

Teemu Ahola

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Developing the collections together – Tools for the nationwide collection management

Dear Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me, it is a great pleasure to be here! My name is Teemu Ahola and I come from Finland where I work as a deputy director and head of collections at the Finnish Labour museum Werstas. Our museum is a national special museum that has nationwide responsibility on the themes of social history and the working life in Finland. I am also acting as a head of the nationwide collections network for professional museums in Finland. The network concentrates on collections management co-operation and development.

The development of collections management is the issue of my talk today. Furthermore I am going to examine what nationwide co-operation can add to this development work. I use our national network as an example and tell you about the issues we have been dealing with in our network. My examples come from Finland, but I am pretty sure you are dealing with the similar challenges and development issues here in Slovenia.

Main challenges in the collections management

I would like to begin with the main challenges that museums are facing today regarding the collections management. Firstly, we are living in world that could be described as a mass production society. Long gone are the times, when unique artifacts were regionally hand produced, and differed from each other based on that regionality. If we think of the potential museum object from present day, it is most likely an item of mass production. For the museums it is really demanding to make the necessary picks among the overflow of mass production. The diversity and the sheer volume of the potential museum objects is pretty huge nowadays.

At the same time the museum storage facilities are filling up and the physical storage space is very limited. In Finland this was not a problem say twenty years ago. Acquisitions were made based on very loose principles, or there were no real principles or guidelines. Museums had plenty of storage space, so why worry? Well, now we are worrying because of those loose principles. Storages are full and it is costly to acquire more space. Even the existing storage space is expensive, if you ask from the museum director. It is

not cheap to store the collections and this should be taken into account when thinking about new acquisitions.

The tradition of loosely based acquisition has led us to object bulimia where museums are not fully aware what they have among the uncatalogued parts of the collections. At least in Finland museums are more or less struggling to get a grip of the uncatalogued material. The amount of work resources that has to be directed to the management of old collections, inventory, cataloguing and disposal tasks, is significant. At the same time we should have resources for managing the new acquisitions let alone all the other procedures that collections work demand.

When we are not fully aware of the contents of our uncatalogued collections how are we able to perform high quality acquisitions? Or if we do not know what other museums are preserving in their collections we are collecting material more or less blindly and so are the other museums too. Traditionally museums haven't been that interested in what other museums are collecting or what is stored in those other collections. At least this interest has not been that systematical. Other museums' collections are usually examined when a museum needs certain object loans for an upcoming exhibition. I say that museums should be extremely interested in collections outside the walls of ones own museum. Because that is one of the keys to the collections development work in one's own museum and nationwide.

If we want to raise the quality of collections on the single museum's level as well as on a national scale, we need to see the overall picture of collections and collecting activities. This has an effect on almost everything regarding the collections management, be it acquisition decisions, deaccession and disposals, collections relocations, storage space rearrangements et cetera.

In my talk I will concentrate on the issues of museum co-operation and the shared knowledge regarding the collections management. My claim is that with the increased shared knowledge and efficient co-operation we are able to push our collections management to the next level. For this I have an example from Finland. We have created a model for nationwide division of collecting tasks. I will tell you about the model and how it has changed our ways to manage collections and work together.

National collection networking in Finland

The discussion regarding the development of collections management has been in increase in Finland during the last decade. It all began with the first official collections policies that were published some ten years ago. When published these collection policies gave museums an opportunity to explore and examine the processes of collection management in museums. That was the first real opportunity for museums to get a glimpse of other museums' collection profiles and collecting activities.

The official collections policies generated also new openings regarding the deaccession and disposals. In Finland the issue of disposals has been very much linked to the different generations of the museum professionals. With the collections policies the new generation of museum professionals gave their voice in favour for the disposals and stated that it is actually possible to think about the disposals and even carry them out. The present generation has approved the value of disposals, now the greatest challenge is creating the correct procedures for them.

After the collections management had surfaced the public realm of the museum field, the next point of the process was the question regarding the co-operation between the museums. Museums had developed their procedures and they had good policies, but they still operated more or less in isolation. There was no general nationwide alignments regarding the concrete collections management. The need for co-operation was obvious.

National Board of Antiquities answered to the call of the museum field by establishing the national network that would deal the issues of collections management and co-operation. The network was named as the national network for collections management and present day documentation (finnish abbreviation is TAKO). The network was established in the year 2009.

