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The Finnish National Gallery

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Welcome to the Museum?

The Finnish National Gallery Promotes Cultural Equality in Finland

Sometimes a museum visit comes close to a hopeless effort. I am going to visit a museum in Munich, Germany, and I enter the old museum building. As soon as I step into the lobby and approach the admissions desk, the clerk fixes his attention on me and shouts out, “you can’t come into the museum”. I try to negotiate but he will not waver. I ask the clerk to consult his supervisor. The supervisor shows up and denies me access. I tell her I work at a museum in Finland, show her my ICOM (International Council of Museums) card and she goes to fetch the museum director. The friendly museum director arrives and apologizes. Of course I can enter the museum like anyone else. He tells me about the museum and chats with me a moment in the exhibition hall, even offers his assistance as I prepare to leave. So the visit has remained in my mind as a positive experience, after all.

The art museum where I work in Finland is located a few hundred meters from our cultural historical national museum. When I go to visit the museum the ticket clerk hesitates and asks me to wait a moment. I step aside, minutes pass, the clerk makes a phone call, attends to a few other customers and makes another call. I start to feel unnerved. Finally, after lengthy arrangements and waiting, the clerk gives me permission to move around in the museum facility. My assistance dog maintains his stoic attitude and, unlike his mistress, shows no signs of frustration.

I have rather frequently ran into situations in museums where the presence of my assistance dog causes confusion. Confusion is what happens when various aspects of accessibility haven’t been carefully considered among the whole staff. Sometimes a person entering a museum is accompanied with a working companion, a guide dog or an assistance dog, who helps the disabled person in daily affairs. Sometimes a person uses a hearing aid or a wheelchair. How can a museum ensure a proper and warm welcome for everyone?

Accessibility of Museums Under Scrutiny

Museum accessibility relates to such concepts as democracy, justice and equality. When we collect material connected with our past and study it, we have to ask why and for whom we are doing it. Only an accessible museum can be a well-functioning museum, since without accessibility a museum cannot perform its task as a provider of information in a satisfactory manner.

Following international examples, discussion on access to culture gained momentum in Finland at the turn of the century. The principal perception was that audience-related work should reach out to all different citizens. Following the efforts of various organizations for people with disabilities, we have become better aware of various obstacles to participation and realized that groups that have been left outside of the museum service supply are by no means marginal.

On the basis of prior British research and efforts, accessibility was increasingly defined through various sub-elements. In a comprehensive audience-focused approach the assessment of accessibility includes the physical environment, accessibility of contents through different senses, access to information and practical details, financial accessibility, social and cultural accessibility and ability to influence all this through decision-making and inclusive attitudes. When speaking of cultural services, the concept of accessibility becomes exceedingly broad, heeding to diverse audiences and their diverse needs.

Accessibility work in Finnish museums at the start of the 2000s has especially centered on a better recognition of people with disabilities or other mobility concerns. For such people, obstacles to participation are often very concrete and require explicit measures. Museums soon started to use accessibility checklists for assessing their activities and guiding material for e.g. organizers of exhibitions. Other groups that are easily marginalized or left invisible include many ethnic minorities and sexual minorities with their own special perspectives. These groups and questions concerning them have in the latter half of the 2000s been more widely included in diversity discussion as groups for whom accessibility needs to be reviewed.

Promotion of accessibility can be viewed as proceeding, both in museums and other cultural work, in stages. At the first stage, the situation is surveyed and concrete obstacles to participation are removed. The next thing to ensure is that the facilities are accessible and that information and experiences are offered in alternative forms, the supply content is checked and all the needed

information is provided on the services. At this stage it may be discovered that some of the physical obstacles cannot feasibly be removed, and decisions must be made on how to inform visitors about this and take people with mobility concerns into account through alternative solutions.

When it is already known that a site or a service has something to offer to all different types of audiences, active efforts to reach out to new participants and visitors can be undertaken. At this second stage, the aim is to develop effectual relations to users and to raise awareness of and confidence in the fact that the site has carefully considered people's individual ways of learning, moving, using their senses and communicating. Diverse audiences and individuals have started to actively take part in these projects, creating services "in their image" and consequently, the role of museums' surrounding communities has grown. At the third stage a state has already been reached where the operations of a museum or other cultural service provider promote equality, prevent social and cultural exclusion and contribute to the welfare of individuals and communities through, for example, means of cultural education.

