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The empty meeting-place – Museum metaphors and their implication for learning

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This article argues for a need to scrutinize the meeting-place metaphor that is commonly used by museum practitioners, when describing the museum role in society as an informal learning environment. The metaphor indicates that there is an ambition that people should use the museum locality for meetings with others. However, there is no clear direction for what the meetings are for, who is setting up the meetings and around what and based on who's agenda the desired meetings should be formed. As a means to push this discussion further, i. e. what the meeting-place metaphor means, how it is perceived and what it does to how learning environments are designed, the article will re-visit empirical data from a study of how Swedish museum workers verbally give form to what newness in museums may consist of in their museum. The examples from the empirical data is discussed from a theoretical perspective on place as socially produced and occurring as people move through. My contribution question is if the meeting-place metaphor as it is conceived by museum practitioners is contra-productive to the one single purpose that all museums strive for, to attract a lot of visitors. The central question I am pursuing is if this way of using the meeting-place metaphor is obsolete and if so, what new routes may be taken in finding other metaphors more in line with how the museum can fit into contemporary mediatise society.

This article will take its starting-point in empirical examples of how Swedish museum workers verbally give form to what newness in museums may consist of in their museums. The examples are taken from a study that was based on interviews, followed by guided tours with professionals on leading positions in five different Swedish museums: Innovatum Science Center in Trollhättan (IN), Malmö City Museums in Malmö (MA), Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm (NA), Museum of World Culture in Göteborg (WC) and Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (FEA).

The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions concerning changes in museum identity from the specific museums' perspectives, i. e. how the museum has changed in terms of communication with and accessibility to the public, the museum role and objectives in society and what is new in terms of organization. The results of the study, that is presented in detail elsewhere (Fors, 2013), suggested that even if what is represented as "new" in contemporary museums showed a distinct orientation in "museum talk" toward focusing on the visitors, there is a need for museums to re-conceptualize the visitors from being silent, individual exhibit consumers toward noisy, active community members sharing and producing content around museum objects to more easily fit into contemporary society and was of ordering social life. The analysis also showed that the visitors are generally construed discursively as autonomous self-governing learners. The most common metaphor to describe the museum seems to be as a "meeting-place", and there is a tendency to put "meetings" in focus. This gap in how the museum is conceived, perceived by the museum practitioners as a meeting-place but at the same time designed for silent individual exhibit consumers, is the point of departure for this article.

When looking into a conventional exhibit area in a museum you see people usually strolling around rather silently looking at things. This might be part of a heritage from a time when the museum was a societal institution with a strong educational purpose of "civilising the public" (Bennett, 1995), specifically educating the public into using more "civilised" sensory, primarily visual, strategies when experiencing the exhibit halls (Classen: 2001, 2005). In the light of this aspect of museum history there might be certain issues with transforming the museum practice from a silent, looking practice into something more of a noisy, social meeting place where people meet and discuss certain topics (provided by the museum). Moreover, there is no clear direction in the museum professionals talk what the meetings are for, who is setting up the meetings and around what and who's agenda the desired meetings should be formed.

In this article I am re-visiting the empirical data from the study described above in order to scrutinize what this meeting-place metaphor may mean in practice and how it underpins certain implicit ideas of learning I rela-

tion to place. In many ways it appears to be a reification of the articulated visitor-oriented view on the purpose of the museum. Subsequently, there are also implicit assumptions about the “meetings” that the exhibit-areas are crafted for. In this article, I argue that the meeting-place metaphor in this discursive form is contra-productive to the one single purpose that all museums strive for, to attract a lot of visitors. I will also pay attention to the possible reasons to why this way of using the meeting-place metaphor is obsolete and what new routes may be taken in finding other metaphors more in line with how the museum seem to want to fit into contemporary society.

MUSEUM CHANGE

Museum change is often seen as a development over time (cf. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) in connection to societal changes (Marstine, 2006) or even paradigmatic epistemological change (Anderson, 2004). The dynamic relation between society and museums is considered as one of the fundamental components in museum practice because “the attempts of people to shape museums and the effects of a constantly changing museum context ensure that the museum remains in flux” (Knell, MacLeod & Watson, 2007, p. XIX). Therefore, there might be reason to question ideas of a linear development, a biological metaphor of a museum evolution, since “the present array of museums does not bear witness to a survival of the fittest, but rather to repeated attempts to reinvent and redefine” (Ibid, p. XIX).

