

Jette Sandahl. Abstracts, Milan 2016

### **HOME-TOWN & OTHER AMBIGUOUS CONSTRUCTS**

Claiming love of place, as we like to, do we critically examine this love? Does it tenderly protect the (cultural) landscape, respectful of the needs of others to equally worship and keen to share the responsibility of nurturing? Or is it a jealous and possessive love, bitterly claiming the rights of primogeniture, scorching and consuming the loved object in the process?

Will museums, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, develop dynamic concepts of identity that point towards our collective, global futures? Or will we persist in the static ideal of exclusionary rootedness and its ubiquitous undercurrents of xenophobia, granting ownership and the entitlement to beat off unarmed neighbors begging for entrance, with teargas and clubs, and legislation less permeable than medieval city walls?

So if and when, as is already the case in some countries, museums win the rights to ward the cultural landscape and to advise on its development, do our criteria reflect these complexities of the attachment to a place? Can we escape the conventional clichés of facile historic references and develop participatory platforms which channel a fresher, up-close-and-personal mapping of the urban spaces? An archaeology of home and a topography of experience that refuse to whitewash the inequality, the violence, the conflict and submission, the fighting for space, power, territory of home life in the city, and in the city as home?

Do we, as museums, continuously and critically, examine how we make 'intercultural dialogue, social cohesion, sustainable development, the enhancement of human rights' our core business, and ensure that we allocate funding where our democratic rhetoric is? Are the descriptions of museums as 'vital public spaces', committed 'to equal access to everyone, in particular the most fragile and alienated populations' earned and empirically documented, or are they programmatic declarations that cover up a reality marred by patterns of class, educational, racial and ethnic exclusion?

Are we, as museums, so obsessed with the past that we lose sight of the future, or do we have real, concrete visions of a sustainable, future city? Do we see beyond the divisions, splits and dichotomies of the urban industrial heritage of our cities and our current local geopolitics? Do we have the motivation, methods and tools to mediate between preservation and planning, and to meaningfully translate historic knowledge into addressing the dilemma of the present and future?

Can we de-colonize our cities? Can we re-nature our cities?

### **Bio**

Jette Sandahl has been the founding director for two pioneering new museums, the Women's Museum of Denmark and the Museum of World Cultures in Sweden. She has served as Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the National Museum of Denmark, and as Director Experience at National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Most recently, she was director of the Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark. She has been part of the formation of new paradigms for museums as platforms for empowerment, cultural participation and social justice, and publishes widely within the museological field.

JETTE SANDAHL

## **HOME-TOWN & OTHER AMBIGUOUS CONSTRUCTS**

*This text about museums and cultural landscapes was written as an oral presentation, rooted in a series of photographic images, for the joint session between CAMOC, ICOFOM and MINOM at the ICOM general conference in 2016. The text, as requested by the organizers, is also written as a commentary to the Siena Charter. Museums and the Cultural Landscapes, and sits in the intersection between the Siena Charter and Unesco's Recommendations on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society.*

### **WHAT PLACE DOES TO US**

I know what place does to a person. I know what it is like when I cross the bridge into the unique landscape where I grew up. I know how my breath quickens and deepens at the same time, and how my hand steadies on the steering wheel. I become both alert and calmer, both lighter and heavier at the same time, my hunger satiated. My eyes find rest when the horizon is always far away and at the exact right height in my field of vision. I know how I took form and was shaped by a landscape. I know my body leans out of the wind as do the trees, and how it makes sense that the term is to grow up in a place, and have it be part of you forever. I know what sunrise sounds like, how snow smells, and how one is compelled to go stand by the sea when it is really angry. I know how home is where opposites melt and relax into unity.

I am, as Francis Meyers says, 'born knowing that the place itself runs through me like rain soaking into sand'.

So I do not question this embeddedness in land and landscape and territory, nor the sense of home and identity that go with it. But I still have a need to critically examine this set of emotions. Do they encourage tender protection of the natural and cultural landscapes? Are they respectful of the needs of others to equally worship, and ready to share with others the responsibility of nurturing? Or is it a jealous and possessive love, scorching and consuming the landscape in the process?

### **MUSEUMS AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF LOVE OF PLACE IN TIMES OF DISPLACEMENT**

In their dramatic diversity, my home territories shaped me for multiple attachments, and I, and millions with me, migrate happily, lightheartedly, on the wings of globalization, with multiple places having become home.

The sense of identity opens up in and to transitions. Metaphors shift, from the single tap root to a myriad of other rooting systems and bases for growth and well-being. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's concepts of identity, as rooted almost solely in the vertical and historical, dissolve and differentiate into an acknowledgement of the horizontal, contemporary connections, connectivities and communities.

