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## Striving to Grow

### The Challenge of Re-imagining Nordic Heritage in North America

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## Striving to Grow: The Challenge of Re-imagining Nordic Heritage in North America

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After many years of planning and fundraising, we are in the final stages of construction. This modern 57,000-sq. ft. museum and cultural center is located in Ballard, the historically Nordic neighborhood of Seattle. This facility will expand exhibition and educational spaces, allow us to continue to preserve cultural histories, and maintain our status as the premier pan-Nordic institution in North America.

To help us accomplish this goal, longtime supporters Allan & Inger Osberg have graciously offered to match all cash Capital Campaign gifts (up to \$250,000 total). That means that during this holiday season, your dollars will go twice as far! So please, reach down into those pockets and help complete this world-class museum project!

These are the words of Eric Nelson, CEO of the Nordic Heritage Museum since 2007, as expressed in an email sent to the museum's members on December 14, 2017. With the grand opening of the new museum approaching in the spring of 2018, Nelson strove to parlay the enthusiasm many of the museum's members felt at seeing the facility approach completion into cash flow. With only months to go the project was still underfinanced. The wording of this call to arms is interesting, because while it promised that the new building would cement the museum's position as the "the premier pan-Nordic institution in North America", and set the stage for offering an array of expanding possibilities to preserve the cultural histories of the Nordics, it carefully avoided saying anything about the *heritage* that had been the core interest of so many of the museum's members, and original founders. The wording, as this article shall argue, was not unintentional. Indeed, it is important to reflect over Nelson's choice of words, as it can help us to more clearly understand new ways in which heritage is being framed and re-thought in today's cultural economy.

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To this end, this article investigates the layers of significance attached to the word “heritage” as staff and leadership at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, proceeded to gear up to move into a new 45 million dollar facility and expand their constituency in order to ensure the long-term economic feasibility of their institution. 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?

### ***Methodology***

Before turning to the museum, however, it is necessary to explain the methodology used in this study. The analysis that follows is based upon two ethnographically based research projects that have focused on the question of how heritage institutions that feature historic houses are affected by processes of commercialization. The first project from which this article directly derives, was an eight week long pilot studying investigating two museums located in the United States featuring Swedish and Nordic Heritage: The Nordic Heritage Museum (NHM) in Seattle, and the American Swedish Institute (ASI) in Minneapolis. At the time of the study, both museums were undergoing dramatic developmental changes and processes of professionalization. ASI had recently completed the development of a new state of the art multi-million dollar facility (called the Nelson Cultural Center) to complement the century old Turnblad Mansion which had been the heart of the museum for the better part of the 20th century. NHM, as we discuss in this article, was in the process of moving from a rented 1907 school building converted in the 1980s into a museum, to a new purpose built 45 million dollar ultra-modern facility.

In relation to the Nordic Heritage Museum, two weeks of fieldwork were conducted in Ballard, WA, in 2014 as well as in 2016 with a follow-up week of fieldwork in 2017. As part of this work the research team participated in museum events, worked as volunteers at the annual summer festival “Viking Days”, and lived with neighbors to the museum while in the field. Qualitative interviews ranging in length from one to two hours were conducted with the Nordic Heritage Museum’s director, head of programming, head of retail, and head of development and community engagement as well as a consultant working for the museum. Beyond this, one to two hour long qualitative interviews were also conducted with an employee in the museum shop, three volunteers working at the museum, two architects who

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worked to design the museum and three members of the local community who have been involved in museum activities. Shorter informal interviews were conducted with dozens of museum volunteers, museum members, board members and local community members as part of the fieldwork process. The fact that Gradén held a position as chief curator at the museum for nearly three years, greatly facilitated the research team's ability to gain insights into the moving process since she had previously been involved in those processes. Beyond this, it also provided a network in the local community that would otherwise have taken much more time to develop. Finally, the research team followed the development of the new museum through local news reports available on the internet, information provided by the museum's own home page, and personal correspondences with museum personell, volunteers, and members of the local community.

