Museums as mirrors of society: a case study of Finnish Museums

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Abstract This article discusses how Finland's museums and their collections are both time- and culture-bound and, as such, reflect society's evolving values as impacted by historical events. Through the lens of Jyväskylä University Museum's history, the theory of 'worker generations' and museum professionalization are discussed.

Keywords museums; society; value; professionalization; worker generations; Finland

The roots of European museums are strongly connected with the research and teaching collections of universities and the curiosity cabinets that enhanced the wealth and status of prominent individuals and families. Museum collections often originated by way of a predominant ideology, and changed as society evolved. Thus museums and their collections, the objects chosen for the collections, and exhibitions, mirror the values of society of its time; they are a cultural reality formed from a historical reality. English museologist Kenneth Hudson (1916-1999) aptly states that: "A stuffed tiger in a museum is a stuffed tiger in a museum, and not a tiger."[1] The tiger in the museum is therefore a human cultural conception of a tiger. These cultural conceptions, or representations, are not limited to the dioramas constructed of samples in a natural history museum, but they can be found in all museums. In addition, the objects and collections that are not accepted into or selected for museum collections reflect the contemporary culture's values and interpretation of history.

Types of collecting

Collection planning strategies vary and can be value- or society-bound. The English museologist Susan Pearce presents three main methods for creating collections: collecting souvenirs containing private or communal memories, collecting objects in a compulsive and almost fetishist manner, and systematic collecting.[2] These strategy types are always subjective, and are dependent on the values and attitudes of the community within which the collector exists.[3] All three collection strategies currently exist: museums can gather material systematically in accordance with a

value-bound research and record keeping plan, or, in extreme cases, collecting can be directed by a fetishist collecting and gathering of objects.

Museum collections have typically been formed from a lengthy process of societal or organizational change. Finnish museologist Solveig Sjöberg-Pietarinen has demonstrated how three “generations” can be distinguished in Finnish museum history: collectors, nurturers, and information brokers. According to Sjöberg-Pietarinen, the first generation that builds a collection will gather the objects, the second generation then organizes the collection, and the third generation ensures that the collection is available to society and has societal relevance. The first generation generally consists of non-professional aficionados, the second generation consists of collection managers who are partially paid professionals (depending upon available financial resources), and the third generation consists entirely of professionals. This development of collection managers in different museums is not simultaneous or absolute, but the evolution of these generations within each museum does follow one another in a relative manner like generations in a family.[4] Parallel to this development, a collection’s focal point evolves from being object-centric at the beginning, to the phenomena-centric, which emphasizes contextual information, and finally to society-centric, taking into account relevant contemporary social and community issues.

A problem may arise from the difference in expertise or between museum staff members and the community; opinions and values may diverge. Philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who originated the idea of viewing history based on a nationalist historical philosophy, demonstrated the existence of two concepts of history. The first concept concerns the actual events that have taken place, and the second concerns the diverse interpretations of the past created by people of each era. Even the interpretations

Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary’s museum committee, founded in 1932. Students collected ethnographic artefacts from their home regions, and organized them typologically in the Teacher Seminary’s museum. The students represent the first “generation” of collectors, according to museologist Solveig Sjöberg-Pietari’s theory. Photo: Jyväskylä University Museum Collections

themselves are divided into two categories, as explained by Peter Seixas:

> *Theorizing historical consciousness has to recognize the complex relationship between the professional practice of history, which claims to advance historical knowledge, and the popular practice of history, where the past is mobilized for a wide variety of purposes including, to name a few, identity projects, policy justifications, reparation claims, public education and profit-making entertainment.[5]*

Museums have primarily operated in accordance with the professional practice of history, by emphasizing the expertise and backdrop of knowledge that comes with education. In order for museums to operate as organizations that take their community and audiences into consideration, museums must understand the popular perception of history within their communities, and make room for that perception within museum operations. This presents a true challenge for the contemporary museum industry.

