

Practicing museums: Museum people, Museum work, and Change in Practice

Lizette Gradén

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Inkeri Hakamies's insightful doctoral thesis comprises three single-authored articles, all published in international peer-reviewed journals (2017, 2018, 2019). These articles are further contextualised in Hakamies's reflexive introduction and summarising synthesis.

This doctoral thesis analyses how museums are defined through everyday social practices. It shows how some professionals, various tasks and museums are considered more 'museal' than others in the Finnish museum field of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The empirical material consists of biographical interviews with professionals who reflect on their careers in the Finnish museum and respond to a questionnaire in which museum visitors share their memories of museums with museum volunteers. The material covers a time that brought many changes to museum work practices and the ways museums function in society, the effects of which continue to unfold in the museum field. For example, museums increased their marketing efforts and edutainment angles and introduced digital tools, changes that challenged previous ideas of what a museum could be and even some professional roles and skills of long-time museum workers. The roles and responsibilities of museums in society were subjected to new debates in Finland, the Nordic countries and internationally.

The topic selected by Hakamies for her thesis is highly relevant, as the conditions for museums are changing worldwide and in Nordic countries especially. Based on extensive archival material produced by the Finnish Museum History Project (2005–2011) and the 'My museum memories project', by the Finnish Literature Archives, Hakamies analyses how museums in Finland in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been shaped and defined through social practices. These were decades marked by social upheaval, geopolitical change and globalisation, all of which impacted the museum field – internationally as well as in the Nordic countries. During this time, the role of museums in society became subject to debate, including aspects of professionalisation, edutainment and digitisation. These shifts caused rifts as well as new

allegiances within the museum sector. As Hakamies points out, these changes call for studying how museums are shaped in practice, by whom, for whose benefit and to what effect.

Significantly, her study focuses on how professional museum workers perceive their work and careers and how audiences reminisce about the museums they have visited. Tacit or practical knowledge is at the centre of the analysis, given the fact that social and cultural practices produce norms and differentiation and carry meaning for the people who share the practices. Hakamies asks: At a time of societal change, what does the concept 'museal' mean? 1) for museums as institutions? 2) to museum workers? 3) in daily museum practice? 4) to visitors and society at large?

Based on ten in-depth interviews, and by applying the concept of '*communities of practice*', she demonstrates in her first article, 'Practice Makes "Museum People"', how operations shape professionals and that the hierarchy among individual specialists and professions impacts how the museum world unfolds and how it sustains itself. As Hakamies discusses in her introduction, and come back to in her articles, there is a methodological challenge in treating archival material produced by others as fieldwork. She offers a profound and reflexive discussion about the difficulties she encounters in doing so and how she handles such difficulties. Her own experience with museum practice is pivotal to her approach, to her ethical and other validations.

In the second article, 'The Dusty Museum', Hakamies investigates people's perception of museums and what makes a museum 'dusty'. Based on three interviews with museum professionals, and using 'Elements of Practice' as a critical concept, she asks: What sort of element is dust in museum practice? The analysis contends that perceived stagnation is the most evident element of dust.

The third article, "Real museum work" and information technology – does not compute!' analyses museum practices in response to changing society. Using nine interviews with museum professionals and articles from *Museum Politics*, Hakamies investigates how museum professionals respond to organisational changes. The analysis contends that curatorial practices are perceived as 'real museum work', whereas new emergent professions are done so with reluctance.

Hakamies's thesis adds to discussions on current tensions within the museum organisations as the cultural institutions strive to grow, professionalise, adapt and contribute to a hybrid market both in Nordic contexts (Gradén & O'Dell 2018, 2020) and internationally (Ekström 2020). Highlighting visitors' recollections of museums in Finland, the study shows that museums are not solely for the museum workers to define, which calls for future research on

how museums in Finland navigate outward pressure arising from stakeholders and visitors' expectations.