It is important to point out that over the course of the fieldwork processes, which has been spread out over a period of three years, the atmosphere at the Nordic Heritage Museum became increasingly tense as the details of the funding of the new museum facility failed to fall neatly into place. The people we were speaking to increasingly came to watch their words, and indeed in the later stages of our fieldwork some people seemed to find it uncomfortable to speak with us. People even commented upon the fact that they needed to be careful about what they said, as saying something that could be interpreted in a negative light by the wrong people could have economic consequences, both in terms of financing the museum, as well as in terms of having one's position terminated. This period was also a time of staff turn over (as often happens in transitional period of museums) and was undoubtedly driven by many reasons. Nevertheless, the turnover was something which was haunting in the background of our work, since not everyone who left the museum at this time did so voluntarily. Against this background we have chosen to anonymize the identities of the people we have spoken to. Since the museum has a small staff, we shall refer to the people we interviewed at the museum as simply staff and personnel. This is a praxis that falls in line with the well established ethical guidelines of both the American Folklore Society and the American Anthropological Association.<sup>1</sup> Many of the quotes used here may seem benign, however, other quotes and materials that we collected over the course of our fieldwork, have been (and will be) published in other places. Naming names here makes it more difficult to maintain people's anonymity in other places, and not everything that people said in our interviews is necessarily as benign as that which we have included here. The question of what

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is benign and what is unproblematic is a question dependent upon the reader as well as the people we spoke with, this is not a question we can solve in any other way than to anonymize the voices you will hear in the following.

Before moving on, we want to underline that the pilot project, which this article is based upon led to the financing of a larger two year research project funded by the Swedish Heritage Board that focused on four museums in Sweden that featured historic houses as well as collections (2017-2018). These were: Skokloster Castle, a 17th century castle and museum located in the countryside outside of Stockholm, Hallwyl Palace, a turn of the 20th century museum located in central Stockholm, Kulturen, an open air museum featuring dozens of buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries; and Kulturens Östarp, featuring an 18th century Scanian farmhouse, and agricultural fields that were being cultivated via techniques from the 18th century. While this article focuses on the Nordic Heritage Museum, for reasons of space, we underline here, that the conclusions we draw in this paper, correspond tightly with results we have come to in relation to the other five museums we have also studied (for findings from these museums see (Gradén & O'Dell 2017; 2018a, 2018b, forthcoming 2019).

### ***The Nordic Heritage Museum***

In November 2017, following the annual Yulefest, the Nordic Heritage Museum closed its doors to visitors. Five months later the museum would move into the new facility, which Eric Nelson described in the opening quote. The museum organization was founded in 1979 by Nordic immigrants who sought a platform to share among themselves and with others their cultural heritage and emigrant experience. Together they transformed an old 1907 schoolhouse in Ballard, a sleepy residential neighborhood in Seattle, into a museum that celebrated the immigration histories and cultural traditions of people coming from the five Nordic countries. The museum opened to the public in 1980. Marianne Forssblad, the museum's appointed director from the early years until her retirement in 2007 came from Sweden, was a librarian by training and held a position as lecturer at the department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. With scant economic resources, but an eager base of volunteers and members, Forssblad oversaw the development of the museum from a grassroots initiative to an increasingly professionalized institution. As one of the longstanding volunteers explained:

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I was still working full time I had started volunteering at the Nordic Heritage Museum. It just got my heart and my soul. And I would be in Norway visiting with my brother and sister in law, they were also working and they would get up in the morning, go to work, come home and make dinner and watch the news on tv and go to bed. The same thing all week long, and I felt sorry for them.