Beckman & Hillström (2003) provides a Swedish example and tries to describe these different views of the essence of the museum in a more timeless and circular fashion as the treasury, the archive, the “folk high school”, and the theatre. They define these ideal images of the museum as grounded in fundamental tensions within the museum practice, on the one hand between a culture based on knowledge and one based on experience, and on the other hand an orientation towards collections or towards visitors. The changing museum is here contextualised as moving back and forth along these different axes of interpretations of the museums’ role in society. Given this field of tension, different ideal images of museums ascribe different meanings to collections of things; define their visitors and the competence of their key professionals in different ways; and ally themselves with dif-

ferent cultural institutions in the surrounding society. This way of sorting out the museums may provide a fruitful perspective on museum change as a dynamic and to some extent repetitive place in the cultural landscape in which “generations of new motives have settled in layers on top of each other at the same time as the collections’ and the houses’ physical and economical inertia contributes to both stability and a chronic cultural backlog”. (Beckman & Hillström, 2003, p. 250. The authors translation.)

A possible problem may be that this system of metaphors in itself suffers from a lack of sensitivity towards the fact that even though the framing of the essence of the museum seem to repeat itself there may be a shift in meaning within each ideal image depending on the situated context in which it appears (Odengrund, 2006). For instance, there are certain indications that the theatre metaphor, that first gained sense in the 19th century Swedish museums with people (or dolls) dressed up in traditional clothes performed the exhibits, has a revival in contemporary museums. However, in today’s idea of the museum as a theatre one can anticipate a shift in practice where it is the visitors that perform the “drama”, not hired actors. This indicates a difference in perspective within the same metaphor from an educational point of view that obviously affords different opportunities for visitors to act.

THE MUSEUM AS (A MEETING) PLACE

However, other metaphors have been used to describe certain ideal images of what a museum should be due to changing museum discourse through which people have tried to grip the essence of the museum. Following the economical changes in society Roberts (1997) introduced the museum as a market place (instead of the older metaphors: university and library) and a common metaphor today is more technologically driven; the idea of the museum as a platform (cf. the social network “Museum 3.0”). Both of these examples have connotations with the more broadly used meeting-place metaphor. However, there are some fundamental differences in the use of the market-place (or meeting-place) and platform metaphor related to how place may be conceptualized. While the former, as we can see below, is more associated toward place as a physical locality, the latter is more concerned by a more theoretically abstract notion of place, as constituted through an

intensity of flows (Massey, 2005). In the empirical examples below the museum meeting-place is described primarily from its physical features, such as architecture, accessibility and state-of the art technology. In this way, museums as meeting places tended to be talked about as circumscribed territorial localities that in one way or another produce and contain culture. Here follows a closer description of the way museum professionals tend to describe and define the museum as a meeting-place; primarily through the architecture and features and policies based in ideas of accessibility powered by state-of the-art-technology

The empirical material shows that the described meeting-place is primarily constituted as a locality in which people can meet if they are properly invited. In fact, according to the former head of The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (Sweden), the museum

“is built like a meeting-place---The huge staircase is as we know a meeting-place and it is a wonderful place for the informal learning where we have different groups coming here, discussions, debates, we have a lot of groups hiring space which we try to incorporate in the museum activities, but the staircase is central”

(Head of museum).

Another important feature of the physical meeting-place is accessibility. There seem to exist a fundamental idea that the museum should be accessible for anyone who wants to come, no matter of race, class, gender, disabilities and so on. This has of course influenced the physical features of the museums, for example displays in different languages and in wheelchair-friendly manners. This is also the main reason for trying to recruit people with different backgrounds. For example at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm (Sweden), the exhibit producers have many different backgrounds (cultural sciences, archaeology, stage design, carpentry) because “many different approaches creates dynamics and that will also lead to that we inspire each other internally”. A broader perspective is here identified as an important aspect of reaching out to a broader public. When Innovatum science center started in 1998 they put an employment advertisement in the newspaper in which they wrote that they



Picture 1: The staircase at The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg gives form to the meeting-place metaphor as it is used by the head of the museum. Remarkably empty.

meeting between people with different competencies is important in order to infuse the museum practice with a “broader perspective”, because it is in these meetings “it happens”. At Malmö City Museums (Sweden), a lot of effort has been put into reaching out to the population with other ethnical backgrounds. Accessibility is here conceptualized as a civic rights issue because “all taxpayers in Malmö city own the same right to come here”:

A great effort lies in reaching new target groups and make it accessible to people that don't know that we exist, that is in the suburbs, among poor people who make other prioritizations or who don't know that it exists or who find this place ridiculous because they don't understand anything because everything is in Swedish and it doesn't show their cultural heritage.

