

## **Who is Responsible for Preserving Heritage? (Un-)Successful Museums in the Future**

### **Different types of museums**

Museums need to define their duties and responsibilities in a new way. Museums are responsible for preserving heritage for paying customers. The customer is the one who pays the bill. Yet the notion of 'the customer' differs for every museum. Generally speaking, museums could be placed into three categories from the customer perspective: 1) 'Rich' museums, 2) 'Absolute Value' museums and 3) 'Poor' museums.

A Rich museum organisation has a huge amount of capital (money, stocks or other exchangeable capital). The Rich museum's customer is the governing body. An Absolute Value museum has no exchangeable capital, but its maintenance has been inscribed in the law or in other regulations. Its customers are representatives of state and cities (politicians, bureaucrats). A Poor museum organisation has neither capital nor absolute value status. Poor museum customers are those who are willing to pay directly (e.g. via admission fees) or indirectly (via grants) for their services. The majority of museums can be placed in this 'Poor' category.

### **Indicators of an at-risk museum**

Prosperous museums may exist in all three categories. But it is vital that a museum realizes to which category it primarily belongs. Rich and Absolute Value museums won't find themselves in desperate circumstances where they are under threat of closure or bankruptcy.

The museums which may experience such difficulties are the ones in the 'Poor' category, which act as if they were rich and believe they have an absolute value status. These museums can be identified by one or more of the following indicators:

- The museum doesn't have an earnings philosophy.
- The museum doesn't know how much it costs to acquire photographs, objects, books or other artefacts, and how much it will cost to preserve them.
- The museum takes new artefacts into its collection without adequate resources (money).
- The museum employees and administration are passionate souls who consider the preservation of history as their duty
- The museum has a lot of prestigious and rich patrons, who assist museums to acquire objects and other material.
- The museum believes the state or the city will save it if its economic problems grow too huge.
- The museum only regards visitors as customers.

### **Indicators of a successful museum**

A successful museum is customer-oriented and knows who its customers are. Customer-oriented museums need to forget visitors. Visitors and exhibitions don't play any role in the financing of a museum's fixed costs. In most cases, admission fees do not even cover an exhibition's production and marketing costs. The conclusion that can be drawn from studies

on Finnish museums is that there is a correlation between an ambitious exhibition programme and deep economic problems.

Visitors are important for museums only if the governing body wishes to receive them (Rich museum) and if the exhibition activities are a duty for the museum (publically-owned Absolute Value museums). In these cases museums have a contract with the customers – the more visitors the museum has, the more money they can acquire from the owners.

Poor museums need to choose whether to be in the tourism business or in the museum business. If poor museums decide to continue in the tourism business and visitors are their only customers, these museums need to sell, donate or dispose of their collections. In most cases they also need to change their name to exhibition hall, experience centre or gallery.

If museums want to continue in the museum business, they have to productize their collection, research and public services. Collection services include consultancy regarding objects that are worth storing, documenting and conserving. Museums should not try to own collections because, at the end of the day, the one who owns the collection will pay the price by losing money or by losing their reputation.

In the future the most successful museum will be a service organisation which helps its customers to fulfil their needs and responsibilities in preserving heritage.