Tomislav Šola, a Croatian museologist, criticizes the scientific-objective perspective of museums, and the fact that museums rarely connect with people's real and present-day life. In a splendid metaphorical way, Šola demonstrates what society-centric work is all about:

> *Once upon a time, two men went for a trip in a balloon but a sudden storm blew them off course and when it had died down they realized they were completely lost. They were relieved to see a man walking along below and they shouted down to him, 'Hello there! Where are we?' The little figure on the ground shouted back, 'You're in a balloon'. The two above looked at each other and one said 'He must be a museum curator'. 'What makes you think that?' said the other. 'Because the information he gave us is perfectly correct but totally useless!"[6]*

It is therefore possible that the museum, as a society-based institution, lives a separate life from the external world without taking into account the community, its members, or their museum-related needs and current issues when managing collections and exhibitions. In the worst case, a museum can remain a completely external institution, which only generates interest from specialized or elite communities, or from marginalized groups. As demonstrated by Šola's example, the information generated by a museum can be completely factual, but may have little use or a weak point of reference among the members of the community.

Museums and cultural heritage

These unique artefacts from the Jyväskylä University Museum collection are resonators used to identify various frequencies or musical pitches present in music and other complex sounds, and were used to teach physics at the Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary. Former teaching tools are an integral part of Jyväskylä University Museum's collections, which houses nationally unique objects related to the history of Finnish teacher training. Photo: Jyväskylä University Museum Collections

Starting in the 1960s, European "ecomuseums" attempted to broaden museum activities to include cultural heritage and environmental education. The concept of an ecomuseum contains a holistic interpretation of heritage, including the outdoors, the environment, and historical events. The goal is to engage the community in its own cultural heritage, and for the community to experience that heritage as a broad, all-encompassing concept that guides the future actions of society. Each community member is seen to have an obligation to take part in the work of the museum, for example cataloguing the collection or participating in exhibitions. The first ecomuseum was the France's museum of mining, Le Creusot, which opened in 1974. Among the largest ecomuseums is Sweden's Ecomuseum Bergslagen, which opened in 1986 and has locations across seven municipalities. At their best, ecomuseums are strongly communal, which highlights the local identity. Yet museologist Kenneth Hudson criticized ecomuseums in 1992, stating that, "It is safe to say that none of the 28 institutions which are officially recognised as ecomuseums in France today carry out the complete ecomuseum task, as it was originally conceived." Ecomuseums easily became "amusement parks of the past" or they did not differ significantly from

traditional museums. Community and societal responsibility did not come to fruition in ecomuseums as was intended.[7] However, Hudson's presentation, *The Great European Museum*, at the 1993 international museology conference in Copenhagen, introduced a new comprehensive concept of environmental education: The Great Museum. He characterized it in the following way by using Europe as an example:

> *Europe is one large museum, where every building, every field and every river and railway contains clues to the past and present of the country concerned, provided the onlooker has the information to understand what he is looking at. Scattered across the Great Museum are the institutions, which we call museums. Their main function is to help people to understand the Great Museum. They justify themselves by looking outwards, not inwards."[8]*

The ideological background of European museums: case study, Finland

From the medieval era until the Russian-Swedish War (1808-09), Finland had been a part of Sweden. As part of the 1809 peace treaty, Sweden ceded Finland to Russia. Finland became an autonomous state, a Grand Duchy, overseen by the Russian Czar who served as Grand Duke. Finland retained Swedish laws and its own Senate, but had no independent foreign policy or military. In 1917, Finland became an independent republic. Since independence, Finnish museums have been closely connected to its national mission. Due to growing European nationalism, this historical period can be considered the origin of modern museums across Europe, when museums bore the responsibility of upholding national identity. The preservation of a national existence became important across different sectors of society. For the small country of Finland with a new political status, museums were one way to reinforce the country's own identity and present its culture. Objects and works of art brought into Finnish museum collections at that time depended upon the collectors' interests, their views on the definition of Finnishness, and how Finnishness should be presented to others.

At the end of Finland's era of autonomy, more than 50 museums existed in Finland, many of which were cultural-historical organizations. The collections had mainly been gathered by local enthusiasts who highlighted local traditions with extravagant crafts and buildings. A strong nationalist and regionalist enthusiasm lay in the background of their work. In the museums, the objects were arranged by subject matter, and were typically typologically organized.

After Finland's independence in 1917, museum collecting took on different tones. The difficult civil war between the Whites and Reds in Finland in 1918 brought out the ideologies of the victors, which highlighted the most extreme nationalist thinking. The so-called Greater-Finland ideology and the strong politically-colored Karelianism emphasized the victors' congruence with all Finnish peoples, which was also evident in the operation of museums. The War Museum (Fin: Sotamuseo) was founded in 1929 in the capital Helsinki. Originally, The War Museums displayed the objects and events of the victors from the 1918 Finnish Freedom War.

