
COMMENTARY

To Display or not to Display?

Personal Memories from Paimio Sanatorium

Anne Heimo

Since the rise of *New Museology* in the late 1980s, the idea of what museums are and how they operate has changed radically. Museums have to be more inclusive and democratic if they are to attract new audiences. Today participation is a fundamental feature of all museum activities. The shift from “object-based” to “people-based”, in other words “participatory museums” (Simon 2010), means that today museums are more aware of their social and political role than hitherto, and strive to increase ecological, cultural and social sustainability. Because of these changes, museums have begun to question the actual contents of their exhibitions from new perspectives and to seek more democratic perspectives on how people and communities can and should be represented (see e.g. Van Mensch & Meijer-Van Mensch 2011, 49, 51; Jane & Sandell 2019; Ribbons et al. eds. 2021). These changes are also requisite for museums to avoid being labelled “dusty” (Hakamies 2018, 78–83). For instance, in my hometown of Turku, the former Handicrafts Museum, Luostarimäki, has just changed its profile for the first time since it was established in 1940: today, the museum represents not only handicrafts workers, but also all the other people – midwives, schoolchildren and tavern keepers, among others – who lived in the area, which before the Great Fire of Turku in 1827 was situated on the outskirts of town (Lehtokari 2021; see also Luostarimäki Audioguides). Another example from Turku is Kurala Village Museum, which is a living museum, where visitors can familiarise themselves with the household chores and farm work of the 1950s. As part of queering the museum (see Sullivan & Middleton 2020), Kurala has for some years now offered guided tours, which tell how the iconic male figures of Touko Laaksonen (better known around the world as “Tom of Finland”) were influenced by what he saw and experienced living near the village in his youth (Kuralan kylämäki 2022). Currently, a new museum, the Museum of History and the Future, is under construction in Turku. The museum aims to focus on the lives of so-called “ordinary people from Turku”, but is well aware how difficult this task is, as Satu Pajarre, the head of the department of the Museum Centre of Turku, has recently stated. Who is ordinary and what do we mean by ordinary in the first place (Pajarre 2022)? The representation of ordinary people and their lives becomes even more challenging when we talk about so-called dif-

difficult heritage sites such as hospitals, asylums and prisons, or in some cases world-famous sites such as the Paimio Sanatorium.

Paimio Sanatorium is often referred to as the most internationally well-known building in Finland. Designed by the Finnish architects Alvar and Aino Aalto in the early 1930s, it was opened in 1933 as a regional hospital for tuberculosis patients. The hospital was immediately acknowledged all over the world for its architecture and became a popular destination to visit, especially by foreign guests. The sanatorium served as a tuberculosis sanatorium until the early 1960s, and thereafter as a general hospital until 2015 (see e.g. The Finnish Heritage Agency 2009; Heikinheimo 2016). The sanatorium is among twelve other buildings representing Alvar Aalto's humane architecture, which in 2021 were nominated as a single entity on the tentative list of UNESCO's World Heritage List by Finland (The Finnish Heritage Agency 2021).

In 2020, the Paimio Sanatorium Foundation took charge of the heritage site, and began to look for new ways to use the complex and, moreover, protected site. In 2021, the sanatorium was opened to the public, and in addition to guided tours, visitors may now acquaint themselves with the history and everyday life of the former sanatorium by visiting exhibitions and former patient rooms, which have been transformed into museum rooms with some examples of original furniture and objects on display (Paimio Sanatorium 2022). However, neither the exhibitions nor the museum rooms offer any actual information about daily life at the sanatorium. There are no photographs, memoirs or personal belongings of former patients or staff members on display in any form; the only photos, letters and other personal items on display are Aino and Alvar Aalto's. One obvious reason for this is to celebrate and honour the work of the Aaltos. The other and more significant reason is the strict personal data restrictions and General Data Protection Rules (GDPR), which restrict the public use of material that includes personal data. Furthermore, among the 390 photographs of Paimio Sanatorium (search word "paimion parantola" 16.8.2022) found in Finna, the search service of Finnish museums, archives and libraries, there are only two photos with people in them. One is a group photo of the doctors of the sanatorium and the other of the nurses. Both photos are from 1937.

