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Introduction

Museums and the Performance of Heritage in Nordic Contexts

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Re-imagining Nordic Culture in North America
Introduction for SASS journal

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In the last few years, museums and heritage sites in the Scandinavian countries and the United States have undergone major changes in scope and approach to visitors to remain relevant in contemporary society. The focus for these institutions' activities has shifted successively as they have gone from being arenas of public education (folkbildning) to establishments of "edutainment" (cf Hannigan 1998:94) in which educational ambitions are embedded in, and often overshadowed by, attempts to entertain visitors and attract public attention). Driving this transformation is the growing expectation museums and heritage site stakeholders have in evaluating the success of their institutions through quantitative measurements in which visitors numbers are the primary measure of success (Gradén and O'Dell 2017). Simultaneously, heritage museums that were established in the 20th century by immigrants from the Nordic countries to the United States have become increasingly concerned with broadening their audiences and more actively engaging their visitors. Efforts to do this have varied from offering cocktail hours, culinary conferences, and sauna sessions, to striving to appeal to people who may not identify as Nordic or do not think of museums as places they would normally visit. In part, these efforts stem from the growing expectations museums face of demonstrating the manner in which they serve a public benefit and support social values at play in society at large. However, they also stem from the demands museums face of providing measurable results of annual growth and economic vitality to their financial stakeholders. An important question in this context is, what happens to people's understandings of what a heritage is and can be when it is increasingly seen as a marketable commodity that can be strategically positioned to compete for consumer attention, and visitor dollars?

Re-conceptualizing Heritage
The manner in which the past is legitimized and reframed in the present has been discussed both within the museum sector and the academy for decades. Cultural heritage has been used to legitimate and support different forms of collective identity and allegiances linked to nations, places, sites, families, artifacts, rituals and traditions from the past. The academic study of heritage and the development of heritage as an analytical concept to discuss how the past is mobilized in the present is a fairly recent phenomenon.

In Scandinavia the concept kulturarv appear in lectures by Viktor Rydberg, to a general public most known for his literary production and especially for the poem *Tomten*. However, Rydberg was also professor of cultural history at Stockholm college (now Stockholm University) from 1884 to 1888, and a scholar whose work emphasized the fact that in order to understand contemporary life and structure, one had to appreciate the role played by the past. In a lecture from 1887, Rydberg used the term *kulturarf* (cultural heritage) to capture "en vidare krets av förflutenhet än de traditionella historiska disciplinerna kunde" (cf. Aronsson 2004: 143, cf. Svensson), i.e. to encompass a wider definition of the past than traditional historically oriented disciplines allowed for. By emphasizing the word culture, Rydberg seemed to advocate an understanding of values, norms and traditions as shaped through cultural processes.

However, it was not until the 1990s when the concept of *kulturarv* (or cultural heritage) began to pull together disciplines such as archeology, ethnology, folkloristics, history, museology, that more critical perspectives on heritage began to develop. The discussions and debates from this period worked to problematize the manner in which heritage could be understood as involving a series of processes that both fortified change and challenged it. Far from being a "natural" process or outcome of history, it was increasingly argued that people make heritage through cultural practices. Heritage practices perform values, articulate priorities, and ensue soft power. Thus, the emerging critical perspectives on heritage in the last decade can be seen as a response to the compartmentalizing of heritage in the wake of its professionalization. By compartmentalized we mean the shaping of collections and subject matter such as global heritage, national, regional, local as well as breakdowns ethnic identity, migration, art, religion, social estates etc., and the ways in which these museums were founded and how they were are organized. Further complexity is added with the division of tangible, intangible heritage, cultural and natural heritage.

In the seminal book, *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett argues that museums of the 19th century and onward are both subject to and agents of change in society (Bennett 1992). In the American context, scholars and museum professionals writing on the relationship between museums and communities anticipated for the 21st century that many groups that had been previously invisible in the society in general and in museums in particular no longer would accept that status, and that new social groups and recent immigration that had altered the makeup of many communities would claim space in the museums (AAM 1984). As formerly invisible groups express themselves politically, public museums have been held accountable to a broader segment of society, resulting, in many state supported museums, in an additive model, where new groups are recognized through temporary exhibitions, programs and collaborations without making a mark in collections or core exhibitions. Meanwhile many groups have done like many social and immigrant groups have done, Scandinavian immigrants included. They have created museums of their own, adding to the rich cultural and artistic fabric of the United States, and claiming their space in the world of identity politics. Contemporary society, with its technological development, increased longevity and a growing senior population,

political upheaval, environmental challenges, increasing social gaps and economic changes has forced museums to redefine their roles and invent new operational models.

