

# The Challenges of Re-Packaging a Heritage

– Re-imagining Nordic culture in North America

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## Introduction

In the last decade, many museums that were established in the 20th century by immigrants from the Nordic countries have become increasingly concerned with broadening their audiences and more actively engaging their visitors. Efforts to do this have varied from offering cocktail hours, culinary conferences, and sauna sessions, to striving to appeal to people who may not identify as Nordic or do not think of museums as places they would normally visit. In part, these efforts stem from the growing expectations museums face of demonstrating the manner in which they serve a public benefit and support social values at play in society at large, but they also stem from the demands museums face of providing measurable results of annual growth to their financial stakeholders. But how does, and can, this work when it is a very particular *heritage* (Nordic heritage) that is under a museum's auspices?

This paper investigates the layers of significance attached to the word "heritage" as it is framed by staff and leadership at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, in the wake of the museum's efforts to leave their 1907 school house and move into a new purpose built facility in 2018 and expand its constituency. What role is attributed to the word heritage when the museum aims to engage new cosmopolitan communities in a global economy? How do notions of contemporary Nordic culture that are at play in the global ecumene challenge and create new interpretations of Nordic Heritage?

## Re-conceptualizing Heritage

The manner in which the past is legitimized and reframed in the present has been discussed both within the museum sector and the academy for decades.

Cultural heritage has often been used to legitimate and support different forms of collective identity and allegiances linked to nations, places, sites, artifacts, rituals and traditions from the past. In

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Figure 1: Illustration. Mithun Architects, Seattle.



Figure 2: Photo, Tom O'Dell.

the early 20th century the focus was mainly on material culture and “tangible heritage”. As the International Charter of Venice emphasized, heritage was essentially constituted by material objects that were “Imbued with a *message from the past*. Indeed, it was not until 1972 that Unesco expanded the concept of heritage to include natural heritage, and 1994 that it included “intangible heritage”, such as oral tradition, festive events, performances, skills to produce traditional crafts, to mention a few.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, aspirations to become part of the Unesco “heritage lists” of tangible, natural, and intangible heritage has become a field of competition for many nation states, the Nordic included, striving to make themselves visible globally.

Among critics of Unesco’s creation of separate lists for tangible, natural, and intangible heritage are scholars trained in ethnology and folklore, who tend to see these three aspects as intimately interconnected. Folklorist and museum scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, has argued that heritage “is made, not found”.<sup>2</sup> Heritage making is an ongoing process. When accepting that the past is continually re-created in the present, focus shifts to heritage as “metacultural production”<sup>3</sup>, the authority involved in the inclusion and exclusion processes that follow such selections.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, in essence, that Unesco’s manner of defining heritage takes on a cookbook mentality, which lists ingredients that are deemed necessary to the making of heritage - a recipe based on Western hegemonic notions, needs, and bureaucratic principles. When selecting the ingredients from past in the present, this process calls for research into the role of the chefs. Who participates in the cooking and to whom is the meal supposed to be served?

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of heritage as something created in the present builds on such ideas as Eric Hobsbawm’s on the “invention of tradition” as well as those found in David Lowenthal’s *Possessed by the Past*.<sup>4</sup> Lowenthal argues:

History explores and explains pasts grown more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes. Critics who confuse the two enterprises condemn heritage as a worthless sham. . . . But heritage, no less than history, is essential to knowing and acting. Its many faults are inseparable for heritage’s essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity, indeed history itself” (1996:xi).

Heritage is in short, not only linked to selected events, traditions, and materialities of the past, but it has, as Lowenthal argues, always been an important vehicle through which the past has been mobilized in the present in the name of specific cultural identities and communities. In the process, heritage becomes charged with symbolic value

<sup>1</sup> Vecco, Marilena (2010). A definition of Cultural Heritage: From the Tangible to Intangible. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 11. Elsevier. P. 322.

