

**Do It Yourself (DIY) Museums.  
Study on Small Museums in Estonia and the People Behind Them**

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**Abstract**

*This paper discusses alternative ways of museum-making. In the focus of this paper are small independent museums of Estonia run by self-learned museum workers. The first part of the paper tries to understand the reasons why there are so many museums with grassroots initiative in Estonia and what is the motivation of the people running them. The following subsection concentrates on the biggest strength of small museums – good contacts with the topic of the museums, the visitors and the community. In the conclusion it is discussed if amateur museums conflict with ‘professional’ museums in some ways. The paper is based on nineteen interviews with people from small museums in Harju County, Estonia.*

**Keywords:** personal utopias, grassroots initiatives, community, non-professionals

During the last decades, museums have been working hard to meet the needs of contemporary society. Since Peter Vergo’s proposal to re-examine the role of museums in society in 1989 (Vergo, 1989: 3), many new ideas and practices have been developed under the concept of New Museology. Museum professionals struggle hard to bring new stakeholders to the museum and museologists concentrate on questions of how to make museums less elitist, more audience centered and more inclusive institutions (e.g. Simon, 2010, Sandell, 2012). While many of the existing museums are making efforts to include a wider audience with a more active role, the ideas of New Museology have also been materialised by the emerging new types of museums – e.g. ecomuseums, neighbourhood museums and community museums (Heijnen, 2010: 14).

To complete the picture of the contemporary museum world, there is one more tendency that must be mentioned – the large number of small independent museums run by amateurs. Although in some countries they might even outnumber the professional museums, their existence is often forgotten by museum professionals. This paper seeks to help filling the gap. The focus of this article is small independent museums in Estonia; however the broader aim is to discuss alternative ways of museum-making.

Many authors have concentrated on the questions of broadening the idea of what a museum and its functions could be. In the same article where James Clifford proposed that museums could function as ‘contact zones’ he also argued for ‘an expansion of the range of things that can happen in museums and museum-like settings’ (Clifford, 1999: 452). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett compares museums with utopias and sees them both as an art practice,

thus ‘the museum is not simply a place for representing utopia, but rather a site for practicing it as a way of imagining’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004: 3). The examples given above are just a few from a wide range of writings that describe museums as something more than just an institution and its objectives wider than ‘collecting, preserving and exhibiting’. The only author who has written extensively about amateur museums and introduced alternative ways of museum-making is German museologist Angela Jannelli. She approaches amateur museums with Levi Strauss’ concept of ‘the savage mind’ and sees amateur museums as forms of cultural manifestation (Jannelli, 2012).<sup>i</sup>

This article tries to understand the motives of people behind amateur museums, their peculiar ways of museum-making and finally asks in which areas these museums might conflict with professional museums. This paper is based on nineteen interviews carried out in 2011-2012 with people from small museums in Harju county.<sup>ii</sup> The article can be considered as a reflection of different perspectives gained from fieldtrips to small museums and interviews carried out.

### **Definition**

Museums included in the research had to meet three criteria. Firstly, they had to define themselves as museums. As one of the aims of this paper is to broaden the boundaries of understanding what a museum is, any traditional definition of a museum could not be used. The only solution was to let the institutions decide whether they define themselves as a museum or not. Secondly, there are no more than three people involved – the less people involved the more clearly points of view of single persons are drawn out. Thirdly, the museum should not be run as a business project. On the contrary, some of the informants said they had to pay extra to keep a museum running.<sup>iii</sup>

‘On every payday we have to pay a sum to keep the museum running. Everyone has it’s expenses – one is paying for the insurance, another for the electricity, a third for other direct costs.’ (Informant 1. FM – fieldwork materials 2011)

‘If my husband wouldn’t work in Finland I couldn’t afford working in a museum.’ (Informant 2. FM – fieldwork materials 2011)

## **Historical Background**

In Estonia there are a total of 245 museums (Estonian Ministry of Culture, 2011). If we exclude central museums and larger municipal museums there are over 200 of them still remaining. It is a remarkable number in comparison to the population of Estonia which is 1.3 million. There are historical reasons behind that kind of ‘museummania’. Many of today’s small museums were founded in the 1980s. It was a time when the Soviet Union began to collapse and for the first time in 50 years people had the possibility to speak publicly about their past and heritage and interpret it freely. All over the country, different kinds of village societies, heritage organisations and museums were formed.

The second wave of small museums and other local institutions began to emerge in 2000. It can be seen as a sign of the developing citizen society. Another reason is the possibility to apply for different European Union structural funds targeted for rural areas. It has given new life to many old museum buildings and has created the opportunity to get something practical done – e.g. a new roof or insulation.

The legal situation for private museums is favourable in Estonia. There are no limitations if one wants to found a museum. One simply has to inform the Ministry of Culture about the name, topic and location of the museum and once a year provide statistical data. All other paragraphs of the law – e.g. collection management regulations – are optional for private museums (Estonian Museum Law, 1996).