(Head of Exhibit building)

One aspect of accessibility is new technology in connection to the exhibits. The museums seem to invest largely in new media and technology (both in terms of technical devices and technically competent staff), both in order to reach new audiences, i. e. young people, immigrants, people with disabilities and senior citizens, and reaching old audiences in new ways. This update of the way information is given at the museum very often entails other means for communication than written texts. In this way museums want to offer information to the visitors through so called interactive, multi-sensory and immersive experiences with aesthetic overtones. The point of departure seems to be that this way of presenting information makes it more easily accessible, especially for audiences the museum have failed to reach before.

As a metaphor, the meeting-place as a location with different physical features seems to be well established in museum discourse. Notably, even though the professionals in the museums show and talk about dynamic achievements in developing for instance exhibit building practices in which new and interesting arenas for meetings and communication take place, the question of what the general visitor is actually supposed to do in the exhibits or how they are supposed to make meaning of the exhibit is not raised. There seems to be a tacit assumption that the experiences of exhibits derive primarily from the exhibit design and layout (place as locality), with no or little interest in how the experience is influenced by the presence of

others and how groups navigate, share and experience them together (place as a constellation of processes). In the coming section I will outline how use of digital media have influenced museum practice into a more collaborative and performative direction. I argue that this may have consequences on how to define place as something that transgress conventional sedentary ideas of place as fixed locations into contingent events.

EMERGING MUSEUM METAPHORS

In many cases, museum professionals have taken examples from increasingly popular social media web-sites in order to find new ways to understand contemporary society and museum identity (Kelly & Russo, 2008; Kelly, 2010; Kelly & Fitzgerald, 2011). Given increasing access to the Internet and rise of social networking it is becoming imperative for museums to understand not only who uses the Internet, but also how and why they are using it. The results of an Australian study of how museum visitors participated in on-line activities showed that not only do those who visit museums participate in more on-line activities than others; they are engaging in activities that are participatory and two-way (Kelly & Russo, 2008). This raises the question of whether these visitors may bring those expectations and modes of behaviour and learning to their physical visit? Thus, questions of learning in the museum are often contextualized through ideas of participation, interaction and co-construction of meaning, which are derived primarily from analytic descriptions of contemporary on-line practices (cf. Kelly, 2010; Russo, Watkins & Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Simon, 2010) and that challenge museums one-to-many relationship with their audiences (Kelly & Fitzgerald, 2011).

For all the hyperbole about digital natives there is little to demonstrate that highly digitally literate audiences necessarily want to undertake 'co-creative' tasks on our sites even if they are regular creators elsewhere - especially (and this is critical) if our physical spaces don't invite co-creation and participation. Is it a chicken and egg situation? Do our physical sites need to change as well as our websites?

(Seb Chan, blogpost Fresh + New(er), 10 March 2008)

These questions have had an impact on museum design, for example has Nina Simon (2010) argued for a new museum metaphor in her book *The Participatory Museum* suggesting that we should re-conceptualize the visitors as participators instead of individual learners. This is a line of reasoning that mirrors recent theoretical debates within educational sciences and also more wider debates on museum identities; what should constitute the postmodern museum and what traces of modern thinking must be recognized, faced and challenged in order to build an appropriate pedagogical idea (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

LEARNING AND PLACE

In recent decades theories of situated learning and cognitive learning theories have existed in a critical relationship to each other and by the twenty first century a major debate raged between the two positions (Sfard, 1998; Säljö, 2003, Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2008) Through this debate one major difference between these learning theories is that cognitive approaches instead draw on the root metaphor of acquisition based in a perspective of the individual. However, as Hodkinson et al (2008) note in fact in both approaches questions of thought and cognition remain central. This is particularly evident in the museum education literature influenced by George Hein's seminal work, *The Constructivist Museum* (1998) which creates a framework for museums to provide learning experiences for their audiences both through cognitive models and more recent socio-cultural perspectives on thinking and learning (cf. Falk & Dierking, 2002). Hodkinson et. al (2008) have therefore called for a more sustained focus on learning as embodied and as part of the situation in which it occurs, understanding learning from the dual perspectives of the individual learner and the learning situation. Their approach draws on anthropological understandings of learning as social and embodied (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and happening through participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Of interest here is also sociologically oriented theories about the "social object" and "object-centred sociality" (Appendurai, 1998; Knorr Cetina, 2001). According to these theories a social network that succeed are based around objects. A social network consists of people who are connected by a shared object, a line of thinking that conflate with Wengers' (1998) notion of community of practice, an idea of learning as transformation of participation in ongoing

cultural activities. Engagement in this kind of practice involves a collaborative, horizontal participation that is motivated by obvious importance and interest in the activity, and communication that employs words to provide or discuss needed information during shared endeavours, i.e. talk is used ‘in the service’ of engaging in the activity (not as a substitute for involvement). Thus, a community of practice is formed through social interaction around joint enterprises in which meaning making is an inevitable part. One crucial aspect of learning in communities of practice is that it takes place somewhere; it is embedded in social and material practices.