The Second World War paralyzed the operations of European museums, which only sprung back into action towards the end of the rebuilding era at the end of the 1950s. Along with national identity, museums grew out of other ideologies. In Finland, a Church Museum (Fin: Ortodoksinen kirkkomuseo Riisa) was established under the Finnish Orthodox Church in 1957 to oversee the antiquity collection established at the Valamo Monastery in 1911.[9] After the World War II, the monastery, located in Karelia, was transferred to Soviet ownership. A strong need for this type of museum came from Karelia's migrant orthodox population.

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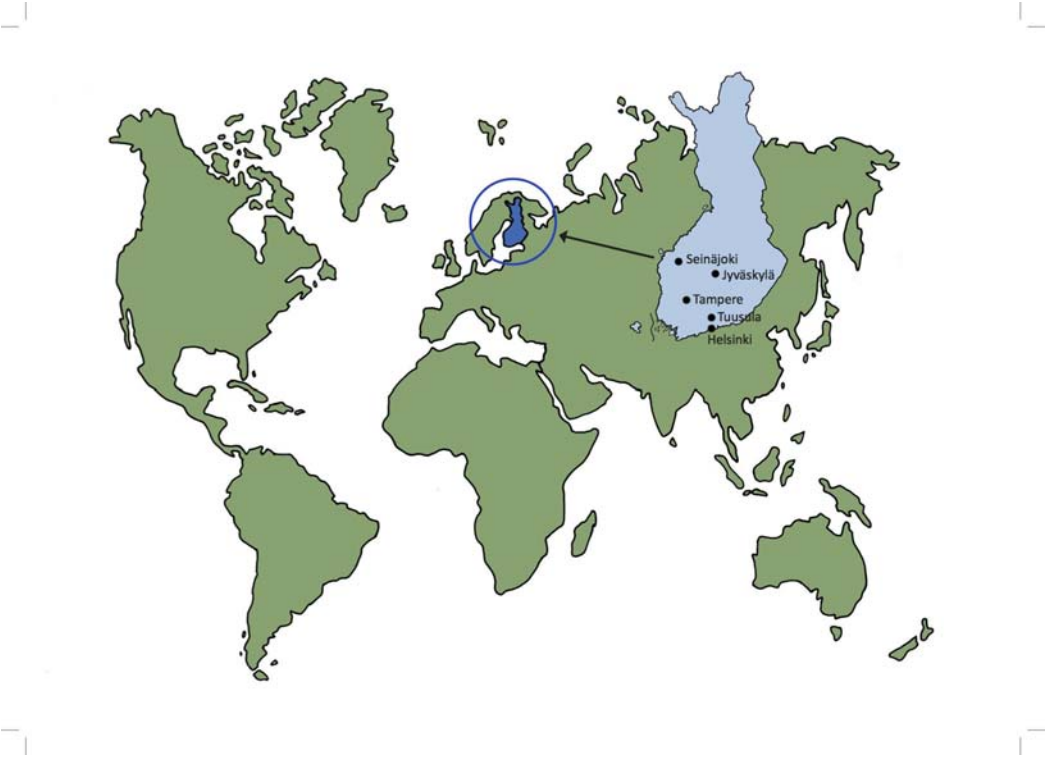
The new political era also made the public display of communism possible. The Tampere section of the Finnish-Soviet Society established a Lenin museum (Fin:

Lenin-museo) in February 1945. The museum opened in January 1946 in the same building where V. I. Lenin (1870 – 1924) and Joseph Stalin (1878 – 1953) met for the first time in 1905. Tampere is old industrial town in the middle of Finland, and the influence of labor activity has been very strong since the mid-1800s. Because of this, the Labour Museum Werstas (Fin: Työväenmuseo Werstas), a new ideological museum, opened there in 1993. In 1996, the Finnish Ministry of Education officially renamed the museum the Central Labour Museum, appointing it the national museum of social history and working life.