This special issue of the SASS journal explores such divergence from the museum's traditional roles to an increased focus on its social commitment, by presenting articles that position museums as advocates for particular values and artforms and show how far a community is prepared to go to claim its identity and how heritage is performed to reach an intended audience. Many museums relating to Scandinavian pasts start as volunteer driven operations. Some try to climb a social ladder both among the museum hierarchy and among stakeholders - a shift that by definition professionalize the organization, cutting the ties with the "mom-and-pop" organization model and its former constituency. Changing a museum organization becomes a balancing act of vernacular heritage, institutional heritage making, and commodified culture, these heritage sites becomes increasingly reliant on its financial stakeholders, technological advances as well as current cultural trends.

In the early 20th century, on a global level, the focus was mainly on material culture and "tangible heritage". As the International Charter of Venice emphasized heritage was essentially constituted by material objects that were "Imbued with a message from the past. Indeed, it was not until 1972 that Unesco expanded the concept of heritage to include natural heritage, and 1994 that it included "intangible heritage" (Vecco 2010:322).

Over the past ten to fifteen years processes of digitization have become ubiquitously entwined with cultural heritage. From tourist made videos emanating from national parks around the world and Unesco heritage sites that are posted on Facebook, to high definition photoshopped photographs made and posted by museums professionals, heritage has entered the digisphere. However, this is a phenomenon that also raises questions about the relevance of holding notions of tangible and intangible heritage apart. As Bjarki Valtysson has argued in relation to current efforts to digitize Danish Cultural Heritage:

> When considered in terms of digitization projects like 'Danish Cultural Heritage', rigid distinctions between tangible and intangible , analogue and digital are not useful. In the age of mobile and pervasive media, widely accessible communication networks, and smartphone technologies, users seemlessly (in one snapshot/video clip) turn ancient cultural objects into digital objects. Once digitized, these objects become networked, interactive, hypermediated, automated, and data based…. (2015:4).

The materialities of the mobile phone, Laptop computer, and IPad are, in other words, increasingly entwined with the materialities of heritage sites and museum artifacts which are then set a flow through tourist performances, and the sharing of those performances through personal social and digital networks. Discerning where the realm of the tangible

ends and the intangible begins becomes a precarious project that is perhaps less important to define in absolute terms than understanding how the two are actually entwined.

This entanglement also points to the fact that heritage sites and artifacts are seldom singular entities. They are always embedded in networks of actors that include tourists, curatorial staff, national politicians, scholars, local communities and many more. In this sense, as Rodney Harrison has pointed out, heritage might be understood in terms of assemblages of people, objects, networks, and interests (2013:34). In this sense, the heritage which Tom DuBois discusses in this volume encompasses much more than the Staff Church he analyses, but includes all the actors he describes, as well as their competing interests. Thinking of heritage in terms of assemblages helps us understand the complexity of what heritage can be.

Whatever it's complexity, however, we live in a world in which people and groups more than ever are prepared to make claims to "their heritage". Indeed, in recent years, aspirations to become part of the Unesco "heritage lists" of tangible, natural, and intangible heritage has become a field of competition for many nation states, the Nordic included, striving to make themselves visible globally.

Although the tangible dimension of heritage is still a main focus and museums recur to it to advocate their sustainability, there is an increasing awareness of the several dimensions of heritage, which require a more holistic approach. Among critics of Unesco's creation of separate lists for tangible, natural, and intangible heritage are scholars trained in folklore and ethnology, who tend to see these three aspects as intimately connected. Folklorist and museum scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, has argued that heritage "is made, not found"(1998:149-151). When following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and accepting that heritage is made and not found, we also accept that museums and heritage sites are products of curatorial agency and the agency of display, and that such ongoing process of selection gives shape to inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups. When accepting that the past is continually re-created in the present, focus indeed shifts to heritage as metacultural production (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995, 1998, 2004). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, in essence that Unesco's manner of defining heritage takes on a cookbook mentality, which lists ingredients that are deemed necessary to the making of heritage - a recipe based on Western hegemonic notions, needs, and bureaucratic principles. When selecting the ingredients from past in the present, this process calls for further research into the role of the chefs. Who participates in the cooking and to whom is the meal supposed to be served?