## **Museum as Self-Realisation**

Although the attitude towards small and private museums is generally positive in Estonia and there are possibilities to apply for partial external funding, the question still remains why so many people are ready to invest their spare time and money into their (personal) museums. During the interviews, many interviewees were not able to give concrete reasons for what motivated them to found a museum.

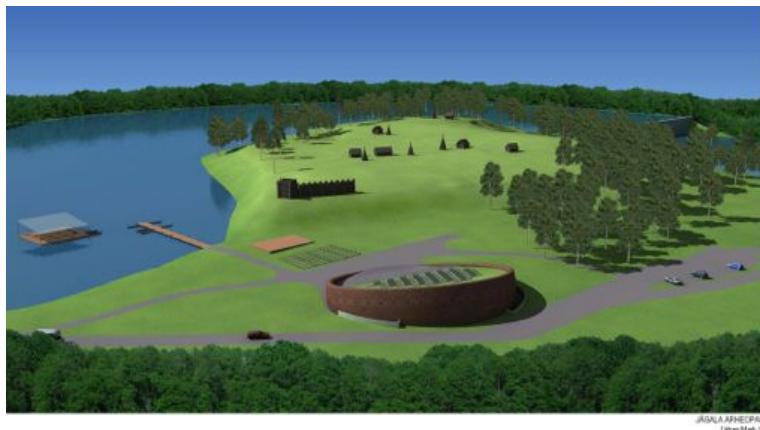
The most common answers were related to people’s interest in history – ‘I have always loved history and old stuff’; ‘I have been in “that” for my whole life’ or ‘My school was situated in an old manor house, that’s where it all began’ (Informants 3, 2, 4. FM 2011, 2012). Another reason brought out by the informants was a wish to contribute to local village life. People in charge of museums in smaller places are usually active in other aspects of community life as well. One of the village activists explains: ‘At first there were common

activities with people from my home village and a museum was a natural development' (Informant 5. FM 2012). To have a museum is also a matter of pride. A man in his thirties says that he likes that he can go to the pub and prides himself on having a museum. At the same time he admits that he is doing it mainly for fun. 'What is a museum nowadays? There is a show and a little bit of science behind it. According to that we are not a museum at all. We are doing what we like and what is fun for us.' (Informant 6. FM 2011)

The founding of a museum can be connected to a sense of mission – especially in the case of thematic museums, e.g. a son of a smith has founded a museum dedicated to all Estonian smiths – he believes that smiths are the backbone of Estonia (Informant 7. FM 2012). Also, the founder of *Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence* sees the museum as a duty that has been put on him:

'It was on 20th October in 1988, about 5:00 am. Was it God himself or some other unknown powers... but they put a duty on me to found a museum here. I told my wife - let's go and find the place. [summer cottage of the brother of the former President of Estonia – author] I thought if it is meant to be like that then let it be. I have put all my energy in it.' (Informant 8. *Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence* 2012)

A young Estonian businessman's case is an interesting one. In 2005 he expressed his interest towards heritage by financing archaeological excavations at a hill-fort near his summer cottage. Currently, he is studying archaeology at the university, he has put up some information panels at the hill-fort about the results of the excavations and since autumn 2011 he is working as a head (and at the same time the only employee) in a local museum. In the future he hopes to expand the museum over the whole area. To the hill-fort he wants to build a visitors centre that resembles the ceramic pot found during the excavations. His motivation for doing all this is that he is concerned that science that derives from universities does not reach the 'common people' – some very specific archaeology articles may only interest four or five colleagues. With his museum he wants to promote the archaeological heritage of the area more widely (Informant 9. FM 2012).



**Figure 1.** Vision of a future archeopark at Jägala hill-fort. Drawing: Urban Mark OÜ

Although none of the interviewees expressed it directly, all the reasons named above can be interpreted as ways of self-realisation. Museum-making as self-realisation is an interesting addition to the long list of museum functions.

### **Personal Contacts**

Although all DIY museums and their methods of museum-making are different, the common characteristic is the ‘personal contact’. In the context of this article the notion ‘personal contact’ can have three meanings – 1) personal contact with the theme of the museum; 2) the personal approach to the visitors and 3) good contact with the local community. Taken together, all three are abilities that every museum that is working towards wider participation and inclusion would be content with.

Personal relation to the topic of the museum can lead to the situation where the borders between the public space and the private space are quite fuzzy, e.g. *Museum of Estonian War of Independence* is dedicated to the war history of Estonia, but, in the permanent exhibition one can also find two canisters that were used by the grandfather of the museum owner for smuggling vodka to Finland during the Dry Law in the 1930s. The exhibition has expanded all over the owner’s courtyard. On the bridge that leads to the museum (and home of the museum owners family) two massive towers have been erected. According to the owner these are symbols of ancient Estonian forts. During training, the Estonian Defence League is housed there (Informant 8. FM 2011). It is a good example of how a visit to a museum can also be a visit to the museum owners personal worldview.