From the beginning, the museum's collection was almost entirely built upon artifacts that local supporters, founders and volunteers donated to the institution. Working together with museum staff they then arranged them, step by step into core exhibitions. Indeed, it was not until the Nordic Heritage Museums was well on its way to moving to the new purpose built facility that an acquisition fund was established. Working by and large with items that volunteers brought from their attics, closets, and forgotten corners of their basements, Forssblad led the transformation of the old schoolhouse into a museum of its founders' heritage.

The first floor of the three story Nordic Heritage museum came to hold a core exhibition, called "The Dream of America", featuring generic emigration scenes from a journey to America combined with many of the possessions the immigrants brought with them to the United States. This first part of the Dream of America exhibition had an emigration history in itself as it was first shown at the Moesgaard museum in Denmark, put on tour in America, and purchased in the 1980s by the Nordic Heritage Museum. Expanding upon the adapted exhibit The Dream of America which was located on the first floor, the core exhibition continued on the second floor, where it shared perspectives on the the fishing and logging industries, which the immigrants became part of in the Pacific Northwest. Several of the museum's early supporters even played a central role in organizing this exhibition, such as the Osberg family, who were mentioned in Nelson's email that this text opened with. This floor also hosted three galleries for temporary exhibitions. The entire third floor had been made available to émigrés of the five Nordic countries to organize and present their cultural heritage in consultation and collaboration with the museum's curatorial department. The life of these exhibits reflected the interest and life of the volunteer groups tending the displays. Some of the displays were rotated on a regular basis. The Icelandic group met weekly to discuss their items and make small changes according to season. The Swedish volunteer

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group focused on seasonal displays such Midsummer, Lucia and Kräftskiva whereas the Norwegian group worked mainly on changes for the holidays yuletid and Syttende Mai. The Danish group had ceased to be active around 2007, seeking more support from the museum's curatorial department and interns from the museology department at the University of Washington. The Icelandic group met weekly to care for their collection and the Finnish group worked with curatorial on their inventory, which was expanded as they inserted new items acquired on trips to Finland. Marimekko fabrics and Iitalla glass were recent additions. This group also took an interest in techniques of display and continuously worked on light and sound as aspects of their exhibition. All of these exhibits did more than offer a representation of each group's interpretation of their own heritage, they also provided a focal point for volunteers to meet, discuss memories and experiences related to their heritage and migration. One example of this was an oral history project which museum volunteers initiated and drove. As one long-standing volunteer involved in the project recalled:

I think volunteering at the museum is an extremely enriching experience and one of my favorite examples is work on a documentary about the Finnish experience of world war II, using 26 of our interviews to create this. Well, when we got down to the final rub, which we did most of the film editing ourselves, I got the assistance of a young man who works for the Mariners and does all of their video. He was very helpful. I found out later, after we were through, that his comment was "Oh boy I am wrong about old people", well I don't think he used the word old but older people not being able to learn, because obviously I had learned the software that we were using and he was impressed. So he was involved and we changed his perceptions (laughs).

In this sense, the early years of the Nordic Heritage Museum's formation was a period enmeshed in the living heritage of the museum's members. As a part of this living heritage, the content, origins, and compositions of the Nordic's exhibitions traditionally worked to interweave aspects of Nordic identity and history, with perceptions of local identity, and community spirit.[2]

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 exhibitions, was squarely focused on the past. In short, Nordic Heritage was consistently constructed in

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ways that Barbro Klein, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Eric Hobsbawm, and David Lowenthal would readily recognize, as Gradén & O'Dell outlined in the introductory chapter to this volume. To the extent that the past could be understood as a foreign country, as Lowenthal phrased it (198?), it was a place that the founding members of the Nordic Heritage Museum visited often - at least in the thematic content of the institution's core exhibitions.