Kapchan, Deborah A. (red.). *Cultural heritage in transit: intangible rights as human rights*. First edition. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination culture: tourism, museums, and heritage*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, “Theorizing Heritage”, *Ethnomusicology*, 39.3, 1995, pp. 367-380; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production”, *Museum International*, 56.1, 2004, pp. 52-65.

<sup>4</sup> Lowenthal, David. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Lowenthal, David. *Possessed by the past: the heritage crusade and the spoils of history*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

and meaning for collectives and specific groups.<sup>5</sup> This is at least how heritage has been seen in the past. But what happens when “specific groups” are not enough to afford a cultural institution’s economic sustainability in the finicky and shifting market of the cultural economy?

### *Nordic Heritage*

The Nordic Heritage Museum, with its current lease expiring in December 2017, faces such challenges as it is in the process of moving to a purpose designed facility. At present, the Nordic Heritage Museum is located in a 1907 schoolhouse in Ballard, a sleepy residential neighborhood in Seattle. The museum was founded in 1980 by Nordic immigrants who sought a platform to share among themselves and with others their cultural heritage and emigrant experience. Over the years the museum has grown from being volunteer operated to becoming increasingly professionalized.

Local supporters, museum founders, volunteers, and contributors from outside the Pacific Northwest have donated the artifacts accessioned into the collection and exhibited in the museum. The first floor of the three story museum holds a core exhibition (the Dream of America) featuring many of the possessions the immigrants brought with them to the United States. The core exhibition continues on the second floor, featuring the fishing and logging industry, which the immigrants became part of in the Pacific Northwest and an extensive folk art gallery. This floor also hosts three galleries for temporary exhibitions. The entire third floor has been made available to émigrés of the five Nordic countries to organize and present their perspective of cultural heritage, in consultation and collaboration with the museum’s curatorial department. The content, origins, and compositions of the Nordic’s exhibitions have traditionally worked to interweave aspects of Nordic identity and history, with perceptions of local identity, and community spirit.

While many of the temporary exhibitions have had a contemporary focus, with a connection to a Nordic past, the bulk of the *museum space* that was devoted to permanent or core exhibitions, was squarely focused on the past. In short, Nordic Heritage in this museum was consistently constructed in ways that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Hobsbawm, and Lowenthal would readily recognize.

### *Reshaping Nordic Heritage in the Pacific Northwest*

But things are changing. Seattle is currently the fastest growing city in the United States attracting a large pool of young international

<sup>5</sup> Anttonen, Pertti J, Siikala, Anna-Leena & Klein, Barbro (red.). *Folklore, heritage politics and ethnic diversity: a festschrift for Barbro Klein*. Botkyrka: Multicultural Centre (Mångkulturellt centrum), 2000. Appadurai, Arjun and Carol Breckenridge. Museums are good to think. Heritage on View in India. In. *Museums and Communities. The Politics of Public Culture*. Ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1992. Pp. 34-35. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. *Destination Culture*, 1998, p. 7.

professionals – many of whom are working in the IT industry. However, Seattle continues to be home to a large Nordic community (it remained at 12,5% in WA state in census after census, all the way to the most recent numbers from 2014). Boeing, SAS, and Microsoft are examples of companies that have been attractive to professionals from the Nordic countries. At present, the city is attracting a young highly educated Nordic population to such companies as Microsoft and Amazon. In the midst of all of this, the Nordic Heritage Museum is trying to adapt to new times, shifting demographics and a new cultural and economic context.

In August of 2016 the Nordic Heritage Museum completed demolition of the Fenpro building, hosting an artist collective, and celebrated the groundbreaking for a new museum facility. In April 2017 the museum held a tree-topping ceremony to mark the raising of the girder framework. On the fence separating the general public from the constructions teams at both occasions, hung large posters promoting the coming of “The New Nordic Museum”. Conspicuously missing was the word “heritage” which had since the museum’s founding in 1980 been an integrated aspect of its name and identity.