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's definition of heritage as a metacultural practice and something created in the present is well aligned with such ideas as Eric Hobsbawm's work on the "invention of tradition" (1983) as well as those found in David Lowenthal's Possessed by the Past (1996). Lowenthal argues:

> History explores and explains pasts grown more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes. Critics who confuse the two enterprises condemn heritage as a worthless sham… But heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting. Its many faults are inseparable for heritage's essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity, indeed history itself (1996:xi).

Heritage is, in short, not only linked to selected events, traditions, and materialities of the past, but it has, as Lowenthal argues, always been an important vehicle through which the past has been mobilized in the present in the name of specific cultural identities and communities. In the process, the past becomes charged with symbolic value and meaning (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992: 35-38, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:7, Anttonen 2000, Gradén 2003) or as folklorist Barbro Klein has explained "heritage is phenomena in a group's past that are given high symbolic value and therefore, must be protected for the future" (Klein 2000:25). Wishing to take the perspective of heritage making one step further, critical heritage scholar, Laurajane Smith, declares that "There is, really, no such thing as heritage" (2006:11) suggesting that the concept of heritage, first and foremost is used to provide tangibility to communities' affirmation of specific values (Smith 2006). Building on Lowenthal and MacDonald among others, Smith uses heritage and heritage-making in ways that resemble the uses of the terms within American and Scandinavian folklore and ethnology. She defines heritage and heritage making as "an embodied set of practices or performances in which cultural meaning is continually negotiated and remade, and is, moreover, a process in which people invest emotionally in certain understandings of the past and what they mean for contemporary identity and sense of place" (Smith 2015, cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Aronsson and Gradén 2013, Gradén 2010, 2013, Österlund-Pötzsch 2013). In other words, one of the most prominent features of cultural heritage making, is to divide space and constitute collectives through embodied practices and engagement (so also within academia).

We know that monuments, folklore, and landscapes, which in recent decades have become organized as heritage, played a significant role in the creation of nation states (Anderson 1991, Klein 2006, Hafstein 2012). Today, the display of cultural heritage remains an important instrument for representing the nation and, although scholars in such fields as anthropology and folklore have convincingly argued that culture is not place bound (Gupta & Ferguson 997; Hannerz 1992; Marcus 1998), but involves processes, flows, and movements that readily transgress territorial boundaries and thus, it has become increasingly difficult to think in terms of old categories such as "national cultures" in a time of globalization and cross-border communities), representations of culture and heritage as "bounded entities" can still be observed in the physical world of museums, not the least in the Nordic countries (Levitt 2015). Under these circumstances, many governments have come to acknowledge and even promote certain communities. In Sweden there has been increased emphasis at major museum institutions to make visible national minorities such as the Roma, Sami, and Tornedal Finns, as well as call for

making the museums accessible for all members of the Swedish society (see Museipolitik 2015). The efforts to be "inclusive" is part of the Nordic cultural strategy (2013-2020), initiated by the ministers of culture in the Nordic countries, funded by the Nordic Ministry of Culture and its success rate is measured statistically by the Nordic section of Myndigheten för Kulturanalys (http://www.kulturanalys.se). Such efforts raise questions such as who is prioritized when the budget is limited? Who is to be included by whom? What happens with heritage and cultural expressions when it becomes a political tool for integration?

These processes of selection can have conservative or socially progressive outcomes but, above all, they articulate various levels of engagement that have consequences. When we look at the case of museums they strengthen relations that are binding, and if one museum chooses to highlight a specific community, a particular cultural phenomenon, or a special interest other surrounding museums may opt to abdicate that perspective in their own activities and plans for future exhibitions. As Levitt points out, when the Multicultral Centre in Tumba opened in 1998, several of the major museums in Stockholm ceased to collect and include in their core exhibitions issues of recent migration and integration. An unintentional consequence of this is that processes of mobility and migration have become increasingly marginalized from many of Stockholm's national museums. What is left are all too often territorially anchored representations of "Swedish culture and heritage". Levitt's example is one among many, but based on fieldwork, her work articulates well how relations are shaped through activities, where cultural values and understandings about the past in the present guide priorities operationalized by museums.