The map identifies Finland in Northern Europe, and the locations mentioned in the article. Figure: Päivi Lamberg, Jyväskylä University Museum

The Moscow Peace treaty, which ended the war between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1944, banned all anti-Soviet “fascist” organizations significant to the national defense, including voluntary organizations like the White Guard and the women’s Lotta Svärd organization. In conjunction with the Soviet Glasnost and later the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the White Guard and the Lotta Svärd Museum opened in Seinäjoki (Fin: Seinäjoen suojeluskunta- ja Lotta Svärd –museo) in 1990, and the Lotta Museum in Tuusula (Fin: Lotta-museo) in 1996.

Consisnting of several museums and diverse collections, the Museum centre Vapriikki opened in 1996 in old industrial buildings on the banks of the Tammerkoski channel in Tampere. Two years later, 90 years after the cruel civil war battle at Tampere, firsthand memories of the war had faded away over the generations, and the museums could open a permanent exhibition, *Tampere 1918*.

The activism of indigenous peoples, which began after the Second World War, was reflected in Finland via the outdoor museum about the life of the Sámi People in Lapland's Inari that opened in 1963. In 1998, the Sámi Museum Siida opened alongside it, which received the status of a national special museum the following year.

Today, 330 professionally run museums exist in Finland, and more than 1,000 local or regional museums are run by volunteers. Most of these organizations still function as local heritage and identity museums.

The three generations of the Jyväskylä University Museum

The three generations depicted by Solveig Sjöberg-Pietarinen are evident in the development of the Jyväskylä University Museum. The museum's roots lie in the teaching collection of the first Finnish-speaking Teacher Seminary. The Seminary's founding in 1863 aligned with the development of education predominant in 19th century Europe. Along with industrialization, serious attention was paid to the education of broad levels of society, to the bad circumstances for children, and children's role in the industrial workforce. In Finland, which had been detached from the Swedish rule since the early 19th century, a general education in Finnish for all people because a nationwide objective. Locating the Seminary in a small town in central Finland, outside of the large cities, is evidence of the country's attempt to strive to raise the education levels of the entire population.

Originally, the purpose of the historical, geographical, and natural history teaching collections gathered at the Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary was to function as observational instruments for certain subjects. The Teacher Seminary and its instructors, who were mainly trained in Germany and Switzerland, actively

participated in gathering the observational collection. The seminary focused particularly on Pestalozzian pedagogy, which was based on the Czech educational philosopher Johan Amos Comenius' (1592-1670) and the Swiss-French Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-78) views on knowledge being based on observations made by the learner. This perceptional pedagogy reached its peak in the pedagogical views of Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852), the father of European kindergarten. Finnish teacher training was developed in this tradition, and through it perceptional pedagogy and its versatile teaching collections gained a strong foothold. The teaching collection of the Teacher Seminary demonstrated nationalist tendencies very early on, when, among other things, dolls dressed in traditional costumes from different Finnish regions were exhibited.

At the start of the 20th century, perceptional pedagogy and collection-building received a push when nationalism-inspired students, led by their teacher, academic and architect Yrjö Blomstedt (1871-1912), established their own ethnography museum.

The Helsinki University Student Associations' Museum (est. 1876), whose objects had been collected by members of different student associations from their home provinces, served as a model. The Student Associations' Museum became the core of the National Museum of Finland (Fin: Suomen kansallismuseo), established in the 1890s, which was called the State Historical Museum after independence in 1917. The Nordic Museum (Swe: Nordiska Museet) served as inspiration for the Student Associations' Museum. It was established in Stockholm in 1872 by Artur Hazelius (1833–1901) who turned the focus of museums from the exoticism, valuables, and eccentricities from elsewhere to a spirit of nationalism, focusing on the Swedish people and country.

The contemporary political climate also affected the establishment of the Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary Museum. Russia had begun to tighten its hold on the autonomous Finland. This strained the political atmosphere, and was evident in the rise of a variety nationalist movements among the Finnish population. The museum's objective, established in conjunction with the Seminary, was to collect crafts from the students' home provinces, to display them typologically, and to use them as observation instruments in the teaching of craft, art, and geography. Blomstedt's

wanted to specifically use the items in the collection as models through which a Finnish style was sought for furniture, décor and even buildings. Setting an example for his students, Blomstedt unequivocally used the models and decorations of the ethnographic objects when designing buildings and furniture. Blomstedt's and the students' museum was not just a collection of physical objects, it also contained intangible cultural heritage. Traditional Karelian singing events were organized for students and the local town residents, where people from the border region between Finland and Russia performed traditional folk poetry in a strong spirit of romantic nationalism.