The strengths of this doctoral thesis lie in the timespan and the stringing together of multiple analytical insights into the fruitful theoretical framework of practice. As Hakamies demonstrates quite well, although the international and national museum field comprises numerous shared standards and guidelines, they continue to co-exist with a plurality of practices. Hakamies brings these tensions to the forefront and interprets them within the practice theory framework, which reveals how people tend to adhere to praxis that they find valuable and meaningful; or 'the ways we do things around here'. These approaches and behaviours also produce allegiances and define whose work is more 'museal', which can influence the professional identity of their practitioners: the 'real museum people' are those who do 'real museum work'. That said, the change in everyday museum practices reflects a change in ideologies and the role of museums in Finland and abroad, the changes in the museum profession and the dynamics of museum work. These changes also probe the future of museums and museum work. Studying museums as social and cultural practices and lived phenomena allows for a critical examination of visitors' and workers' understandings of museums, their origins and their roles in society in the future.

In the report, synthesis, and epilogue, Hakamies stresses the need to think in terms of a meta-museum, where layers of museum practice have been disclosed and the pace of work elicited. She contends that just as with objects, collections, exhibitions, and programmes, so too the practices of cataloguing, exhibiting and guiding visitors should be regarded as a vital part of the museum's history. Indeed, shifting from a focus on material culture to institutional practice offers a productive perspective. These conclusions relate to previous studies in ethnology and folkloristics that differentiate between what museums do and how they do it, the 'meta-cultural production' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000) and the 'cultural practice about cultural practices' (Aronsson & Gradén 2013) that produce communities of practice and institutional knowledge. As the title of Hakamies's thesis indicates, the changes may shape new categories, in this case 'museal', 'museum people' and 'real museum work', which in turn reflect history and ideologies. By applying a 'practice theory framework' (Wenger 1998, 2020) to the archival material, Hakamies demonstrates how professionals describe their practices and how these descriptions produce perceptions not only about museums as institutions but also about the people who work there. These practices, in turn, influence the idea of what museums can be and how they operate.

The structure of the thesis is logical in terms of how the three articles are presented and linked together. The introduction, synthesis and epilogue offer conceptual clarity and a solid material presentation, and the three articles provide conceptual clarity and in-depth analysis, all written eloquently. Among the thesis's gems is the rich biographical material by museum workers, which the author treats with ethical care and reflection. Hakamies wisely discusses the challenges of handling a vast body of material produced within a specific framework, such as the 'Finnish Museum History Project'. By applying the theory of practice to archival material, she reveals how people's stories about their community practices can be more important than the actual practices themselves. Interestingly, no matter what an official job description might have been, people create a practice to do what they find needs to be done and shape a practice of recounting it verbally.

In this discussion, she addresses the struggle of dealing with 'gaps' in information and 'gaps' in time. She reflects on the ethical issues involved in transcribing and analysing material produced by others when standards of informant integrity were different from today. These reflections highlight the difficulties of treating archival sources as if generated by in-situ fieldwork situations. The recognition of these 'gaps', however, is partly due to Hakamies's tacit knowledge gained from similar communities of practice, the experience of working both in the museum sector and the academy. Such insights would probably have gone unnoticed without the cultural competence of both worlds. Hakamies's work is a well-situated contribution to ethnology, museology and museum practice. It demonstrates how tacit knowledge, organisation and communities of practice impact – propel and limit – what museums can become. It spurs further questions, such as: How does collaboration between academic and museum practice contribute to restoring or probing change in the museum? What does it mean when museum workers increasingly refuse to hide behind the false notion of neutrality? As museums are never neutral, when will we see some museums gain a second life as museums of museum history?

AUTHOR

Lizette Gradén is associate professor of ethnology at Lund University. Her research includes museum leadership and curatorial practices, ritual and performance, and traditional knowledge and more than 20 years of research into Nordic-American and Swedish-American culture. Her recent publications include *Kulturarv i förändring* (2020), co-edited with Tom O'Dell. Much of her research is conducted in projects involving public and private actors outside academia.

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