### ***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 professionals – many of whom are working in the IT industry. However, Seattle continues to be home to a large Nordic community (it has remained at 12,5% in WA state in census after census, all the way to the most recent numbers from 2014), At present, the city is attracting a young highly educated Nordic population to companies such as Microsoft, Expedia and Amazon. In the midst of all of this, the Nordic Heritage Museum in Ballard 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, an artist collective, and celebrated the groundbreaking for a new museum facility on the lot where the Fenpro had once stood. 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 a large poster 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***

The museum leadership and a number of staff members, for example, spoke about the Nordic's priority to reach a wider audience. Repeatedly, the word heritage emerged as an impediment to the process. As it turned out, heritage was a concept that was hotly contested in ways that Klein, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Lowenthal wrote little about that were linked to issues of economy and stewardship (which includes branding and development) of heritage, - and that critical heritage studies has insufficiently recognized. In an interview one staff member tried to explain the situation.



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I know that in spirit, in 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.

But this being said, he went 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.

If heritage increasingly seemed “fuddy duddy” in the eyes of 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. A central problem that museum leadership struggled with concerned the direction in which the museum should grow. A new larger modern facility would need a broader and larger audience to be economically feasible. The majority of the museum's members and volunteer corps who constituted an important base upon which the museum stood, were ageing and diminishing. The local community was an important source of visitors to the museum, but this was a limited population which was not large enough to sustain a revamped museum. A shift to a new audience base seemed necessary, and this required a great deal of soul searching and new visionary work that 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.

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. However, it was apparent that relying solely on existing groups of

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members and visitors 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. As a member of the museum's leadership team explained:

We were in the middle 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 ca 1910.

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 vastly different and competing ideas of what the future should hold. Patrons and members from the fishing industry argued for a stronger focus on their maritime heritage in the future, while those with a past in the forest industry advocated that orientation instead. Many of the volunteers and members who had helped establish the museum from the beginning worried about the fate of "The Dream of America" core exhibition as well as the national exhibitions that celebrated each nationalities' immigration heritage on the third floor of the museum. These were sentiments which the local newspaper reported on as early as March 25, 2008 in an article which described the results coming out of a series of focus group interviews being held at that time by a consultancy firm. While the consultant involved in the project could not promise that the immigrant story of the core exhibition would make its way to the new museum, she tried to reassure the local community that, "We will recreate it in some fashion" (<https://www.westsideseattle.com/robinson-papers/2008/03/25/nordic-museum-hears-focus-group-design>). Architects interviewed in the same article explained there was a need to reach a younger public, while the museum's business manager at the time, pointed to a need for the new museum to be more than local and attract larger audiences. Eight years later, in 2016,

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when we interviewed a person in a leadership role at the museum it was clear that “The Dream of America” and the story of the immigration heritage was still a sensitive topic. As the leadership team member explained when describing anticipations before the opening of the new museum in 2018:

It's not without anxiety. There's a lot to do between now and then. And again, the challenges of losing audience, and having people who are disappointed. There will be people who are disappointed because the Dream of America will not be the Dream of America as is known, in the new museum.

The question of how much of the immigration story would be included in the core exhibition of the museum, was still in the process of negotiation, however, leaving some form of representation of the Nordcc community's immigrant heritage out of the story of the new museum's narrative entirely, did not seem as a realistic option either. As another person in development and marketing whom we interviewed emphasized:

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 -- authors' note)

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.

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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.

### *An expanding community?*

But if heritage was viewed as an impediment for the development of the museum, this raises questions as to how a museum can perceive its own identity, and understanding of itself as bound to a group of people whose story it once was to tell. For whom could a new museum be relevant? One group that had been central to the establishment of the museum was the local Ballard community, many of who volunteered their time and skills in the founding and development of the original museum.

As one of the architects responsible for the development of the new facility noted when in an interview with us:

The number of volunteers, the social aspect, they actually do the maintenance. I mean it's kind of a miraculous story that you have this old school, and that people came together around Marianne Forssblad, and they...you know, they're fixing the windows, they're bringing a lot of exhibitions per year, the number is kind of amazing for an early volunteer thing turning into a professional staff.