MUSEUMS AS TAKING PLACE THROUGH LEARNING

A re-conceptualization of the visitors from being individual exhibit consumers toward active participants in communities of practice based around museum objects considered as “social objects” is already happening. Nina Simon, is a museum professional who works exclusively with questions of designing participatory museum experiences and runs a homepage devoted to these issues, Museum 2.0. She comment on the importance of improving the visitors opportunities to socially interact around objects like this (a discussions that she elaborate in Simon (2010)):

Unlike digital networks, which have to manufacture or solicit online versions of objects around which users can rally, museums are full of objects. We know that the stories and connections between visitors and objects exist--we just have to find ways to use those connections to turn the objects into triangulation points for social behavior. Rather than convincing visitors that they want to be part of “the museum club,” if we can find ways to make our objects function socially, the opportunity for a useful network may emerge.

(Nina Simon, blogpost Museum 2.0, 24 September, 2008)

This way of re-thinking the role of museum objects goes in line with theories of place as something that is not static, but more like “events” with a quality of “throwntogetherness” (Massey, 2005, p. 140). To be in a new place can be a frightening experience, where one can find oneself in a rather arbitrary position, something people want to avoid. Instead, people want to change this arbitrary feeling to something more meaningful, in a way inhabit the room to feel safe; place is from this perspective location made

familiar, concrete and meaningful through practice (Tuan, 1977). To achieve this 'homely' feeling, people need to have the opportunity to experience the interior with their bodies and actions become oriented through the process of embodied learning and emplacement. A geometric interior is not the same as the place we are experiencing, it is a continuous process and, as such, is constantly changing and subject to redefinition through experiential accomplishments. From this perspective places do not exist so much as they "occur", produced from movement because "there would be no places were it not for the coming and goings of human beings and other organisms to and from them, from and to places elsewhere" (Ingold, 2008, pp 1808). Forming communities are one way of creating place-events, and now through digital media, these place-events cannot be considered as strictly constrained to one site. Pink (2009) argues that from this perspective, understanding place is not so much about studying localities as such, but studying the processes of people's emplacement. New metaphors used in museum practices that originate from digital practice (like seeing the museum as a "platform" or "social media", or re-conceptualize visitors as "players") may very well be one way to introduce and make other perspectives on place concrete in museum practice. However, as noted above this also has consequences on how to theorise and design for learning in the museum.

SOCIAL MEDIA, MUSEUMS AND THE PERFORMATIVE TURN

Indeed, forming communities and making active use of objects and other resources is an experience of being-together-with enacted and reinforced through the increasing use of web-based so-called 'social media'. It might also have implications on how people are skilled to perceive their environment, a line of reasoning I have developed elsewhere (Fors, submitted). Russo, Watkins, Kelly and Chan (2007) suggest that web-based social media have both long-time and short time effects on museum learning and communication. The Internet and social media could have these effects since it has been claimed to be the first media that both can cater for two-way and group communication. Through the use of social media, museums could re-engage young people, communities and "encourage audiences to respond to what they discover and relate it back to themselves in ways which are meaningful to them" (Russo et. al., 2007, pp.20). These effects are reached since social media can be used to build partner-

ships between the museum and communities of interest on more democratic levels of participation. For example, successful commercial social media such as Facebook and YouTube make it possible for individuals to upload content to widely accessed websites and add tags to enable others to re-view this content. It is the use of these kinds of communications systems in the every day life that makes many-to-many communication a democratic form of participation.

Of interest here is how the introduction of social media in museum practices may enable new ways to experience the museums in relation to others, creating what Ingold (2008) calls the “meshwork of paths” in which places occurs through the intersections and proximities of pathways as they are entangled. This inherent sociability is used by museums for example by establishing so called folksonomies, a system of classification derived from the practice and method of collaboratively creating and managing tags to categorize content (Peters, 2009). “Social Tagging” refers to the practice of publicly labelling or categorizing resources in such a shared environment. The resulting assemblage of tags form a “folksonomy”: a conflation of the worlds ‘folk’ and ‘taxonomy’ used to refer to an informal, and organic assemblage of related terminology. When shared with others, or viewed in the context of what others have tagged, these collections of resource identifiers, tags and people begin to take on additional value through network effects.