The network is led by the head of the network and seven members of the steering group. In addition there are two secretaries from the National Museum of Finland and one specialist member from the National Board of Antiquities. The head of the network and the members of the steering group come from different finnish museums. All the members have their own position in their museums, so the membership of the steering group is more like a position of responsibility.

The idea of the network is to develop collections management and bring collection professionals together. Network is a hub or channel for new openings regarding all kinds of collections activities. The network has two main modes of operation for the development work: the present day documentation activities and the national division of collecting tasks. I have been a member of the steering group from the beginning and a head of that group for three years.

[TAKO: Present day documentation](#)

The steering group of the network was elected in 2009 and the creation work for establishing the network was launched. The corner stone of the network has always been the idea of doing things together. From the beginning we had the idea that we must create a system that defines how different social and cultural themes are collected and preserved into the museum collections and create a division of responsible actors that perform the collecting work. That would be one of the main features of the upcoming network. But

such an demanding system could not be created before the museums have been familiarized to each other and to the networking. Therefore we decided to begin with the other main mode of operation, something that would nicely bring museums together and make them work in co-operation. That would be the present day documentation activities.

I am sure you all know what I mean by the present day documentation, so I am not going to go any deeper into those activities. With the present day activity I mean the different ways of documentation (interviewing, photographing, videofilming, collecting objects) that museum uses to catch significant and important themes of today's world into the collections.

In Sweden museums had worked together around the present day documentation activities since the 1970's. We had examined their network and decided that it could be something that would work also in Finland. We copied some elements from their operation mode and network structures and adapted it for our needs. In Sweden they had created a structure where the themes of society and culture were divided thematically into several categories that were called pools. In these pools museums operated together by documenting certain themes in joint projects.

We decided to create the pools of our own. After careful thinking we came up with total of seven different pools. We published the structure and invited the museums to join the pools of their liking and to begin with the networking. The idea of the networking and the pool structure received very positive feedback from the field and the network began to grow quite rapidly. Today we have a total of 82 active museums involved. When I am talking about museums here I mean professionally run cultural historical museums. Although there are some art museums committed too.

The present day documentation pools

The idea is that museums are free to join any pool they wish. They can be part of one or more pools. They are free to change between pools if they wish. The pool decides independently what kind of present day documentation projects – or collections management projects – they want to carry out. The bar for the involment of the museums is set as low as possible. The pools apply funding for the projects independently from different potential sources. The network does not finance any projects, but instead the network has a yearly budget for travelling costs. The members of the pools are able to travel to pool meetings and network seminars with no cost. This has made it possible especially for the small museums and those that are located in far away locations to travel and meet colleagues around the country.

Every pool has a head, who is part of the steering group. This way the information will flow directly from the steering group to the pools and vice versa. Creating this kind of network was an excellent way to

introduce museums to each other. Present day documentation is quite a new thing in Finland on a larger scale and museums were keen to learn this kind of activities.

Developing the co-operation

The network got a good start with the present day documentation activities. After three years of active networking we felt that the network and the museums were ready to take the next step and begin to formulate the division of collecting tasks in Finland. The network received funding for this work from the Finnish Museum Association. We were able to establish a project, where I was chosen to carry out the project as an investigator for five months.

In Finland similar model regarding the nationwide division of collecting tasks was made in the 1980's by work-group appointed by the National Board Antiquities. The end-result of the model was very nice and balanced, but the downside was that the museums didn't adopt it as a tool of their own. Eventually the model was in use for a while and then slowly faded away.

When I began my work I decided to proceed totally opposite way than what had been done in the previous attempt during the 1980's. My plan was to proceed from the grass-root level – the museums – upwards, so that the museums would have the possibility to give their voice for the model and define the optimal set of collecting tasks for themselves.

I choose to have all the professionally run cultural-historical museums as my target group. There were total of 114 of them. I decided that I would contact personally all of them by phoning them and presenting my ideas and discussing of the matter. I knew that this would be very time consuming way to work, so I had to leave out the other museum types from the model. Therefore the art museums, natural history museums and non-professional museums were left aside. I spent the fall of 2012 by phoning over a hundred museums and discussing of the core themes that they were collecting and what would be such themes that they could take a nationwide responsibility for. I must say that that fall I felt like being an academic salesman by phoning quite a huge number of museums and trying to sell them something that did not even exist. Now I will tell you more about the aims, logic and purpose of the model we were creating.