### *Heritage from a curatorial, development and strategic point of view*

In order to understand the changes that are taking place around the museum as it gears up for its move to the new building, we have spoken with many factions of the community. In this particular paper we focus on museum staff and leadership who occupy key positions in the organization (In the following we will refer to all as simply staff, for reasons of anonymity). A number of staff members spoke about the Nordic’s priority to reach a wider audience. Repeatedly, the word heritage emerged as an impediment to the process.

I know that in spirit, in the content and identity of this (the Nordic) museum that the idea of heritage is never going to go away. It’s ingrained here. It’s part of the inception of this museum and it’s always going to be an important foundation of this museum.<sup>6</sup>

But this being said, he goes on to qualify the statement and implications the notion of heritage might have for the museum.

We have a partner organization down in the Oregon area. They have recently undergone a transition. /.../ They thought the word heritage sounded too old and fuddy duddy and they thought the word Foundation was too referential to money and needing money. So they did not want to see those names.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 3: Photo, Lizette Gradén.



Figure 4: Photo, Lizette Gradén.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

<sup>7</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

If heritage increasingly seemed “fuddy duddy” in the eyes of sister organizations and the general public, the museum had to choose between aligning itself with that, or to re-tailor the suit it was to clothe itself in in the future. This required a great deal of soul searching and new visionary work that has led the museum to stake out a new path of development. As a staff member explained:

The Nordic Heritage Museum doesn’t just want to be a Nordic American Museum or a Ballard Museum. No, we want to be a Seattle museum. It is going to be the only pan-Nordic museum in the United States. So let’s be that! And invite people from all over the US to come visit.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

With an aim to reach beyond their own constituency, the Nordic Heritage Museum leadership wanted to reform the museum in a way that they felt would be relevant for old as well as new groups of visitors. Indeed, it became apparent that relying solely on existing groups of visitors and members would not be a sustainable strategy to allow for the future growth of the museum in its coming facilities. Framing that which was Nordic had to be expanded and, at least in part, re-imagined. Part of reimagining Nordic culture implied the transformation of the institution itself. In order to better understand the shifting sands upon which Nordic Heritage was being understood and framed by museum members and the local community, focus group interviews were conducted. These interviews proved to be revealing.

We were in the middle of a generation that really was not as interested in their great grandparents immigration story as they were in film or design. . . // . . . and this was coming out of the focus groups, there was also a lot of interest in Norse mythology and the Vikings and all this stuff, and the Finns all wanted a sauna. You know so there was this, instead of getting more narrow, there was a widening of the desire for the museum to be more than just the Ballard circa 1910.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

Trying to find a new profile and direction of growth for the museum was akin to opening Pandora’s box. Rather than quickly finding a new focus for the museum, its many constituencies weighed in with a plethora of different and competing ideas of what the future should hold. Indeed, leaving the immigrant story out of the new museum’s narrative entirely did not seem as a realistic option either. As one person in development explained:

I think . . . the immigrant story will continue to be a piece of the museum story, but not the only piece of the museum story. There is that sense that, it’s not I’m a Swedish American, it’s just I’m Swedish, or I’m Norwegian or I’m Icelandic. I don’t know, a lot of people don’t really understand what that all means. And so for the museum to talk

about identity and to talk about what shaped and forged this identity over how many thousands of years, and made it unique, I think that maybe of interest to people, and I think that may be of interest to people who aren’t Nordic as well. And then I think on the other side of things, is this sense of contemporary culture and how you remain connected to the Nordic countries, and what’s happening in the Nordic countries, whether that’s through arts and culture exhibitions or other types of exhibitions or cultural exchanges. That might be of interest to people.<sup>10</sup>

But this staff member too, concluded by hedging on the degree to which the museum wanted to assert heritage as a central component in a new museum.

My sense is that people who have invested, or made these contributions all want to see more people coming to the museum. They want to see the museum more widely accessible. And if the word “Heritage” in its name is an impediment to that, then they would probably be open to having a discussion about that.