I do not believe museums can – as the Siena Charter does – have 'an intercultural vision of landscape' as an afterthought, an add-on, a dutiful last point. For me heterogeneity, along with its

different perspectives, contexts and conflicts, are built into any landscape and any community, rural or urban. Who would constitute the 'us' and 'our own' in 'an intercultural vision'?

I distrust the false notion of scarcity that has made us believe that our territory can nourish only a few, and have personally never been able to make the leap of faith from one's attachment to the particulars of a local landscape into the construct of a more or less arbitrarily defined and delineated country, or the even more abstract construction of nationhood?

An estimated 60 million people, half of whom are children, were driven away from their homes, home towns, home lands in 2015. And while the wars, changing climates and economic exploitation causing this flight are in essence globally connected and generated, there is little willingness towards global responsibility, accountability or solidarity.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is acting out yet another version of the battles of primogeniture, of claiming rights to place and privilege based on birth. While the Mediterranean is turning into a tacit mass grave and the highways of Europe into roads to nowhere, museums can hardly celebrate local cultural landscapes, in innocence or in denial, of this massive global displacement.

Our professional vigilance is called for, if our concepts of cultural heritage are not to be easily annexed or hijacked by nationalism and xenophobia - a xenophobia so mainstream that it governs major political parties, but extreme enough to lead the country where I live rapidly to the wrong side of human rights, with legislation less permeable than medieval city walls.

Museum case:

The Baksi Museum, in the farthest corner of Anatolia, is in essence defined by and within its landscape. Solidly anchored to the ground with local boulders and through its founder's personal narrative of topographic belonging, the museum explores the potential of a museum as 'cultural interaction point' and a 'cultural resistance point', where the rural meets the urban, where traditional craft, art and culture meet contemporary art and lifestyles, and the centre/periphery dichotomy dissolves in a slow, complex, and difficult cultural metissage.

## **TOPOGRAPHY OF A CAPITAL**

When one crosses the 100 meters of the Queen Louise's Bridge, in Copenhagen, one loses about seven years of one's life. Or phrased less sensationally and more precisely, the life expectancy between two adjacent neighbourhoods varies by around seven years, from 80.2 to 73.3, in this small capital.

Longevity or life expectancy are not the worst indicator of quality of life, and certainly function as tangible evidence of the inequalities marring contemporary societies, even those that have been model welfare states.

## MUSEUMS AND THE TOPOGRAPHIES OF INEQUALITY

In Denmark, national legislation obliges local authorities, in urban planning, to reflect and protect the narrative qualities and the cultural historical values of a building, of a cluster of buildings or of a neighbourhood. The Museum of Copenhagen is a formally recognized hearing partner for the Municipality of Copenhagen concerning urban planning and decisions about changes in the built environment. As the museum sector has pointed out, this advisory position could be much stronger and much more formalized, but my main issue in the current context is really whether we, as museums, are actually making the best possible use of this platform?

Do we have and do we use the right methods and tools to translate historic knowledge into addressing the dilemmas of the present and the future, and to meaningfully mediate between preservation and innovation? As expert on material cultures and how physical environments translate into social structures and social patterns, should we, in the face of increasing urban inequality and socio-spatial conflicts, still have preservation as our core and defining value? Or should we rather be advocating massive change to urban landscapes that have carried and continue to carry the material underpinnings of the splits, divisions and hegemonic social structures of our history and heritage?

The municipality of Copenhagen publishes its own documentation of these inequalities in a series of 'socio-economic maps', dynamic, interactive maps, with data back to 1995, coupling demographic and geographic data. For me maps like these are where the Siena Charter and the Unesco Recommendations on Museums and Collections intersect, and I believe we need to pay very close attention to these topographies and incorporate them in our core priorities, if we are to earn the role Unesco believes museums to have 'in the social system and as a factor in social integration and cohesion' and the services we can provide to also 'the most fragile and alienated populations'.

The Copenhagen socio-economic maps document the history and patterns of what I think of as the topography of class, as it manifests itself in levels of income, education, size and quality of living quarters, access to or exclusion from the labour market, in various sections and neighbourhoods of the city.

They show the topography of race, in terms of the segregation of the population and distribution of Western or non-Western residents in various sections and neighbourhoods. Segregation in city planning and in the built environment is one of the most efficient strategies in producing and maintaining racism. The forcible move of millions of people in South Africa as part of the destruction of black communities and the implementation of apartheid is well known. In the US, the use of city zoning, of public housing and mortgage policies as deliberate strategies of racial discrimination, is under renewed scrutiny.

A couple of other interesting parameters stand out in the socio-economic maps of Copenhagen. One is what I think of as a topography of fear, of how residents perceive their safety in various sections of the city. Another is a topography of participation and belonging, of how residents took

part in the last municipal elections – where of course those of us with local knowledge can see a number of complex factors crossing and blending.