Creating a model for the nationwide division of collecting tasks

What is the purpose of the model for nationwide division of collecting tasks? I'll open here the most important features of the model. First, we are trying to create an overall picture of the field of collecting in Finland. We are trying to shape what are the central themes that museums are preserving in their

collections. Creating such an overall picture is essential in trying to understand the structure of collections nationwide.

Secondly, we are trying to find out the overlapping areas of collecting. By this I mean exactly the same themes that two or more museums are preserving into their collections. The overlapping areas of collecting are significant challenge for museums and something that consumes great deal of resources and storage space. By raising the shared knowledge of the collecting activities we are able to move away from this kind of collecting done blindly.

Museums are collecting the same objects, but at the same time there is a myriad of themes that no one is systematically preserving in the collections. We are calling these themes as Black Holes of the field of collecting. In order to preserve a balanced picture of our times, we have to take these missing themes into account as well and arrange responsible museums to take care of the collecting them.

The third purpose is to make an overall change in the mindset of museums and encourage them to be more open. Traditionally museums have tend to be a bit jealous over their collections. The information regarding the collections has been kept on our own and the distribution of this information has been quite limited. But when we make other museums familiar with the knowledge of our collections, it will have many positive outcomes and create new possibilities for lifting the quality of collections. I'll come back to this later.

Features of the model

Basicly the model defines certain themes of our society and culture of which individual museums are willing to take the responsibility of collecting. The collection tasks are set in a structure that is divided into seven main categories. You will see something familiar with these categories when I show them to you. Namely, we used the same structure as with the present day documentation pools. We had used that structure for years, museums were already familiar with it and it felt logical. Therefore it was quite natural to take this structure for our model as well. Inside every category or main topic we created several sub-topics and the actual collecting tasks were placed under these sub-topics.

The collecting tasks

Now I will tell you more about the logic and main features of the core of the model: the collecting tasks. Collecting tasks are individual themes that were discussed and agreed between the investigator and the

particular museum. Collecting tasks are themes that museums are willing to collect in their collections and at the same time they are willing to take the nationwide responsibility for them.

This means that other museums may trust on that particular museum for preserving the theme and therefore other museums are free to leave the collecting of that theme. By doing so museums are able to focus their resources more efficiently on the central themes they are collecting.

When I was discussing of the potential collecting tasks with the museums two main issues were emphasized: firstly, the tasks museums choose should be from the core themes of the museum's collection profile. Meaning that the tasks should be linked to the identity of museum's collection profile and identity. Otherwise the end result would be inoperative and superficial.

Secondly, the number of collecting tasks per museums is not relevant or important regarding the model. What matters the most, is the realistic number of the tasks museum is willing to take the responsibility for. When taking the nationwide responsibility of the themes, the museum must be sure that it can carry out that responsibility, so that other museums may be sure that the theme or themes will be taken care of.

A central feature of these collecting tasks is the nationwide nature of them. We have different kinds of museums: some of them operate on the national level, but most of them have physical regional boundaries where they carry out the collecting activities. Being a part of the model does not change this basic setting. Those museums that operate regionally, continue to do so also in the model. The basic assumption is that modern day objects are not tied regionally if thinking about the physical composition or appearance. For example the cellular phone or an iPad is the same, no matter where it is collected at. In the model the regionally collected objects are examples from nationwide cultural phenomena that certain object is linked to.

One important notion is that with the model we are not denying museums to collect whatever they want. Museums are free to execute their collecting actions as they want. Of course museums are collecting many themes that they haven't included in the model. With the model we are able to reduce the overlapping areas of collecting. The collecting that museums do outside the model is their private decision and it does not show as part of this national activity.

There is a total of 402 individual collecting tasks in the present version of the model. The total amount of committed museums is 92. There are also certain tasks that are divided between two or more museums. In these cases museums have discussed about the matter together and made agreements how the responsibilities are divided between the museums inside that particular task. Tasks like these are typically quite large-scale as a theme, for example different branches of manufacturing and industry. In these cases it is very good to have more than just one actor collecting the themes and sharing the responsibility.

Seven topics of the model

Here are the seven main topics of the model. As you can see, it is almost identical to the structure of our present day documentation. The only difference is in the topic number six, where the content is slightly different, mainly regarding the themes of exercise and sport that are included into the topic level.