### *Broadly Relevant, and Beyond Heritage - The Contemporary as Heritage*

There is no doubt museums all over the world are changing in the 21st century. The question is: How far can the Nordic Heritage Museum transform without losing its identity? A staff member reflected:

It is safe to say that this museum, from its inception, probably right up until 2012 worked very much out of collections and canned exhibitions that focused more on things that would be coined as traditional in nature for Nordic identity and Nordic arts and culture... //... Speaking in blunt terms, I don’t need to do a bunad (Norwegian costume) exhibition to hold onto the members we already have. They already know, but the reality is that in this particular region, the bunad is only going to be of interest to a very small and finite group outside of our community<sup>11</sup>

At issue here is a movement away for the past, and from folk traditions, to more contemporary and design-oriented influences coming for the Nordic region. As an extension of this, exhibitions are not only being oriented more towards contemporary culture, but are even being *framed* to attract audiences more interested in contemporary arts and fashion than traditional folkways. Considering that the exhibition openings, next after the festivals, draw the largest audiences, museum staff is re-imagining the audience by partnering with various organizations and businesses, which bring their members.

The adding of a programmatic component to your openings definitely influences a higher turnout. We had a fashion show this past Thursday

<sup>10</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.



Figure 5: Photo, Tom O’Dell.

<sup>11</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

to accompany the artist presentation. Building in things like that really turns it into an event, not just an opening.<sup>12</sup>

### *Hip heritage – a market oriented strategy*

The Nordic, like many museums, are constantly re-imagining their past, to legitimize their role in present society.<sup>13</sup> As we know, these re-imaginings take on concrete forms, they have material or immaterial shapes in terms of buildings, collections, performances, craft skills, customs, stories etcetera that are of importance to the makers and of which the museum leadership and staff always play a part.<sup>14</sup> Aspiring to change the institution in a direction of being more contemporary, the museum leadership taps into trends from the Nordic countries. For example, New Nordic cuisine, established by the restaurant Noma (nordisk mad) in 2003 and based on Rene Redzepi’s idea of heritage as terroir, has become one of the museum’s attempts to reach the community of foodies in Seattle. This has occurred as at least some visitors and staff have questioned the relevance of traditional foods recognized as Nordic in America.

We were getting young Norwegians coming in and young Danes and looking at our applaskiva (æbleskiver), which is very popular at our various festivals, and the Lefse, and saying that nobody eats that shit in Denmark anymore. Why are you serving that? Nobody eats that in Norway anymore, why are you serving that? But then, at the same time, you have a food truck, a Viking soulfood truck, down in Portland, where they do fried chicken and lefse, and it is one of the most popular food trucks in all of Portland because they find ways to hybridize and re-identify these traditional items. So in looking at our exhibition schedule programmatically, I think it was focusing on being very contemporary, and very modern in terms of what the reach and scope would be for audience identification.<sup>15</sup>

Fashion shows, artist presentations, and Viking soulfood all represent ways of moving the past to new forms of *hip heritage* that strives to engage new groups in the rapidly expanding demographic profile and cultural cityscape of Seattle. We call it hip heritage, but this is not to imply that it is any less honest or well grounded than the museum’s original orientation, which more strongly emphasized the immigrant experiences and traditions of its constituency. In fact, we view *hip heritage* as a market-oriented strategy of transforming museum institutions. As a staff member explained:

Ex-patriots and especially the folks in the embassies and others, really wanted it (the new museum) to be modern contemporary Scandinavia, here we are world leaders in sustainability and innovation. And they don’t want to be portrayed as, you know, the farmers who came out and lived in sod houses.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

<sup>13</sup> Karp, Ivan (ed.). *Museum frictions: public cultures/global transformations*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *World Heritage and Cultural Economics. In: Museum frictions: public cultures/global transformations*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2006.



Figure 6: Photo, Lizette Gradén.