The museum was not just a collection of physical objects, it also contained intangible cultural heritage.

Students served as the caretakers of the collection, and inventoried the objects and created a catalogue in which the objects were named and listed without any broader contextual information. The collection existed to create a strong emotional connection to the objects regarded as folklore; the cultural heritage of mothers and fathers. Finland's independence and the civil war that followed strengthened the significance of the elementary school institution in the construction of the Finnish identity. The Seminary's museum collection was at the front line of this task. A strong enthusiasm for regional research, which acted as a catalyst for the establishment of outdoor and regional museums beginning in the 1920s, was also evident in the operations of the Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary Museum. Students continued to look after the collection and to organize soirees and concerts displaying the culture of different provinces. All total, the students collected approximately 2,100 objects from the period of Finnish autonomy. Although the museum was a hobby for students, the objects they collected presented a diverse view of Finnish folklore and handicraft. However, without detailed contextual information, the collection has had only a minor significance for research. The importance of museum activities later contributed to the fact that many teachers became active in local museum work after graduation, and worked enthusiastically in their own home villages.

In 1934, the Jyväskylä Teacher Seminary became the Jyväskylä College of Education. When the operations of the College were gradually broadened after the Second World War, the School established a Faculty of Philosophy, with a professorship in history. Responsibility for the Seminary's museum collection and its reorganization, which had become the College's museum, fell to the history professor. The first appointee to the professorship deposited the ethnological collection with the Provincial Museum of Central Finland (est. 1932), and boldly directed the College's museum operations towards recording the history of the educational institution. Collections regarding the history of teacher training became central, and a new, modern permanent display was constructed. The Museum also received new facilities and, on an organizational level, it was made one of the institutions of the College. History and ethnology students were hired to organize and catalogue the collections. This second generation of the museum began to organize the collections partially at a professional level.

Although the main part of the ethnological collection was given to the Provincial Museum of Central Finland, the Seminary's teaching collection and its old teaching instruments were left in the care of the College, beginning the College museum's transition to a museum documenting the school's history. Overall, museum work at that time was connected to social need. The Second World War had strengthened people's attachment to their home regions, and museums were perceived as excellent tools in helping to continue this. Museums were established in Finland at a rapid rate during the period following the Second World War. Museums displayed items that strengthened the identity of different regions, telling stories of past generations. It was equally as important to tell the story of the country's first elementary school teacher training. By the mid-1960s, the College's museum had achieved the foundations of modern-day museum operations: it had a permanent display, separate storage facilities for collections, an image archive, and a workspace. By the end of the 1960s, the collections had been inventoried and catalogued. The only thing missing from the Jyväskylä University Museum was a permanent staff of museum professionals.

When the Jyväskylä College of Education finally received university status in 1966, the museum took its first steps as a university museum. The University hired its first museum professionals in the late 1980s. By that time, museum operations had

improved significantly: funding had increased, and the museum had gained new facilities. Additionally, the museum was divided into two parts: a cultural history section and a natural history section. The University appointed its first two permanent curators in 1989, one for each section. These positions revolutionized the museum, immediately moving the museum into its third stage of development, professionalism. Both museum sections kept regular opening hours, and they greatly strengthening the University's cultural and natural heritage collections. Today, the museum has ten permanent positions.

Jyväskylä teacher training seminary was built in the early 1880's outside of the city center on a wooded hill near water, according to Central European models. Observing and enjoying nature was integrated into seminary education. The photo depicts the older Seminary buildings in the middle of a forest, and the water tower, which now holds the Natural History Museum, on the hill. The Alvar Aalto-designed campus was built in the 1950s, and surrounds athletic fields. Photo: taken 1958, Jyväskylä University Museum Collections

Over the last three decades, the University's museum has become a more community-oriented organization. The museum has organized exhibitions regarding the University's history, and has published works on collections of objects and art, on the University's oral cultural history such as anecdotes, and on student life. In 2000, the natural history department moved to new operating facilities in the nearby water tower Vesilinna (Eng: Water Castle). The museum's cultural history department opened its new permanent exhibition center, which presents the history of Jyväskylä University, in November 2013.