When state of the art technology is used in museums it seem to be in order to further individualise the experience and in many cases prevent social interaction. Instead, the discourses characterizing the talk about how social media can be used to develop museum practice take its starting point in how to get people involved in knowledge sharing and engagement in more “organically” evolved questions:

By acting as trusted online cultural networks, informal learning environments such as museums can extend their pedagogical practices to engage young people in knowledge sharing around cultural collections. At the heart of the success of future social media learning initiatives is a shift in forms of formal production. Collaborations between cultural and educa-

tional institutions could focus on storytelling, culture and education, and be centred around particular topics or questions which evolve organically, enabling new knowledge to emerge from the engagement of young people. (Russo, Watkins & Groundwater-Smith, 2009, pp. 164)

This way of adapting museums toward contemporary media culture resonates with recent suggestions from museum scholars that we are now facing a “performative turn” in museum practice (Weibel & Latour, 2007; Basu & MacDonald, 2007) in which the exhibition space is transformed from a space of representation to a space of encounter. From this perspective, the exhibition is no longer conceived as a medium for representation, but becomes instead a medium for enactment.

The performative turn is also enacted by technological developments in exhibit building practices. Kahr-Hojland (2006) argues that many museums are now entering a new exhibit building paradigm (augmented reality-paradigm) by adding on virtual dimensions to interactive and narrative means of representation. As an example, the use of mobile technology is used in order to offer experiences that are characterised by both being individual, experimental and structured and furthermore challenging the prevailing constructivist learning paradigm in interactive exhibits by adding the concept of learning communities. In augmented reality games the player performs parts of the virtually organised game in reality. From July to October 2008 The Smithsonian American Art Museum hosted the alternate reality game “Ghosts of a chance”, as the first museum in the world to host such a game. In this game teams are playing a scavenger hunt in the museum, in which objects in the collection are part of the clues, and players use cell phones with text messaging to solve them. The creator, Jane McGonigal (who earned a PhD in performance studies in 2006), have also helped museums to design games that tries to solve real world problems in order to push people to be creative problem solvers.

“The fate of humanity hangs in the balance over whether we’re going to get crowds to do anything useful or not,” McGonigal says. “Are they going to put all of their cognitive bandwidth into virtual worlds, or are they going to contribute?”

... We have all this pent-up knowledge in museums, all this pent-up expertise, and all these collections designed to inspire and bring people together. I think the museum community has a kind of ethical responsibility to unleash it.”

(<http://www.npr.org>)(Retrieved October 15, 2013)

CONCLUSION

I argue that one way for museums to develop in new directions closer to their aspirations to becoming a meeting-place filled with people, not in a sense of being a locality to where people might go, with exhibit areas that keep on “working” with or without people visiting them, but to be a confluent space that gather crowds, is to re-think the concept of “place”. Thinking solely of place as something that exists with or without people makes them empty in a literal sense. More than thirty years ago, Lefebvre (1991) reminded us of that places are not produced simply by designers, planner and builders, space is also used and inhabited by people who live in them and make them meaningful through practices. Instead of thinking of museums as designed localities that provide contexts or learning, this line of reasoning invites us to think about place in more fluid terms. Understanding people’s practical engagement with their lived-in environments as the ever-changing context for learning may resituate focus from museums as meeting-places to museums as taking place through visitors inculcated “funds of pedagogies” (Zipin, 2009), i. e embodied ways of knowing and perceiving the environment. The notion of place-event suggests that visitors museum practices do not take place in prior constituted museums, rather these practices are co-constitutive of the event of museum exhibits as places and provides a way to understand the renewal and transformation of museum exhibits.

However, the Swedish meeting-place metaphor discourse that flows through museum professionals’ talk does not seem to include object-centred sociability (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), medium for enactment (Basu & MacDonald, 2007) and place –events (Massey, 2005) to any greater extent. One reason may be that these different answers to the ‘performative turn’ also embrace a rather thorough re-conceptualisation of conventional educational theory and ideas of place in museum practice. Constructivist ideas of learning as something that is constructed in the mind of the individual due to individual interaction with an exhibit fail to describe what happens in performa-

tive exhibitions from a communicative perspective. Thus, museum practices that are solely based on ideas of “the constructivist museum” (Hein, 1998) may end up in difficulties when trying to adjust to the demands of the new era of communities, encounters, performance and enactment. A re-examination of pedagogical ideas prevailing in the museums may be a fruitful starting-point in order to achieve a badly needed upgrade of the meeting-place metaphor as it is carried out in exhibition building practice.

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