Increasingly, municipal authorities supplement the formal, representative governance with more participatory, dialogue-based practices. In Sweden, for instance, in cities trying their best to actually ‘be for everyone’, planning is done in intensive dialogue with residents, cataloguing their self-described needs and wishes. Gender, which is strangely absent from the Copenhagen mapping material, is a significant dimension. Through questionnaires, interviews, workshops, and sociotopic mapping the specific needs of women are documented relative to infrastructures, transportation, access to employment, public facilities and services, and not least safety, including sexual safety.

Museum case:

As part of a more future-oriented and dynamic interpretation of the cultural heritage, the Museum of Copenhagen developed a number of participatory platforms. On the digital Copenhagen Museum Wall people explore the historic and contemporary landscape of Copenhagen, contributing their own personal experiences and subjective landmarks, into an experiential cityscape of past and present memories and emotions, of the secret places and sacred places of urban neighbourhoods. These participatory principles were extended also into exhibitions and into collecting of contemporary objects.

However, bringing a critical perspective and these personal, narrative and participatory methods into the museum’s role as a hearing partner for the municipal planning department, raising a much needed quality of life discussion, remained an unmet challenge. In this area, the museum seemed unable to come unstuck from a deeper groove of a conservative default position, with its clichés of safe and facile historic references.

## **TOPOGRAPHIES OF HOPE, FEAR AND ANGER**

‘This is the highest ideal of democracy - that everyone can participate in making their own life and the life of the community - and the street is democracy’s greatest arena, the place where ordinary people can speak, unsegregated by walls, unmediated by those with more power.... a lot of history has been written with the feet of citizens walking through their cities,’ says Rebecca Solnit.

## **SOCIO-SPATIAL CONFLICTS AND SOCIO-SPATIAL PROTEST MOVEMENTS**

I am interested in the parliament of the street, and how people express their anger and excavate the beach of their hope underneath the pavement, as the saying used to be. I am interested in the specificity with which socio-spatial conflicts generate socio-political movements, and how these movements are equally embedded in the cultural landscape, and are enacted spatially, in street marches, picket lines, sit-ins, occupations of urban spaces.

Occupy Wall Street initially, as the name implies, targeted the headquarters of financial capital, in protesting the consequences of the most recent financial crisis and the increasing concentration of global wealth with fewer and fewer people. Occupy Wall Street grew rapidly into a global movement, involving hundreds of thousands, disputing economic inequality, the measures of austerity, and how the cut backs in social services hurt the most vulnerable populations.

Street movements are mostly amorphous and non-hierarchical, and often expand into larger issues of life. Urban space is often not just the venue for expressing dissent, but is in itself part of the claims or the rights that are being articulated or fought for. Like the Taksim Gezi Park protest, they may originate in protecting a specific urban space, and evolve into defending the rights of assembly and the public use of public space, against an increasing international trend towards privatization of urban public spaces.

Segregation, the racialization of urban spaces, and racialized violence by urban authorities have generated a long tradition of street protests and revolts. After Ferguson, Black Lives Matter, following by the deaths of unarmed people of colour at the hands of police officers, mobilized massively against these patterns of killings and the systems that allow and encourage and depend on them. Using, as did Reclaim the Streets, the unofficial and raw places of the city, marches and sit-ins have shut down highways, staged encampments outside of police departments, lie-ins or die-ins in public places like shopping malls.

In Take back the night walks, women since the 1970'ies have defied their fear, and walked collectively the streets on which they are continuously, as individuals, at risk.

Arab Spring came to Cairo with both real and symbolic spatial focus points and pivot points in the Tahrir Bridge and Tahrir Square. In the cross field of the new and the old, of liberation and repression, sexual harassment and sexual violence against women became a public, rather than a private issue. Young women invented new digital technologies to re-negotiate and navigate the gendered city, to map, report, and anticipate sexual attacks – technologies which have since found use in a number of other cities and countries to create greater safety.

#### MUSEUMS AND THE RIGHTS TO THE CITY

These diverse manifestations of a continued battle, are, of course, about the Rights to the City, as Henri Lefebvre said. To whom does the city belong? Who owns public space? Who owns the city? Are we, as museums, active participants in this battle? Or are we, at least as a very minimum, out there, with our ears to the ground, trying to pick up and understand the grievances, the methods and the messages? When we advise our cities or regions on the cultural landscape, will the Siena Charter, will our new ICOM Code of Ethics, will our commitment to the UNESCO values together give us guidance on where our responsibilities lie as individual professionals, and on where to position our museums, in these times and sites of conflicts, in contested cases and areas?