An early suggestion, which the museum leadership weighed, was the possibility of moving the museum to the Lake Union area in central Seattle where it would in theory be more accessible to a larger group of tourists who might not have known about the existence of a museum in Ballard. The question was what such a move might mean for the museum's role as a community center. As one staff member noted:

The business model, I think would have been to really push the earned revenue through admissions and things of that nature, instead of... the museum has always filled the need of being a community center in a community, so if the museum were moved into a downtown location it would have been much more difficult to serve in that capacity.

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The board and leadership made the choice to do as little as possible to jeopardize the museum's local community connection. It was then up to the architects to reflect upon the manner in which they could design a more modern Nordic space that would be alluring to new publics, but not alienate the old community. They tried to focus on the affective attributes of what designs and materials might make a building feel Nordic.

So how do you evolve this really active volunteer group? Partly, the old school has a comfortable feel to it, it's an old building, it's kind of cozy. And new museums tend to be more austere, and edgy, and they're not always the most comfortable warm places.

The lobby is sort of the heart of the heritage center portion before you get into the museum world. There is a lot of wood ceilings, there is a corner fireplace. And the auditorium is a big wood box. You get a sort of warm glowing volume to it.

While current trends in the architecture of museums emphasize white blank surfaces, Mithun, the architectural firm, strove to warm up the space of the museum by incorporating materials such as wood which could be associated with nature, and with a hearth in the entrance lobby that would first meet volunteers, members, and new visitors to the museum. However, in doing this, they also began envisioning the museum community in new and enlarged ways. A Mithun architect envisioned the future in the following way:

The visibility (of the new museum) is very different. Just think that there is a bus stop right there around the corner, right in front of the café. That's going to draw people that would never venture up to the school. And I think the linear nature of the "fjord", and if I see the signs on Market street, there are poster boxes of the outside of the building of the changing gallery, to see what is going on inside. It's so much more visible, and the future of the Burke Gilman trail, people riding their bike behind (the museum) and seeing the sun terraces and the lights and the craft room and the activity there and the windows into the auditorium. It's just the kind of building and the location that people will want to go to even if they don't know what it is.../.../So you have way more mixing. Now it's totally intentional, like you have to go there and you are only interested in Nordic heritage.

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The museum leadership hoped to include the existing core of local community members and volunteers once they moved to Market street, but even (perhaps more importantly) envision a community that included the spontaneous visitor, the visitor who may not identify as Nordic or does not think of museums as places to visit. This audience would include Seattleites stopping by for a bite to eat when riding their bike on the Burke Gilman trail. It would also cater to the young Ballard residents commuting to the Amazon.com campus by public transportation. These visitors may become regulars at the cafe, or at its best, they may also venture into the museum and take an interest in exhibitions and programs. When the museum strives to expand its audience, the emphasis shifts from collections and programs and focuses increasingly around the role that events and secondary services such as cafes and shops can play in attracting visitors. That is to say it shifts slightly from a primary focus on representations of past perceptions of Nordic Heritage in the Pacific Northwest, to increasingly emphasize forms of hospitality and entertainment. The emphasis of the emerging institution does not necessarily ignore the role of members and volunteers, but it is increasingly more focused on attracting tourists, young hipsters in the IT industries, and chance consumers in a global experience economy - who are envisioned as a new, and potentially important group for this newly invented institution (Pine & Gilmore 1999).

This is not a situation unique to the Nordic Heritage Museum. In Minneapolis, a member of the leadership team of the American Swedish Institute (ASI) explained in 2016 how the institution strove to downplay the “Swedishness” of ASI:

We say, ‘ASI’. If we say ‘The American Swedish Institute’, phoom (demonstrates a door being closed). ‘I am not Swedish and therefore it doesn’t mean anything to me’. So doing certain things like saying ASI instead of the American Swedish Institute has helped us break through some of these barriers.