Paimio Sanatorium is not an exception. The historian Sari Kuuva in one of her articles (2018) analyses photos published in histories of Finnish mental asylums from the 1930s to the 2010s. Most of these photos are of asylum buildings, surroundings, interiors and furniture. There are some photos of the staff, but very few of the patients. Most of the photos with people in them were taken in formal situations and not during daily activities. There are several reasons for this. In addition to safeguarding the anonymity of the

patients, the documenting of everyday life was not at the time seen as worthwhile. As a result, the histories portray more the history of the asylums and their staff than the experiences of the patients. For example, photos of empty patient rooms do not reveal the harsh attitudes many of the patients experienced during their treatments and have recollected in their memoirs (Kuuva 2018). In her master's thesis in ethnology (forthcoming), Terhi Kokko uses photos of Paimio Sanatorium and oral histories as her main sources. Kokko has come to the same conclusion as Kuuva, and views it as essential to combine the two types of sources to gain a full picture of daily life at the sanatorium.

Much of what is known of the daily life and the experiences of the patients of Paimio Sanatorium originates from memoirs written in the early 1970s, organised by the Archive of the Finnish Literature Society and Keuhkovammaliitto (The Organisation of Respiratory Health and Diseases) (SKS KRA 1971). In 1986, a selection of these memoirs was published in the book *Parantolaelämää* (Life in Sanatoriums) by Aili Nenola. In order to gain new knowledge and to discover new sources about daily life at the sanatorium the folklorist Anne Heimo, the ethnologist Helena Ruotsala and the scholar of museum studies Maija Mäki from the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, founded the project "Paimio Sanatorium: Social, Historical and Cultural Perspectives" in 2020. In the course of the project, it has become clear that though the daily life of the sanatorium can still be studied, it will be difficult to publish the outcomes of the research in any other form than academic books or journal articles. This is especially disappointing for many of the partners of the project, which include family members of former patients, staff members and local inhabitants, who would like to tell how they and their close ones remember their time at the sanatorium and remind people that the sanatorium is not merely a renowned architectural site.

Strict regulations concerning the use of personal data are common to all the Nordic countries. Compared to many other countries, oral histories, life stories, personal memories and other types of biographical materials are rarely displayed at museums, archives or other cultural institutions in Finland, Sweden or Denmark. The main reason for this is that even before the implementation of GDPR in 2018, all of the Nordic countries had strict personal data acts to safeguard the use of personal data. This has led to the situation that museums and archives in the Nordic countries are very cautious about the public use of research materials, which may include any kind of information on private individuals. These restrictions mean that we do not have similar online oral history archives with texts, audios or videos that many other countries have. For example, in Tallinn you may watch videoed testimonies of what life was like under Soviet rule at Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom.

Alternatively, you may acquaint yourself with prison life at Armagh Gaol and the Maze and Long Kesh Prison in Northern Ireland during the Troubles by listening to and watching former inmates and staff members tell about their experiences online on the website of the Prisons Memory Archive.

To find ways to overcome the lack of personal memories in museums and other public exhibitions a group of Nordic scholars with expertise in uses of the past, oral history, memory studies, cultural heritage, museum studies and future studies came up with idea of a series of workshops on the topic. The project Nordic Voices: The Use of Oral History and Personal Memories in Public History Settings (2022–4) is funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS). The project partners include Anne Heimo (PI), Helena Ruotsala and Maija Mäki, University of Turku, Finland, Anne Brædder, University of Roskilde and Iben Vyff, Museums of Elsinore, Denmark and Malin Thor Tureby, University of Malmö, Sweden. Over the next two years, together with international and local experts from museums mentioned above and elsewhere, Nordic Voices will organise two international seminars to discuss the uses and roles of personal and private memories when employed in public history settings. You are welcome to join us!

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