<sup>15</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

<sup>16</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

*Hip heritage* emerges as a tool of *institutional transatlantic connectivity*, guided by priorities made by current *Nordic diplomacy and overseas nation branding*, rather than from within the communities themselves. Regarding museum capacity and audience development, another staff member puts it this way:

My goal is that the new audience is all of Seattle, all of Puget sound, and all of Washington State. And not just Nordic Americans, or Nordic expats for that matter. But anybody who’s interested in contemporary art and culture. We’re obviously always going to be a Nordic museum so there’s going to be that orientation for us. But I think that a lot of what contemporary Nordic art and culture is about, is not necessarily about Nordic identity but about the shifts in Nordic identity and about how other people from other cultures can relate to those shifting demographics.<sup>17</sup>

At the crossroads of that which is perceived as “fuddy-duddy” and that which is hip and perhaps in tune with the times, a new framework for heritage seems to be taking form.

Heritage is about the construction of identity and senses of community. It demarcates the symbolic boundaries within which communities can perceive a space of maneuverability. But as Anthony Cohen has argued, communities that find themselves in the midsts of rapid social change also find themselves in a position of having to negotiate a great deal of border work that often involve atavistic re-engagements of the past.<sup>18</sup> (Cohen 1985:46).

The Nordic, like many museums, is constantly re-imagining the past. However, if heritage has been about re-invoking the past in the present as part of a process of staking out the contours of a community and understanding of a collective identity for the future, then it might be possible to say that when heritage *becomes a market bound commodity*, the process at work at the New Nordic indicates a shift in orientation. The effort here is to drop the term “heritage”, but to nonetheless select and mobilize a certain heritage (Norse mythology, saunas, selected food, Vikings etc.) that is now re-troped as “contemporary” and popular culture in an outward direction beyond the local community on the competitive catwalk of *heritage fashion*. To be certain, as a means of asserting a collective identity, heritage has always had a high degree of outward orientation, but what is new in the case of the New Nordic is the degree to which representations of the past are filtered through a *hip factor* in the name of gaining broader relevance. This is not a process unique to the New Nordic Museum. It can be witnessed in numerous other museums created by Nordics in the United States. Among these, we have seen the American Swedish Institute transitioned to “ASI” in 2013, the Danish Immigrant Museum became Museum of DanishAmerica (MoDa) in

<sup>17</sup> Interview August 2016. Recordings and transcripts in the possession of the authors.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, Anthony. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. Routledge: London New York. 1985



2015 and in 2016 the Scandinavian Heritage Center in Portland was renamed Nordic Northwest. While many institutions with Nordic heritage face the challenge of reinventing themselves, even other types of museums, such as art museums across the country grapple with how to stay relevant in an age of competition, decreased funding paired with demographic changes. In trying to engage a local audience Brooklyn Museum of Art dropped the “Art” and rebuilt the entrance into an admission-free “plaza” for borough people to hang-out in.<sup>19</sup> Minneapolis Institute of Arts with comprehensive art collections became M.I.A., toned down the emphasis on the institution’s art profile, added a cafe and expanded the gift shop - and then became “MIA” – in trying to reach an audience beyond the arts community. These changes reflect an ongoing movement amongst museums as they struggle to broaden their audience base by becoming less specialized and more generally oriented. For heritage institutions that have gone from being volunteer operated by collectives such as immigrants and descendants from the Nordic countries to becoming professional institutions with a focus on Nordic culture, their leaders are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to attract paying visitors with their historic collections. But these changes do raise questions as to how we might understand heritage, not only as an attribute of specific group or community identity, but also as a marketable “re-tropable” commodity in a rapidly and ever changing global experience economy. For all the solidity of a museum’s building, gallery space or storage, it is a malleable institution, which has no choice but to try to change with the world around it and delve further into the business of cultural re-imagination.

<sup>19</sup> Masuike, Hiroko. “Encyclopedic Brooklyn Museum. Museum Vies for Contemporary Attention. The New York Times, May 2017.