The structure of each topic is hierarchical and divided into three steps. First there is the main topic, then the subtopic and under the subtopic the actual collection tasks.

Presenting the model

The model is quite complex with over 400 collection tasks from nearly 100 contributors. Therefore we have produced three different viewpoints to help in examining the contents of the model. First, there is the listing of collection tasks by each main topic. With every collection task one can see the museum responsible of that task. This is the basic way to introduce oneself into the main topics and their contents. The second viewpoint is based on museums. This is very handy if one wants to examine the collecting tasks of one particular museum.

The third viewpoint include the mind maps, where sub-topics and collection tasks are grouped around the main topic. This is very compact way to see one particular topic and its contents. The names of the museums are removed from the mind maps in order to keep the maps as compact as possible.

All the information including the three viewpoints can be found from the TAKO website. We have tried to make the examination of the model as versatile and easy as possible. The accessibility and opportunity to acquire information is extremely important. The web page will also include the reports of the collecting activities and these reports will be accessible for all. I'll come back to reporting little later.

Using the model

When we had the model finished, we wanted to give it an official status of course. Therefore every museum that is committed to the model has signed an agreement with the National Board of Antiquities stating that they are engaged to execute collecting by the model and the responsibilities stated there. With the signed agreement the national division of collecting becomes an official part of museums' activities and makes it a bit harder for a museum to slip away from the model. We do not have any real sanctions against the museums other than a peer pressure. Actually, the formal nature and the signed agreements works the other way round also. I have been told from the small regional museums that they can use this agreement

towards the communal decision makers and justify their existence better, because they are a part of nationwide network and although they are just a small operator locally, they also have national responsibilities. That is quite a good argument in these economically hard times.

One thing that I need to point out regarding the model is that it is far from finished. As a matter of fact, it will never be something of finished or perfect without the need for further development. The world keeps changing and the museums do so as well. The collecting activities cannot be something carved into a stone, something that never changes.

Therefore we will reserve a certain period of time every year for museums to propose changes in their set of collecting tasks. Changes may include removals of the tasks, addition of new tasks or changing the location of existing tasks from one topic to another. These are the normal adjustments of the model. Especially now when the model is still quite new, museums need time to test the model and see how it works for them. Next January we will publish the third revision of the model. We have a log in our web page where everyone can see the changes there has been in previous revisions. I must say that overall museums have been very moderate with the changes. And this is also something we wish for. With the present day documentation we encourage museums to experiment and hop between the pools. With the national division of collecting tasks, we wish that museums would be systematical and logical with their collecting and that they would make long-term decisions when choosing the tasks.

We are not keeping the model up just for the model's sake, but we want to see some concrete results as well. We want to find out what museums have collected during the year and we want to publish the results for everyone to see. Therefore the committed museums have to report the results of their yearly collecting activities done by the model. There is an annual reporting period between January and March when museums are reporting the collecting results from the previous calendar year. This year we asked the results from the calendar year of 2014.

The reporting is done by webropol online survey tool. We had our first reporting this year and now we are processing the data and building the applicable tool for presenting the results. The main issue with the tool is that it must include instruments for arranging and searching the data. At first we are going to create this tool in excel format. The first results of the model will be published in our annual seminar next February.

Experiences from the model

The model for national division of collecting tasks was introduced to the Finnish museum field in the beginning of the year 2013. This has been the third year of operation for the model. I must say that we have been very satisfied with it. The greatest fear was of course that museums will not adapt the model or

the operation mode and the model will fade away. Fortunately this has not been the case since the museums have been very active and engaged to the model from the beginning. The other fear was that the model turns out to be nonfunctional or that it has some major flaws. This has not been the case either. Although I must say that the model has its downsides.

The greatest downside is the lack of consumeration, meaning that it lacks some integrity and proportions. Some of the collecting tasks are very narrow and very specified while others can be very broad and complex. This was to be expected as we built the model together with the museums and not by commanding the tasks ourselves. This is however quite a small flaw compared to the usefulness of the model and commitment of the museums. I also believe that the lack of consumeration can be fixed by further development of the model.

Museums have taken a very active role in taking the concept further. After museums have had the possibility to see the whole structure of the model and the actors within they have started to look for partners who are collecting the same themes. Museums have started the dialogue with each other and they have started to make fine adjustments to the model.