As a nation of immigrants the United States represent a special case, with differences in the ways in which social collectives are organized around the concept of heritage. In fact the ideas of communities is complex and often invokes a mix of the universal, transnational, national, regional, local, the indigenous, ethnic, and the diasporic in overlapping identities and allegiances. In the context of communities, heritage is a forceful but flexible tool that is used to stake out very different competing understandings of culture and belonging.Heritage is innovative in the sense that it shapes social collectivity and culture and pedigree. Or in the terms of folklorist Valdimar Hafstein "heritage is collectivity by culture squared" (Hafstein 2009). This emphasis on identity, community and value is at least the predominant manner in which heritage has been framed by leading scholars in the field to date.

But what happens when "specific groups" are not enough to afford a cultural institution economic sustainability in the finicky and shifting market of the cultural economy? The case of museums is of particular interest because, as economists Carmen Camarero, María José Garrido and Eva Vicente have argued:

> Museums... have become part of the experience economy. Although museums
> have traditionally been described as institutions focused primarily inwards on the

> growth, care, and study of their collections, they are gradually adopting a more entrepreneurial management approach aimed at serving the public (2015:229).

As economist Joseph Pine and James Gilmore argue, operating in the experience economy implies a strategic mind shift in which managerial teams focus more on the packaging and selling of experiences, than physical objects and commodities or more traditional services (spanning the spectrum from more traditionally public sector services such as health care and education to private sector services such as those in retail, dining, and entertainment). This brings our discussion of heritage and museums full circle to where this introductory chapter began: the realm of edutainment, and the question of what museums and heritage sites have become.

However, this is not simply a question of what museums and heritage sites have become, it is very much a question of what visitors to these places are looking for. The common sense presumption has long been that visitors to heritage sites and museums are in search of new understandings of the past, and inspirational insights of knowledge which will help them to not only gain new insights into the past, but even help them re-think that past and their relationship to it. Interestingly, recent scholarship points to the fact that is quite often far from the case. More than new understandings of the past, it turns out that visitors to heritage museums and sites are often looking for information that confirms their understandings of themselves and their interpretations of history (Smith 2015). In their contribution to this volume Gradén and O'Dell drive this line of argumentation further by illuminating what happens as museums push their activities further and further into the experience economy. Based on an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, they illuminate how museum leadership are currently working intricately to reposition their museum to a broader public as they gear up to move to a new extravagant and function built facility. A more traditional exhibition platform that told the immigration story of the local Nordic population is giving way to an experience and event based orientation that strives to bring in a younger and broader audience. In the process, in-depth knowledge of the historic immigration process is yielding ground to more contemporary oriented design, fashion, and arts based exhibitions. The goal is to create a cooler museum with broad appeal, and educational aspirations follow their after. In order to succeed here, heritage has to do more than just confirm visitors' expectations as Smith argues, it has to be fun: it has to be hip.

Heritage, as we and the contributing authors to this volume are arguing, is not a particular thing. It involves multiple components including educational, cultural, economic, political, social, and experiential dimensions (Sacco 2016). Most heritage sites and museums include varying proportions of all these dimension, but the manner in which these are weighed is changing, and does vary from context to context. The contributions in this volume illuminate a number of interesting ways in which the significance of heritage is shifting.

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In line with this, all of the contributions to this volume highlight an important insight: When museums prioritize among their collections, exhibitions, programs they do so to engage specific visitors groups - for example families, socially active adults, makers, and people of certain ages. By so engaging specific groups, the museum indirectly expresses their stakeholders' economic, social and cultural preferences and political values. In other words, museums as curatorial agencies of "heritage making" constitute collectives and organize such collectives around cultural remains: such as objects, collections, houses, narratives, songs, craftmanship, cooking, dress practices and so on. In this context, however, the potent question which the articles in this volume focus upon are: whose heritage is being preserved and by whom, and what roles might museums create for themselves, as makers of future histories? If museums created by immigrants from the Nordic countries in the US are places where major transatlantic histories were shaped, these are also places where they unfold and transform.

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