Museum case:

The European Solidarity Centre is a museum of revolt and popular uprising, in Gdansk, embedded in the site of the origin of the Solidarity movement. It is a story of a local

movement, which, utilizing its strength of detailed knowledge of the technologies and topography of the shipyard district, gained huge international impact and had resilience enough to make one of the world's toughest political systems stumble. It is an evocative narrative of personal agency and empowerment through solidarity between otherwise powerless people. The museum has an active commitment to the cultural, social and political situation of today, as a public meeting space focused on citizenship, democracy and solidarity.

## **TOPOGRAPHY OF SUSTAINABILITY**

Current cities are using a plethora of new strategies and technologies in meeting the challenges of both urban growth and sustainability in times of rapid climate changes. Sustainable solutions seem best addressed through a very close dialogue with the residents of a given area.

### **PARTICIPATORY ARCHITECTURE AND THE CHALLENGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Chinese architects Wang Shu & Lu Wenyu believe the use of ancient or traditional techniques is environmentally, socially, and culturally most sustainable, and that rural life and village life continue to carry models of social harmony and respect for nature that are relevant also for larger city development today. Engaged to design a large new national museum complex, they insisted that this be embedded in a restoration of neighboring villages, in close consultation and cooperation with local residents, using their labour, knowledge of materials and techniques, staying within the specific local vernacular.

People migrate to cities. Building cheap affordable housing is universally seen as the major challenge for the coming period, to have or reestablish even a minimum measure of social balance in the fabric of the city.

Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena sees his responsibility as giving people 'tools to escape poverty', and tools which can 'subvert the forces that privilege individual gain over collective benefits.' He builds 'bridges of trust between citizens, governments, businesses', and he builds good 'half houses', using the available funding for a basic structure, in several stories, with plumbing and electricity installed, which the residents can then double or triple in size, using local materials they know and skills they already possess. Blueprints for these houses are made freely available on-line to whoever wants to initiate similar building processes.

21<sup>st</sup> century projects as these examples reflect well-known 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scales of urban development. They mirror precisely the worker's cooperative settlements from the 1880'ies in Copenhagen, which offered gradual buy-in to ownership and gradual expansion. Condemned as slum in the 1970'ies, then saved by resident petitions, these humble houses, with their small gardens back and front, have now become prime real estate for a moneyed elite. The obvious quality of life of this kind of build has caused them to be copied in a number of new neighborhoods in Copenhagen - unfortunately, however, without copying the model of open

participatory architecture, which could be a road to affordability, allowing privacy, ownership, empowerment and gardens, for the less than rich.

#### RE-NATURING THE URBAN

On another scale and in a very different format Irish gardener Diarmud Gavin's Magical Tower Garden show garden broke up the usual horizontal format and showcased new models in stacking a small area densely and intensely. The Magical Tower Garden had 5000 plants and trees, distributed and planted over the seven floors according to the successive conditions of light and shade and wind and water from bottom to top. It had playful garden features like a Japanese pavilion and an American caravan, but also functional elements like solar panels, cold-frames and greenhouse, useful when attempting to re-localize food-growing into the urban and sub-urban areas.

The intensive marked gardening of the 19th century, in and around major cities like Paris and NYC, have provided inspiration for current experimental research and experimental micro-agriculture in creating and documenting a huge increase in fertility and yield, when reventing away from the logics and methods of mechanized, industrial agriculture to traditional, labour intensive, models, based on the newest techniques of mixed crops, dense interplanting, raised beds and hotbeds, permacultures. The point, of course, is to feed and re-plenish the soil, rather than to de-plenish it.

#### MUSEUMS AND THE ALCHEMY OF FERTILITY

Playing with the vertical and with the alchemy of fertility, to use the language from Hervé-Gruyer's *Miraculous Abundance*, summarize of the new approaches.

Museum case:

The Museum of Copenhagen entered this process in partnerships with the municipality as well as with established and guerilla urban gardeners, with a series of exhibitions throughout the building, focusing on different aspects of urban nature and sustainable urban planning, and by converting all museum grounds from forbidden dead areas into open, inviting, playful and beautiful public gardens. While the museum is currently closed, preparing to move to a new building, the gardens have gained a life of their own, have literally become 'living vital spaces', as Unesco says, as school groups ask to take over the maintenance and people stray in off the street to forage for dinner.

Focusing on sustainable solutions, as individuals, institutions, organizations, cities, or nations seems to be the fundamental, current version of the questions of what it means to respect, nurture and love a place and a cultural landscape.

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The text has explicit and less explicit references to

Alastair Bonnett. *Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies*, 2014

Francis Mayes. *Under Magnolia*, 2015

Rebecca Solnit. *Wanderlust*, 2001

Perrine and Charles Hervé-Gruyer. *Miraculous Abundance*, 2016

*The Siena Charter. Museums and the Cultural Landscapes*, 2014

*Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society*, Unesco, 2015

The Guardian and Die Welt, particularly, for references to Wang Shu & Lu Wenyu and to the works by Alejandro Araveda