Key Role of Cultural Administration

In Finland there have been increased efforts since the start of the 2000s to extend the principles of equality and equal opportunities to the field of cultural services. International guidelines and agreements and national legislation aim more and more clearly and concretely towards equal opportunities for diverse groups of citizens. Multiculturality and internationality, minority rights, securing development for children and youth and population ageing are challenges of today's society. Cultural administration strives for its own part to recognize these challenges and find effective means to promote cultural access for all citizens.

The work for promoting accessibility at the Finnish Ministry of Education has proceeded in three stages: at the first stage, a working group was appointed to evaluate cultural participation among people with disabilities and supportive administrative measures. Secondly, Disabled People and Culture Committee was appointed to prepare an action plan to support operators in the field of culture so that especially people with disabilities are better taken into consideration as producers and consumers of culture. The committee comprised representatives from state administration and the municipal sector, cultural institutions and organizations for the disabled. The third stage centered on the Access to Arts and Culture for All program, in which the Ministry of Education outlined its measures for the five-year period of 2006-2010. In the program the perspective on

accessibility has been extended to cover not only that of people with disabilities but also the views of other minorities and special groups. Among them are immigrants, language and cultural minorities and ageing people. The suggested measures primarily concern resource allocation, information-based guidance and performance management. One of the means of information-based guidance has been to finance the Culture for All information service for cultural practitioners, which is coordinated by the Finnish National Gallery. The Ministry encourages cross-sectoral cooperation in the work of promoting accessibility.

Nordic Cooperation

Nordic operating models are rather closely related and subject to active interaction. Museums have also had good experiences with cooperation that has centered on improved access to cultural heritage. Geographic closeness and similarities in social structures have created traditions for cooperation and financing models that enable collaborative projects among Nordic countries. One initiator in these projects has been the Nordic Council on Disability Policy operating under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Council has published reports on Nordic cultural and disability policies and brought perspectives of cultural policy for all citizens into discussion.

The Museums for All project in 2000-2003 started off cooperation among museums around the essential questions of accessibility. Participators in the project included, besides Nordic museums, also representatives of different groups of people with disabilities. Four sub-projects were carried out within the project, resulting in an Accessible Museum guidebook for museum staff, a checklist as an accessibility evaluation tool for museums, the international Museums for All conference and a touring exhibition.

One way of drawing attention to questions of accessibility has been recognition through contests and awards. The Nordic Council on Disability Policy picked museums as the theme of its Nordic accessibility contest in 2001. The Council also published a book in connection with the theme, which introduces twelve Nordic museums and their work to enhance accessibility.

Nordic museum professionals have wished to form a functional network because close communication, easy exchange of experiences and better information resources can help cultural professionals in their daily work. A project was launched to start off an accessibility network for museums, during which the contact framework and methods of communication were established.

Promotion of cultural access calls for awareness, information and knowledge, which the network brings more easily within reach through, for example, its website and e-mail discussions.

The Finnish National Gallery Promoting Cultural Accessibility

In Finland, the Finnish National Gallery is actively engaged in promoting equal access to culture. It is the country's largest art museum institution, comprising the Ateneum Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, the Sinebrychoff Art Museum and Central Art Archives. Especially persons involved in its pedagogic activities have produced path-breaking results and practical initiatives. A significant achievement has been a two-year project that started in 1999, during which accessibility of the Finnish National Gallery's own museums was studied extensively in respect with improvement. Since the National Gallery is one of the national central museums in Finland, its practices have a countrywide impact. The first project was continued with a national evaluation and training program in which both smaller and bigger museums from southern Finland to Lapland took part. Along with accumulated experiences and information, the Culture for All network for workers in the cultural sector was established in the Art Museum Development Department of the National Gallery. The unit has also had an appointed cultural diversity coordinator since 2005, who assesses museum services and activities from the perspective of minorities and cultural diversity.

Another important sphere of action has been cooperation between the National Gallery and other central actors in the museum sector, such as the National Board of Antiquities and the Finnish Museums Association. International projects have been initiated and cooperation has been carried out at both Nordic and wider international level. The National Gallery has also taken part in cultural policy program work. The aim is to influence the structures of cultural services: to establish permanent operating environments, actors, practices and models that enable long-term development work. The National Gallery has thus become an important national and international actor in promotion of accessibility.