As the museum has opened its collections more widely to the public, visitor services has diversified its offerings, and new full time employees have been hired to assist in running the organization. A museum shop now operates in both parts of the museum. The museum's objectives are now focused on operating in a transparent manner, and on serving the University community. The opening of national borders following World War II and the rapid development of information technology has led to an increasingly pluralistic society in which people have increasing freedom of

choice. Awareness of one's own cultural and natural heritage – and of the wider world – has increased in Finland. This has challenged museums and other cultural institutions to participate more in society, which is evident in the broadening of cultural heritage work, among other things.

In his analysis of the cultural work at Uppsala University (Sweden), Lars Burman remarked that cultural heritage is now a strategic resource for a university, which strengthens its own national and international role. Culture, a cultural milieu, valuable monuments, and cultural heritage in general are foundational pillars in society, and it helps to form an internationally active university with a long and storied history. Although fostering a cultural heritage is costly, it produces direct economic value, in the form of goodwill, for the university, and helps to build the university's brand. Most of all it increases confidence both within the university and in the community surrounding it.[10] However, things are not always so charmed, and the relationship between a university and its museum can be quite complex: the university may try to avoid its responsibility to preserve university-based artefacts. Scarce resources transform the university museum's activities into a kind of cultural fire brigade, a term applied when cultural or natural heritage is threatened.

The development of the Jyväskylä University Museum from a teaching collection to an identity museum, and now to a scientific museum, has been a long one. During its last two stages of development, the museum has adhered to the principles of Kenneth Hudson's Great Museum. Interaction between the museum and the university has developed in many ways. The museum and its collections are involved in publication and exhibition projects about the university and its schools, the museum takes part in the university's alumni and cultural activities, and it exhibits the university's academic cultural heritage and the stories of 'making science' to visitors, new students, and employees. The museum also supports the university's communications.

Over the last few years, the museum has helped foster the university's cultural and natural heritage by participating in the restoration and maintenance projects of the university's buildings and grounds.[11] A particular strength of the museum is the fact that it acts as a teaching museum of museology, where students of the profession

can get hands-on experience of museum work and can participate in the museum's various projects. Present-day documentation projects are particularly popular, in which students document the phenomena of the university for the museum's collections by photographing and interviewing diverse participants. In the practical work component of the museum pedagogy degree, students have the opportunity to participate in presenting the cultural heritage of the campuses, and later to join the network of campus guides. The varied surroundings of Jyväskylä University, with its architectural gems and interesting nature areas, offer numerous opportunities, making it possible to conduct interesting inventories and documentation. In 2013, the museum's collections were placed to the former army caves outside the city of Jyväskylä.

New challenges

The University Act reformed the Finnish universities 2010, improving the quality of teaching and research, and increased competitiveness. In conjunction with the new law, state-owned university campuses, including buildings, parks and gardens, were handed over to a real estate company, which is now responsible for overseeing the premises for the new university organization.

Educational activities for young students are central to Jyväskylä University Museum's teaching mission. Here, students explore the Natural History Museum's butterfly collections. Photo: Pirjo Vuorinen, Jyväskylä University Museum Collections

The 2010 university reform brought about a major change in academic heritage management: universities no longer have an active role in managing their campuses. The new real estate company has the monopoly in overseeing university property, and universities are forced to rent buildings at the market price, or more commonly, according to the earnings needs of the monopoly. Finland has produced a situation in which universities can no longer afford to rent all of their "own" buildings because of the high rents. More importantly, the protection of the built heritage does not belong to any one entity beyond the real estate company interested in profits. This situation is a threat to both the university heritage and to the identity of the university. It also represents a significant challenge for the university museum and its objectives to

benefit of the university's heritage. The reform of Finnish universities can be seen part of the worldwide change in the public sector.

The most recent challenge to the University museum system is the new Open Science Centre. Established in early 2017, the University Library merged with the University Science Museum, forming the Open Science Center in order to make research data and museum collections accessible to the broader academic community. At this time, it is not possible to the success of this venture. The museum sector in Finland continues to evolve as organizations mature and the law changes.

Notes

[1] Kenneth Hudson, *Museums for the 1980s*, (Paris 1977), 7.

[2] Susan Pearce, *Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*, (Leicester University Press 1992), 69-88.

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[5] Peter Seixas, *Introduction*, edit. Peter Seixas, *Theorizing historical consciousness*, (University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2006), 10.

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