Especially with the themes that are large and broad, museums are making the adjustments of who collects what and how the co-operation should be developed. Museums have begun to keep meetings where they process these issues and responsibilities further. The pool meetings are of course for these discussions as well. I am sure that the driving force behind all this is the need to make rearrangements to the collection profiles and wish to rearrange the existing resources more wisely. The model has made the situation of the areas of overlapping collection tasks very visible and museums want to make a change to that.

The other problem that has come truly visible with the model is that of the missing areas of collecting, the Black Holes. There are rather large and important themes of the society that no one is taking care of. As an example I could mention the health care sector in Finland. A huge and very important theme, but the preservation of the theme is now quite arbitrary. There is an absolute need for collecting activities here, no question. Other examples include themes like rescue service, social exclusion, voluntary work et cetera. By searching for the themes that does not exist we are able to see the weaknesses and blind spots of our collecting activities on a nationwide scale.

Speaking of further development, the Finnish museum field came up with a request after they had worked with the model for a year. They wished that we would create a platform, where museums could present the summaries of the specific collections or thematic entities inside their main collections, let's say for example the wedding dress collection or folk music instruments collection. Museums wanted to present this information for other museums in order to raise the shared knowledge of collections nationwide.

We decided to create a platform where museums could publish this information by themselves. We chose to have a Wikipedia site of our own to be this kind of a platform. We launched the Wikipedia in January this year. Museums have their own pages in the Wikipedia where they can publish collection summaries. The information they feed include the history and formation of the collection, brief description of the collection, what types of objects does it include, what is the amount of objects, is the collection digitalized and is it accessible online. All the core information on the collections level.

With the Wikipedia we are able to link the information to our national online collection portal called Finna. Finna is also our national link to Europeana. Our Wikipedia and Finna portal complete each other: in Finna portal we are operating on the object level. It does not tell anything about larger levels, like collections and how they have been composed. That information can be found from our Wikipedia. Now we are able to link these platforms together and tell about collections in the Wikipedia and link all the objects that belong to that particular collections to Finna platform, where people can examine the objects. Assuming of course that these objects have been digitized.

The model for nationwide division of collecting tasks is greatly affecting to deaccession and disposal activities. There was a survey done in Finland regarding the reasons for disposals. The general reason for disposals is the bad state or imperfections of the object. Other main reasons are linked straight to the thematic of our model: In many cases the ground for disposal has been that the disposed objects do not belong to the themes museum is collecting and/ or the objects should be part of some other museums collections. With the division of collecting tasks we are able to give the museums new tools for arranging their deaccession and disposal activities. We have already seen some outcomes of it. When museums are able to find out the collection profiles of their fellow museums there are new possibilities for collection relocations. For example our local city museum transferred the collection of clothes and dresses of roma people to the museum that had taken the nationwide responsibility of the theme. It was very high quality collection of approximately 100 clothes and dresses. The theme of roma people has never been a part of the city museum's collections profile and therefore that collection was not that visible to others and the museum staff did not have particular expertise on the matter. After the relocation the collection ended up in the museum that had the expertise and great interest to put the collection accessible and visible. At the same time our local museum got freed valuable storage space for other textiles. Truly a win-win situation for everybody.

The model has had quite an impact on acquisition processes as well. Today museums are able to coordinate the acquisitions together. When a donator offers object for a museum that is not responsible for the collection of that kind of objects, museums have the knowledge to forward the customer to the right

museum. The level of activity between museums on this matter has been in great increase lately. For the museums it is making things more clear and for the donators it is good customer service.

The last experience that I would like to mention is the increased level of co-operation that reaches outside the themes of division of collecting. When museums have gotten to know each other and when they have had chances to discuss the matters, they have begun to do all kinds of collection management projects together. They have created manuals for how to write collection policies, they have made surveys and instructions regarding the deaccession and disposals, they have had projects regarding the open data and its usage in museum environments. They have created and tried the concept of communal cataloguing of object, meaning that we would have one mass produced object in some museums collections, and other museums would produce context information to that particular object. The end result would be one physical object with wide set of different contexts to it. Very fascinating project.

I believe that the future of the museums collections management and its development is increasingly tied to the co-operation between the museums. By joining our forces, resources and expertise we are able to tackle the existing challenges and bring the collections management to the next level(s).

Teemu Ahola

Head of Collections

The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas

Tampere, Finland

tel: +358-50-440-1164

e-mail: teemu.ahola@werstas.fi