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AN HOLISTIC APPROACH TO MUSEUM PRACTICES: PUTTING THE BASICS FIRST

* FIONN ZARUBICA, MANAGING
PARTNER, FIONN ZARUBICA
& ASSOCIATES
FIONN@FIONNZARUBICA.COM
WWW.FIONNZARUBICA.COM

Fionn Zarubica

Serbia 2013. Today, heritage protection in Serbia is at a serious turning point. Ongoing turbulence in the region, has led to a circumstance wherein heritage is neither a social nor a political priority, and no clear national strategy for protection exists. There is little cooperation between state ministries and legislation is inconsistent with current standards. The institutional network based on a model of operation that was established in 1947, is obsolete and inefficient, resulting in poor inter-institutional communication and cooperation, as well the absence of an integrative approach.

Financial resources are uncertain at best. This year only 0.6 percent of the annual budget for the state was set aside for culture. And because governments here change so rapidly, there is no stability or basis for establishing any long-term initiatives.

There is constant pressure on those involved in protection efforts from state administration, poor wages, cocooned institutions, revolving leadership, limited opportunities for professional development and low professional morale. All of which have lead to little incentive for practitioners to advance in the field.

In terms of collections care, there are few up to date education programs available, or mechanisms in place for collections research. Inadequate storage and exhibition facilities have resulted in massive damage to museum objects, and no standardized or centralized documentation system exists.



Fionn Zarubica and Students from Collections Management Certification Program, Serbia, Labelling Objects, February 2013. Copyright © 2013 Fionn Zarubica & Associates.

On the public front, Serbia's two most important museums are closed. The National Museum in Belgrade has been effectively closed since March 1999, when they withdrew their permanent collection from display due to the bombardment. They officially closed in 2001, and since then have been awaiting reconstruction to provide appropriate storage and exhibition conditions. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade is also closed.

In 2005 they began to withdraw artifacts from permanent display owing to extremely unfavorable conditions in the exhibition space. Reconstruction began in 2008, but it is currently at a standstill. This has undermined potential community outreach, education and tourism, and has gravely impacted economic growth.

Here in Serbia conditions are so critical, and cultural heritage is so endangered, that any conversation other than how to address the immediate and basic concerns of the objects themselves is fruitless.

What is needed now is a clearly defined strategy for protection, an organized integrative system that gets down to the basics of collections care; unifying and linking all activities to provide interdisciplinary education on an academic and expert level.

In recent years the international museum community has become increasingly involved in high-concept intellectual discourse. Hypotheses about new technology, curatorial theory, museum architecture and exhibition design, have largely dominated the conferences, newsletters and blogs.

But what about the basics? For regions that are only now coming out of decades of instability, what would make a difference is education and training for professionals to address the primary needs of the objects and to help them find an approach to their care that is cost efficient and practical.

Suggesting to a museum in Serbia that they could really improve their storage conditions, have more permanent collection rotations or get onboard with international standards, without offering resources for a meaningful and long-term basis of education and training, is like asking a paraplegic to sprint across the room; as is encouraging more students to spend years in school to become curators of objects that they cannot locate or work with – and for museums that are closed.

If you don't know what you have, if what you have is inaccessible or in a devastated condition, what are you going to curate, conserve with high-tech equipment or document using expensive software? And most importantly, without accessible and stable objects, or open museums, how can you possibly make any relevant contribution to the community you serve through exhibition and education?

The fundamental issues of object safety and documentation need to be settled first, and museums in the region must come together in mutual cooperation. Establishing standards now is essential, as is winning the support of the people who have to abide by them.

Additionally, it is important that we examine underlying issues that affect morale, such as professional depression, and answer the questions of why we are in the field in the first place, why does cultural heritage matter and how does it make a difference to others? In many post-socialist cultures, there are individuals who are professionally engaged in the museum field who have no genuine rapport with what they do. It is a job. How do we penetrate the barriers set up by the old systems? Unless we can reach the hearts and minds of the professionals in the field, important topics such as standards and ethics, and all that they entail, cannot find a sticking point.

The time has come for an holistic approach to education and training that takes all the issues into account, is contextual and relevant to the cultures, individuals, resources and situations in question; and most importantly, provides follow-up and long-term support.

Therefore, in partnership with The Central Institute For Conservation In Belgrade, and with support from the United States Embassy in

Belgrade, Fionn Zarubica and Associates has launched a Collections Management Certification Program in Belgrade, Serbia, which while taking an holistic approach, offers state of the art collections management training to museum professionals and emerging professionals in the region. The program is offered at no cost to the participants and admission is based on professional qualification and academic excellence. The program addresses the urgent need to get those who work directly with local collections in a position where they can make ongoing and meaningful improvements to their collections, through documentation and preventive conservation. It also offers progressed studies in exhibition arts, incoming and outgoing loans, as well as museum ethics, effective use of resources, best practices and sustainability, through instruction and hands-on training.

Good collections management is not by necessity high-tech, it does not require an advanced degree; neither does it require expensive software or equipment. It requires intention, goodwill, education, training, collaboration, common sense and hard work. It is the starting point, the basis upon which all future success, if any is expected, must be built.

The heritage in the region is worth saving. With examples of human workmanship ranging from the Bronze Age, through Classical Antiquity to contemporary society, it is relevant to the global discussion as well as vital to the cultural life of the local community.

Once we have established the basics of collections care here, instituted modern standards and entered into creative and constructive cooperation with our colleagues in the region, then communication with others will become possible. Then we can join the international dialogue and present our treasures in the appropriate frame, making them accessible to the public, scholars and researchers; thus promoting community growth, stability, civic awareness and tourism, by allowing local and far ranging communities into contact with the rich heritage and cultural life that Serbia has to offer.