clairement le terme "régional". Il sous-entend à la fois une idée d'espace mais aussi de géographie, impliquant des frontières plus politiques que naturelles, et peut faire référence à des dimensions très différentes. L'article décrit comment l'histoire a transformé un espace géographique en espace social et culturel, pour en arriver finalement à une unité politique. Il décrit également le système des musées régionaux en Scandinavie, chargés des collections locales mais aussi des monuments placés sous leur responsabilité géographique, tout en présentant le développement de ces musées, les influences auxquelles ils sont soumis, et les activités et conséquences qui en découlent. L'auteur souligne aussi la difficulté de définir une culture régionale. Au vu de l'évolution des conditions et des besoins du public, les musées régionaux doivent trouver des réponses adéquates. L'article aborde ces nouvelles approches et énumère les principes de base.

The rather vague concept "region" is continuously questioned and debated within ICR. It is difficult to distinguish between "region" and "community" and the boundary between the adjectives "regional", "municipal" and "local" are definitely blurred when applied to the museum institution. The societal framework for the museum operation must always be studied individually. However, its boundaries can be described in general terms of some significance for comparative purposes. In Sweden the regional concept, as you will see, is very strictly defined in relation to the overriding "national" concept and the subordinated "municipal" and "local" concepts. But I think that closely related aspects could be applied to any museum with a geographically defined area of action. However, they stand out very clearly in the Swedish context. I think, too, that those aspects could be of help for the analysis of museum outreach work of specific relevance to the theme ICR chose for its 1995 meeting, *Museums: from visitors to users*.

The region is a spatial concept and a geographical concept; when we want to demonstrate its scope we use maps. It is also easy to think of regions as having natural boundaries, and being "true" geographical spaces with a sort of permanence. But most of us have to deal with regions that are administrative spaces, defined by political powers, which probably change through the ages and have only provisional permanence. One of the main problems of ICR has to be compatibility – because administrative regions can be so different in scale. The "Länder" in Germany can be regarded as regions in relation to the national level, like the individual states in both Canada and the US in relation to the federal state, and the "département" vis-à-vis France. The regional subdivisions in Scandinavia include such areas as the "amt", "fylke" and "län". Such regions are usually more or less related to true geographical spaces. When the authorities' interest in some kind of planning and regulation for practical, administrative purposes

arose, it came to be based on units that had already been developed spontaneously by a society of agrarian settlers or mobile land-users such as hunters, fishermen or shepherds. These units, farmsteads or villages, hunting or grazing zones, linked together by road and water communications, were thus spaces shaped by the natural topography. That is how an old pattern which relied on everyday activities became formalized as administrative regions. Such consistent regional spaces appeared in Sweden in the Middle Ages as church parishes, geographical spaces which in Scandinavia were very stable until the late 19th century. The Scandinavian word for parish is "sokn". It is etymologically derived from the verb "söka", an equivalent to the English "seek". The act of seeking the same church, located for easy access by a number of settlements, formed the parish and its congregation. The Scandinavian/German word for the people living in an area with a church in common, that is to say the congregation, is "menighet, Gemeinde", those who share the church. It is the equivalent of the basic meaning of "community".

Thus a geographical space became a social space, where a common dialect was developed, and as a result of the church serving as a constant meeting place the parish became what sociologists call a marriage zone, tying families together in a net of reciprocal obligations. Over time the social cohesion grew, common habits and traditions settled and a "cultural space" formed. It is interesting to note that the parishes that obtained their definite boundaries in the early 19th century are the units which still form the basis for local history associations, which often have a small open-air museum with a collection and whose members often convene to produce a parish history book. An administrative reform in the late 19th century transformed the parishes into communities, and the administrative responsibility moved from the church to politically elected bodies. In the 20th century a new administrative reform was carried through,

which was motivated by a school reform extending compulsory schooling to nine years. As this required a more numerous population basis than that of the old communities, several communities were blocked together, reducing the original number by about 50%. Again it is interesting to note that many of these fell apart afterwards. Social spaces cannot expand beyond a certain point without causing uneasiness, frustration and hostile feelings among the citizens.

When you look at the "national" level, it was of course necessary from a central government's point of view to have other administrative units than the ecclesiastical parish and diocese. Jurisdiction, military organization, and taxation required regional structures, where controlling networks could be established, and laws and regulations effectively implemented. Accordingly a county-structure – the county in Scandinavia being termed "amt", "län" or "fylke" – was applied to the old pattern of parish communities, each county comprising 20-50 parishes. Governors in the counties represented the Crown. The governor was assisted by an office which gradually became a mini-government as planning and regulating functions grew. In Sweden 24 counties came into being, which today have an average population of 250,000 with four exceptions – three big ones around Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö with close to or exceeding 1,000,000 inhabitants and a very small one, the island of Gotland with about 60,000 inhabitants.