Culture for All Service

The Culture for All service coordinated by The Finnish National Gallery is one effective means of increasing and concentrating information. The information service operates within the Finnish National Gallery's Art Museum Development Department. Its task is to enhance cultural accessibility through the establishment of networks and communication contacts, needs

assessments, training and production of materials. The information service provides tools, guidelines and expertise for the use of cultural service producers. An important channel for sharing information is the unit's website at www.cultureforall.info. The Finnish Ministry of Education finances the information service as part of its strategy work with cultural accessibility as one main emphasis.

One example of the unit's services is accessibility assessments museums can commission on their built environment and services. When a survey is commissioned, the museum and its activities are assessed in detail together with museum staff and an expert or experts. The museum receives an evaluation report containing observations from a visitor's perspective. The survey focuses on such aspects as communication, entrance to the building, services, public spaces, signs, exhibitions, etc. The survey is based on, for example, building codes and accessibility guidelines. It makes it easier for the museum staff to prepare an overall plan: what are adopted as the goals; what concrete measures should be employed; what cannot feasible be realized; which staff member bears responsibility for which change/reform, i.e. who is responsible for the implementation; what are the financial parameters; what is the timetable; what is urgent; etc.

The Culture for All Service also arranges customized training for museum staffs, organizes seminars and provides guest speakers. Producing guiding material is also a central part of the unit's operations. Checklists for self-evaluation of services are provided for museums, organizers of cultural events and theatres. The Culture for All service has also produced a DVD guide titled "Open Doors", which introduces through international examples work for greater accessibility in cultural heritage sites. The DVD has been produced as part of the EU-financed ACCU project (Access to Cultural Heritage: Policies of Presentation and Use 2004-2007).

Practical Measures in Art Museums

The museums of the Finnish National Gallery have attempted in various ways to take diversity of audiences into account. One integral part of this work is communication, to ensure that the potential museum-goers receive appropriate information already before their museum visit. Museum brochures and websites should provide basic information on accessibility: are the facilities accessible, are there assistive hearing devices and seeing aids available, etc. Information is also designed directly for target groups. The staff is trained in the use of plain language and graphic

design for people with visual impairments. Basics on accessible web design are studied so that websites can be operated also with aids for people with visual impairments.

Access to the built environment can be a challenge especially in older buildings. A major reform process in an older building can be, for example, basic renovations during which elevators are installed. Smaller reforms are easier to carry out; floors have been equipped with safety tape indicating stairs, signs have been redesigned, seats have been acquired for public use, tele/induction loop systems have been installed, service counters have been lowered, etc.

An instruction leaflet has been prepared for organizers of exhibitions, which helps to take the needs of diverse audiences into account. Information on each exhibition and its background is provided in a form that is understandable for all. Clearly readable texts and carefully designed audio guides are important. The possibility to examine objects through different senses interests audiences.

Touch screens featuring the building, art and artists of the Ateneum Art Museum were designed to serve as diverse a range of audience as possible. The screens were developed to be easily accessible and they were supplemented with such assistive devices as magnifying glasses and tele/induction loops. The procedure of content and graphic layout have been designed to be simple by using, for example, strong enough contrasts between objects and their backgrounds or clear fonts. The basic principles of plain language are applied in texts; sound and graphic design support each other and users are given options to adjust them.

Museum guides have had opportunities to acquire further training in guiding special-needs groups and guide services have, for example, been offered in plain or sign language and for visitors with visual impairments. Guided tours have made visitors feel more comfortable through such solutions as portable chairs and assistive hearing devices. Guides have also been supplied with material relating to multisensory works, such as fabric, small objects or sound samples.

In the field of pedagogies, the National Gallery's three museums have organized theme events connected with different kinds of audience groups. Some have been realized together with immigrant groups, some with organizations or individuals involved with work for the disabled. Special focus has been placed on children's events, striving to also reach out to children with disabilities. It is important to engage diverse audiences to reflect alongside museum professionals on the content and perspectives of a museum's services.

These courses of action have helped museums to shrug the dust off their shoulders and endeavor to become an active part of people's lives. Museums have a lot to offer: versatile information, building blocks for self-perception and identity and interesting exhibition contents. By surveying and evaluating its own activities, preparing a clear accessibility action plan, defining staff responsibility for accessibility issues and training its staff, a museum can find its way to the hearts of growing numbers of people. This task is not without challenges. Is the museum staff capable of assessing its established practices critically and daring enough to try out new approaches? How does one maintain a level of accessibility in services even when the work pace is hectic and staff turns over? Responding to these challenges is well worth the effort. The rewards are satisfaction over work well done, keeping abreast of time and feedback from happy audiences.

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