**Figure 2.** Part of the museum owners family history of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Estonian Wars Of Independence. Photo: Liisi Taimre 2011



**Figure 3.** Elements of the museum have expanded into the landscape. 'Defence-towers' built by the owner of the Museum of Estonian Wars of Independence. Photo: Liisi Taimre 2011

The presentation of one's personal worldview is a good starting point for making contact with a visitor. In DIY museums the head of the museum, curator, collection manager, guide and warden is often the same person. As real enthusiasts, they love explaining how their

exhibitions are compiled, how their museum functions and telling additional stories about the exhibition. It dissuades the visitor from just walking through the exhibition and forces him/her to relate to the exhibition at least in some way. People in DIY museums fully appreciate the importance of communicating with visitors. ‘You have to talk to people, especially to foreigners! When he/she goes to a museum somewhere else, he/she just buys the ticket and that’s it. We deal with every person as much as we can.’ (Informant 2. FM 2011)

They are fully aware that what they are saying is only their opinion and they are not claiming it as an absolute truth. ‘You just talk how you think and see the things. It may not be the opinion of all Estonians. But you just talk how in your family it has been spoken about.’ (Informant 2. FM 2011). One person even admitted that according to old storytelling traditions some things were made up – it helped visitors to remember the information better (Informant 5. FM 2012).

As museum workers in smaller places are well known persons in the community, the collection work is often skilfully used to strengthen the ties between the museum and the community. During the housing and population census in 2012 many museum workers took a second job as an enumerator. Quite often the official enumeration process ended up with the donation of some objects to the museum (Informant 4. FM 2012). While large museums can not afford to accept all items they are offered, small museums often can not afford to reject any item. ‘One has to be clever. If you accept his broken Wellington boots today then tomorrow he might bring something valuable.’ (Informant 3. FM 2011) Although such attitudes could overwhelm museum storage rooms, it definitely helps to maintain good contact with the community.

### **Possible Points of Conflict**

Despite DIY museums not being registered in any institutional form, it is not free from the museum as an institution. Only by publicly defining themselves as a museum are they becoming part of the ‘symbolic capital associated with the museum’ (Buntix, Karp, 2006: 207). Thus, to some extent DIY museums may conflict with ‘professional’ museums.

The biggest problems of DIY museums are connected with their sustainability – museums are usually seen as permanent institutions where heritage is kept in trust. Unfortunately, it is sometimes hard to predict how long the life-span of a small independent museum will be. A very important part of exhibitions in DIY museums are the stories told by

museum workers, but the stories are not documented anywhere. Similarly, the information about the collections indicates that the only person who has the whole information about the objects is the founder of the museum. Furthermore, DIY museums often do not have the time or the money, or lack motivation to set up and maintain a museum database.

The best scenario would be that the museum would be inherited by the next generation and new people will take over, making it alive with their stories. It would be a very good start for a community museum with a grassroots initiative. The more probable scenario is that the museum dies together with the person or persons running it. As shown above, in DIY museums often the person running the museum is as important as the permanent exhibition or the collections. If there is no one who could bind the environment and objects in it into one fascinating story then there is no museum.

People are used to seeing museums as permanent institutions where their heritage is kept safe. In the previous subsection we saw how a museum accepted broken Wellington boots as a positive example of putting the member of community and his/her understanding of valuable heritage first. However, is it right for a museum to accept an item without being certain if it can be preserved for future generations? Or, rather, is it right and natural in some cases to allow museums to be mortal and thus cease to exist?

## **Conclusion**

During the last decades, there has been a lot of talk about the democratisation of the museum world. Many museums and museologists have put a lot of effort in to including wider audiences in the museum. Attention has been put into broadening the museum world itself e.g. new types of museums (ecomuseums, community museums) have come into existence and new types of activities are taking place in museums.

This paper focused on small independent museums that have, so far, not received much attention. This paper considered amateur museums which defined themselves as museums, whose staff consisted of a maximum of three people and were not commercial business projects. In the context of this paper they were termed as ‘DIY museums’.

The interviews carried out with museum amateurs from small museums in Harju county (Estonia) revealed that a key motivation for them was self-realisation. The interviewees admitted that they were doing it mainly for fun, but, also many felt a kind of obligation – to commemorate or promote the topic that is for some reason important to them.



Such a personal attitude to the theme of their museums leads to personal contact with the visitor and the local community, which can be seen as the biggest strength of DIY museums. The main area where DIY museums are most likely to conflict with the ‘professional’ museum world is sustainability – museums are generally seen to be permanent institutions but occasionally a DIY museum dies with the person who founded it.

What is the future of DIY museums? Through the desire for self-realisation (probably without realising) – people in DIY museums are actually following modern tendencies of democratisation in the museum world. If, in many museums, the audience is taken and accepted as an equal partner to museum professionals, then, perhaps one day the museums which are run by non-professionals will also be viewed and accepted as equal colleagues.

### Notes

- i. The author of this paper acquired the book in the final phase of writing the article, hence the reason why the ideas of Angela Jannelli have not been reflected in the main body of the article.
- ii. As some of the interviewees asked for privacy, in most cases references to concrete persons and museums have been avoided. All the informants were marked by numbers and the year interview was carried out has been noted.
- iii. The difference between private museums and small municipal museums has not been made in this paper.

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