When regional museums were established in Sweden during the 1930s and 40s, they fitted into this pattern of central and regional administration. They were the result of the vision of one man, the National Antiquary of the day, Sigurd Curman, who clearly saw that an effective application of the legislation concerning prehistoric sites and finds, the protection and care of historic monuments and buildings as well as the inventorying of both sites and buildings, which was at that time manifestly insufficient, demanded a decentralized organization. He had also seen that the collections brought together by voluntary organizations all over the country dedicated to the cultural history of their various territories were inadequately housed and cared for. The idea he was able to carry through was that state support could be given to an association in the regional centre, the "county capital", to build an adequate museum, provided that the association agreed to employ a professional curator as director, who at the same time should be the responsible regional representative of the Central Office of National Heritage. Rendering service to the Crown gave the association

yearly state support for the director's salary. These offers were tempting.

And the 24 regional museums which came into being during the 1930-1945 period all became general museums of cultural history. Through the double obligation of the museum, the Swedish regional museum got one of its basic characteristics – the combination of collecting both objects and environmental information on prehistoric and historic monuments and memorials in the region. And for those responsible for the activities of the museums the following question gradually arose: was the region, that is to say the administrative space, a cultural space which could be given a fair presentation in the museum? On the whole, how did the administrative, social and cultural spaces fit together in the region?

The administrative space had been determined, but how could the social space be defined?

The museum, situated in the regional capital, housed a collection normally brought together by an association dominated by middleclass people with middle-class tastes and preferences combined with a romantic interest in archeology, art and history. Among them there were often one or two really dedicated persons, collectors and amateur scholars. The members of this small circle were happy to welcome among themselves a university man, with professional taste and discrimination. They formed the board of the association, and were thus ready to regard the museum as an extension of their own social space. And the schools with their "local knowledge" subject on the curriculum from 1919 were an available captive audience. But what about the region? Was there a regional audience, and how could it be identified and reached? Some of the associations, which transferred their collections into museums, were at least nominally regional in their scope and could even have a yearly publication which covered a regional membership. They could also have locally affiliated, often parish-based local associations, which could be seen as potential collaborators.

But with very limited resources in the beginning, the director/curator of the museum was restricted to trying to keep the museum running with reasonable opening hours, and he was more inclined to seek support from the regional government, the Central Board and the national museums to organize activities for his museum. Often, he looked suspiciously at the dedicated amateurs and the local circle dominating the board of the association that was his employer. The shrewd realized that they had first of all to secure a solid economy, which

they could only do through their host community and the regional council. The latter was a product of community reform in the 19th century, was regionally elected, had taxation rights and first organized the region's public medical service. It also initiated various schools for vocational training, and occasionally sponsored cultural projects. The successful director brought funding from the host community and the regional council to the museum to add to the meagre state money – but this also meant that these two sources wanted to influence the programme and the activities of both association and museum. The professionalization of the museum thus also led to the appearance of politicians on the scene, which had far-reaching and unpredictable consequences. Lucky were those directors who could obtain the support of strong and influential politicians who at the same time respected the autonomy of the cultural institution. Those museums blossomed with expanding activities which required more staffing and space, involving extensions to the buildings. But the management situation became a matter of debate. The political bodies funding the activities wanted more influence and better control. The end of the story was that in the early 1970s most regional museums were made into foundations on whose boards sat representatives of the founding association, and of the host community and the regional council in order to secure continued insight into the museum's affairs.

Many regional museums had for years been accused of being exclusively for the host community. Now they became integrated in a regional cultural policy, and their ambition to attract the region as an audience was gradually expressed in specific activities such as travelling exhibitions for the region, support for local associations and their collections, and museum weeks organized in different places to make the museum and its work visible throughout the region. The museum's activities became an established and expected ingredient of social life, and thus contributed to the characteristics of the social space.

Lastly – what about the definition of the "cultural" space? Here we approach a vital question, because it is within the cultural space that the museum explores, describes and communicates the temporal dimension expressed in the physical environment and material culture. Many of us looked upon our cultural mission primarily as taking care of the collection which was entrusted to our museum, and developing it along traditional lines. We regarded authenticity and regional provenance as the most important criteria for the acquisition of new objects. But when it came to the task of arranging

the collection and illustrating the cultural history of the region many questions arose. In what way did the objects signify the development of a coherent cultural space?

One of my basic convictions is that *Every object in a museum is primarily local*; all objects are produced by specific persons in a specific place and they are used by specific persons in local spaces. Only on a secondary level is the object regional – or national – or Scandinavian – or European – or Eastern, or whatever. That is why the only true museums are local museums where the objects are rooted and can feel at home, deriving much of their regional meaning from their surroundings, provided that these do not change too much over time.

