

Contemporary Issues – Contemporary Collecting
The City History Museums & Research Network of Europe
Museum of Copenhagen, 14 – 15 September 2011

Summary Report.

Purpose of the meeting

At the first meeting of the City History Museums & Research Network of Europe in Barcelona in 2010, contemporary collecting was identified as one issue that the participants of the network saw as relevant for more thorough discussion at a special meeting. This meeting was organised by the Museum of Copenhagen to take place in mid-September 2011. On the basis of preliminary registrations by members of the network, the Museum of Copenhagen was able to secure financial support for the meeting from the Danish National Heritage Agency to reimburse travel expenses and accommodation for a total of twelve participants in the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was, on the basis of presentations from the participating institutions, to have discussion about the challenges and opportunities of collecting contemporary cultural heritage in a museum setting.

Format of the meeting.

A total of 17 persons from 12 institutions were able to participate in the meeting (see the attached List of Participants). The meeting took place from the morning of Wednesday 14 September until the afternoon of Thursday 15 September, with all sessions being held at the Museum of Copenhagen with the exception of the later afternoon session of Wednesday 14 September which was held at the National Museum as a joint session with the ICOM INTERCOM conference taking place there.

Summary of discussions.

The presentations and discussions during the meeting (see the attached Programme of the meeting) addressed the particular challenges and potential of contemporary collecting on the basis of concrete experiences and reflections in the institutions. One question that was almost immediately raised concerned the understanding of the term 'contemporary'. For some museums, this was taken to equal the period since industrialisation. For other museums, the period covered the decades after World War II, and for some it concerned the 1980s onwards. Acknowledging different definitions

of the term 'contemporary' is obviously crucial when discussing strategies and approaches, but in practice most presentations and following discussions concerned collecting activities directed towards cultural heritage from the past three or four decades.

Several museums related the experience of finding it difficult to identify relevant material in the collections in order to deal with present-day issues like fx cultural diversity and migration. Collection strategies focusing on the formal and dominant aspects of cities combined with a tendency to focus on acquiring objects from earlier periods probably provides some of the answers to why stores appear to be empty when it comes to representing urban life today. And this of course points to the importance of revitalising collecting activities. But at the same time, as it was presented by several museums, museum professionals also need to adopt new perspectives on their collections in order to see how objects collected for very different reasons can in many cases tell important stories about issues that characterise fx the superdiversity of life in big cities today.

When dealing with contemporary culture from a heritage perspective, politics quickly become part of the equation. Through their engagements with issues like drug addiction, war crimes, poverty, migration and political violence, there had been a sense of anxiety in several museums about how their entry into areas of controversy, conflict and trauma immediately present to many people would be responded to. In the light of how positively several of these initiatives had been received by audiences and stakeholders, it becomes clear that some of the most important obstacles to an even stronger museological engagement with present-day issues may actually lie within the museums themselves. In fact, establishing a dialogue with the public around museum activities had proven quite successful in the case of contemporary issues and collecting, pointing to how a very clear sense of identification facilitates the inclusion of broader audiences in museum-based dialogue.

Yet the fact that when you deal with the present, you move very closely to the lives actually being lived by people today, can also present a problem in terms of collecting. Several presentations related the experience that museums were not able to convince people to offer objects that for them were very significant, precisely because of the importance they played for the identity of these persons. In this way, contemporary collecting distinguishes itself clearly from collecting from earlier periods. Older and more distant objects may well be regarded as important and worthy by those in possession of them. But these persons may be quite content to see the objects pass to a

museum collecting rather than remaining with themselves. Parting with objects that inform your identity more directly is probably harder in many cases.

Quite possibly, questions about the importance of certain objects in people's lives accounts for why many of the contemporary collecting activities presented had a strong focus towards photography and the collection of stories/ oral histories. Several projects had the clear intention of focusing on the biographical aspects of objects, with the museological value of the objects being determined to a large degree by the quality of the story accompanying it. Securing the personal, subjective thoughts about an object is of course one of the unique possibilities in contemporary collecting and is pursued by many museums. Attention to these biographical aspects of objects is a real indication of a shift in the collection aims of museums today and offers amazing insights into the diversity of urban life today. Also, paying attention to how people think about concrete objects is a way of dealing with the fact that much of the material culture that surrounds us today is of a mass-produced and much more ephemeral nature than the objects traditionally thought of as relevant for museum collections. The biographical aspects can provide some of the uniqueness and rarity that is probably still sought in the museum experience by both museum professionals and visitors.

Yet during the discussions, several participants argued that physical and aesthetic qualities should also be important criteria for collecting. Perhaps it is more difficult to identify in our own present the objects that can relay a sense of connection with aspects of urban life even when removed from their original context and without primarily relying on narrative.

In addition to questions about what to collect and why, a continuous theme in the discussions centered on how to create the organisational basis for an active collecting programme. Clearly, this work needs to be prioritised in order to happen, and thought should be given to how to create the proper framework. A clear characteristic of the projects presented was that they involved a very high degree of cooperation. In part between museums on a regional, national or international scale, usually with the intention of covering as much ground as possible and at the same time being economical about the resources spent. But more prominently through cooperation with communities or organisations outside the museums. Contemporary collecting needs to happen in a much closer partnership with the people actually possessing the objects relevant for museums. In that way, collecting ties in with aims to strengthen dialogue with the general public about the role and

function of museums, and points to how the museums can create a platform for interaction on a uniquely museological basis.

Still, however, much work needs to be done by museums in order for these activities to succeed. One important point is the formulation of collection policies that can ground collecting in the institution and direct the use of resources. Several museums had very interesting reflections on the need to acknowledge and continue past priorities in collecting while at the same time being open to themes and material types new to the collections. Here, digital material was presented by some museums as a special challenge, both in terms of acquisition, registration and storage. The network may function as a kind of knowledge base on more practical issues as well. There was great interest among the participants in sharing collecting policies.

Plans ahead.

In the concluding discussion of the meeting, the general attitude was that the discussions around contemporary collecting in the network had been very productive and inspiring, and also that the network could profit from continuing the discussions, on a problem-orientated level, at a future meeting. The general meeting in Barcelona in November would not be the right place for this since this meeting will deal with a range of other subjects as well, so an agreement was made to try and arrange another meeting on contemporary collecting during Spring 2012. Wien Museum kindly offered to host the meeting.

Prior to the coming meeting on contemporary collecting, it was agreed that each museum should produce summary budgets indicating the kind of funds and resources allocated to collecting activities in order to have a discussion about differences in the institutional framework that this work happens in.

The Museum of Copenhagen will, with the assistance of Renée Kistemaker, secretary of the network, produce a summary report of the Copenhagen meeting for presentation at the general meeting in Barcelona. Participants will be asked to offer their comments and additions to the summary report.