Museums Bridging Cultures

Bridging Cultures – The ICOM Challenge

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> The idea behind the Bridging Cultures theme began during the building of a physical bridge, the bridge over Øresund between Denmark and Sweden, inaugurated in the year 2000. Although there were already regular ferry crossings, the bridge had an enormous political and symbolic effect when the vision of a new region was realised by connecting the Danish capital, Copenhagen, with the largest city in Southern Sweden, Malmö.

> In 1999 ICOM Denmark formulated the plan to host the ICOM General Conference in Copenhagen, and specifically in the Øresund region, on the theme “Bridging Cultures”. During the 2001 General Conference in Barcelona ICOM Denmark and ICOM Sweden agreed to prepare a joint bid for the 2007 General Conference. One of the objectives in choosing this theme was to challenge the culture and conventions of ICOM General Conferences themselves by orienting the conference process towards Bridging Cultures.

> The fact that we lost the bid did not detract from the significance of the issues. ICOM was created in 1946 in order to foster international communication and understanding, with museums and museum professionals as an important non-political international network, and to protect cultural heritage at a local and global level. Bridging Cultures is thus a core challenge for museums and ICOM, a challenge that is still as relevant today!

> When considering the topics for the Bridging Cultures conference “cultural understanding” was seen as important, in times of conflict, tension, globalisation and multicultural challenges of the social structures of societies and nations. The very nature of museums, offering formal and non-formal education through their collections and knowledge, gives a unique opportunity to address this issue. Museums offer more insight and reflection than most other media, which tend to offer their digested opinions to the public. The museum is often in competition with these other media for the favour of the public. But here it is important for museums to have the media and politicians recognise the museums’ potential and attribute the right support and role to them when addressing and fostering cultural understanding.

> Another aspect of international cooperation was the fight against theft, destruction and deterioration of cultural property. The ICOM network has been invaluable in increasing the number of countries committing themselves to the international UNESCO and UNIDROIT Conventions on stolen or illicitly exported cultural property. The network has recently proved instrumental in improving the situation regarding the conventions in the Nordic countries.

> The Bridging Cultures theme should be used to make politicians, dealers and the public at large understand that although knowledge and admiration of foreign cultures is obviously important, it is also imperative to prevent the destruction of cultural identity that follows the looting and destruction of cultural property in times of peace and war.

> Based on the work done for the 2007 Bridging Cultures bid, ICOM-Denmark and ICOM-Sweden decided to hold a seminar on the theme in September 2004. This seminar took place on the island of Hven between Denmark and Sweden, and included participants from the museums in the Øresund region in order to create a network for future cooperation. This first seminar addressed very concrete topics within the Bridging Cultures theme: the relations with museum visitors and society; the links with the economy; and Danish-Swedish cultural similarities and differences.

> The preparation involved in this local conference, and the conference itself, showed that there is great potential for cooperation in bringing the knowledge of the other countries’ cultures to either side of the Sound. It also showed that cultural and linguistic differences presented true barriers, even in a region where foreigners have difficulty in telling the difference between the two countries and languages. It is clear that the political vision and decision of creating a region by building a bridge have greatly underestimated these cultural differences, and this is an area where museum professionals could or should be capable of giving advice.

> A mainstream of the conference had to do with relations to the economy and other commercial aspects. “Michelin Guiding” of visitors to museums, an idea that ICOM evaluated some years ago, is now being done in Denmark, and the process of evaluation is still continuing. Direct cooperation with companies was also discussed, i.e. museums taking on the task of building company museums, museums setting themselves up as event venues for companies etc. There is still some reluctance regarding this kind of cooperation, one consideration being how to control ethical issues. In our part of the world there continues to be a strong focus on culture as an event. Culture in which visitors, companies and politicians expect “value for money”. The economic potential for museums in building close bridges with the corporate culture seems so far to have been greatly overestimated in political terms. This is therefore a significant issue to us, although it may appear somewhat superfluous in other parts of the world.

> Bridging Cultures is a fundamental mission and an ongoing challenge for museums and ICOM, all over the world. We hope that International Museum Day on 18th May 2005 will provide a special opportunity to raise awareness of this mission.

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