The figure of three concentric circles is often used to illustrate an applicable concept of culture for a museum structure where the regional museum is the intermediary level between national museums and local museums. The wide circle signifies the national culture common to society as a whole. The terms national character and national traits are used to describe a national culture. National symbols are constructed to signify national identity and to strengthen the national community. Marc Maure has written several papers elucidating how a Norwegian national identity has been formed, and how museums have participated in its construction and promotion, favouring specific themes and motifs in the narratives they offer. The characterizing features tend to be somewhat diluted in their descriptive attempt to cover every citizen, community and cultural space. The innermost circle represents local culture, which is full of concrete and specific nouns and adjectives. It is in this local and social space that the cultural identity of the individual has its genuine soil. The parish has already been indicated as such a dense social space, the field of operation for the "true museum", the local museum. In between these two circles comes that of the regional museum. What remains for it? As the administrative spaces only coincide with cultural boundaries in a very limited way, the regional museum faces a complex pattern of boundaries and identities from which it must distil the linear cultural evolution, the routine narrative of traditional museum exhibitions. And the local objects with their rich individual history are robbed of much meaning when they are used to represent the general and abstract story of a region. The region is too much an administrative abstraction for objects to lend themselves easily as illustrations. Only those that are linked to the "suprastructure" of ecclesiastical, educational, judicial, military or communication institutions could be truly regarded part of regional history. Most of the

latter is more appropriately told with maps, documents and graphics.

We have also seen a strong growth in the number and quality of local museums, and they are demanding attention from the national community. Their importance for local heritage is undeniable, and they want to share common financial resources with the already established national and regional museums. It is furthermore interesting to note that local museums and associations are in turn challenged by the study of an even more limited cultural space – the village and the isolated settlement. When the question of representatives appeared on the agenda cultural complexity became a real problem. This is even more so when the public asks more for human meaning than for artistic qualities in the objects exhibited.

How then do regional museums respond to the ongoing changes in their social and cultural space? How do they cope with the complexity of their task? Some general trends can be discerned. For one thing regional museums concentrate on making accessible as much as possible of their collections and archives, especially the photographic collections, in spaces called “fact rooms” or “study rooms” so that anybody can individually explore the past through the source material. People need no longer content themselves with the versions of history they are offered in the curatorial interpretations of objects and documents. The “fact rooms” are made possible through the computerization now current in all museums. The rooms are multiplying, and have met with a great and happy response by the amateur historians who were stimulated in the 1970s by the local history movement, *Dig where you stand*.

Next, the regional museums consider their role in relation to local museums. These are gathering strength and vitality, many of them ecomuseum-like and established in places where industries have been closed, to commemorate both the workers’ lives and conditions, and a piece of technological history that is disappearing. Three models for the relationship have been proposed and partly tried.

The first is the “wheel” model. The regional museum is the hub, its spokes reaching out to the local museums of the area. Each local museum focuses on a specific aspect of regional culture characteristic of the locality. At the regional museum an overview is presented and indications given, directing the visitor to the local museum corresponding to his or her specific interest. In the “network” model a regional museum is established where none existed before. It has a central coordinating function, but the regional museum is identical to the sum of local museums in the area. There is also an alter-

native “network” model. There the common functions of the individual local museums – conservation service, central storage area, and exhibition workshop facility – are located in a separate area not normally accessible to the common museum visitor. One of the local museums, preferably situated in the regional centre can offer an overview of the museums belonging to the network. A fourth alternative is that regional responsibilities are decentralized from the existing regional museum to local museums with sufficient professional staff. Thus a more traditional hierarchical structure is established. This brings us back to the basic questions common to all types of museums.

The formerly unquestioned directions and purposes of the museum are now questioned, and the criteria on which museums construct their interpretation of history and heritage have become a matter of dispute – “Whose history? Whose heritage? For whom is it produced?” These questions are present at both the museum’s interfaces with society – the “accession” of objects: what to accept and select, and why – and the “exhibition” of collections – what to exhibit and communicate, and why? In a museum the stage is set for communication between living human beings and the frozen representation of human experience in the past. How far does the exhibition carry an intelligible or interesting message from human beings in the past to human beings in the present? Is the message perceived and accepted as part of the cultural identity of the community? In many museums public attendance consists mostly of strangers, tourists, and guests from abroad. Local people do not often return and are not frequently seen at the museum. The local community simply does not see what is discussed in the museum as part of its cultural identity, as part of a vital concern in an individual’s life.

The role of the museum as intermediary in the social space between past and present must be a central preoccupation for the museum worker. For that reason the involvement with the past and the involvement with the present, that is to say the continuous observation of changes in the social and cultural space of the museum, must be equally important. It is necessary to understand that “a final interpretation” with an eternal validity laid down in a “permanent” exhibition is impossible and must be substituted by provisional interpretations offered by temporary exhibitions, where alternative interpretations are tried in an ongoing critical reassessment, as part of a living dialogue and interaction between curator and public. All the important questions we can put to history and heritage are produced by challenges in the turmoil of the present. ■