Tweaking the institute’s name was part of a strategy that was intended to take the edge off of being related to a specific ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> But it was also linked to the development of a new large modern wing to the museum called the Nelson Cultural Center that was geared to draw in broader audiences. The new center was developed to not only housed a new state of the art gallery and auditorium, but also an award winning restaurant, and an expanded gift shop.

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Rather than working extensively with their collections, members of the leadership team explained how they were now strategically working with programming to draw in a new and broader public, and worked with temporary and traveling exhibitions focused on fashion, art, and design to attract visitors. They were not striving to develop their audience base by explicitly appealing to issues of “Swedishness”, “Swedish heritage”, or even “the Swedish Immigrant experience” as they had done in the decades prior to the new millennium (O'Dell & Gradén 2018), but through attempts to provide visitors with a series of memorable experiences that were increasingly not related to representations of a historical past, but of a more cutting edge arts and fashion orientation.

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

There is no doubt museums all over the world are changing in the 21st century. As Peggy Levitt points out museum budgets are tightening almost everywhere, and curatorial departments in particular find themselves hard pressed with the between choices of working with their collections to produce new knowledge, or to focus more on attracting larger audiences (2015:44). As she explains:

Curators felt tremendous pressure to attract tourists. There is so much competition for people's attention and there are so many other places to learn about the world. People interested in Native Americans, for example, can just stay home and watch the Discovery Channel.

Philosophical differences about the kinds of punch lines museums should deliver and how they deliver them, also abound. Often these debates are about whether to treat objects as art or artifact, should something be showcased for its aesthetic values or because of what it can teach us about the people who made and used it? (2015:44)

This is part of a broader trend which other scholars in the field of critical heritage studies have pointed to in which “museums must look beyond the traditional focus on collections” and more on the production engrossing experiences (Camarero, Garrido & Vicente 2014:229). Echoing this conclusion, heritage scholar Rodney Harrison sees this change as an integrated outcome of several processes related to the development of late-modernity that can be understood to fuel the expansion of the experience economy. These include: “the

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development of the heritage “experience” as a marketable commodity; the growth of domestic and international leisure travel and the accompanying restructuring of the tourist gaze and its economic and social impacts; the diversification and segmentation of heritage to make it marketable to more varied audiences; and the globalisation of the World Heritage concept...” (2013:227). The question is: How far can the Nordic Heritage Museum transform as it strives to become a player in this global market without losing its identity? This is an important question as change was seen as an important ingredient in the growth of the museum. As a staff member explained:

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 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”

At issue here is a movement away for the past, and from folk traditions, to more contemporary and design-oriented influences coming from the Nordic region. When staff relegates an interest in bunads (traditional dress from Norway) to the already established Norwegian and Nordic community, the potential of the collective forming around handcraft and the dressed body in the ethnically and culturally diverse Seattle may be missed, as there is more similarities in making traditional dress than there are differences (Shukla 2015, Gradén 2017). Nurturing a community interest in craft would most likely expand the community beyond those who do not identify as Nordic while developing the global ecumene of handcraft and material culture.

As an extension of this, exhibitions at the Nordic are not only being oriented more towards contemporary culture, but in a manner very similar to that occurring at ASI, 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, which bring their members.



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The adding of a programmatic component to your openings definitely influences a higher turnout. We had a fashion show this past Thursday to accompany the artist presentation. Building in things like that really turns it into an event, not just an opening.

The Nordic, like many museums, are constantly re-imagining their past, to legitimize their role in present society. As we know, these re-imaginings take on concrete forms. 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) back in 2003 and based on Rene Redzepi's idea of heritage as terroir, has recently become one of the museum's attempt 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. As a staff member explained:

We were getting young Norwegians coming in and young Danes and looking at our applaskiva (aebleskiver), 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 soul-food, 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.

Fashion shows, artist presentations, and Viking soul-food 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 than the museum's original orientation, which more strongly emphasized the immigrant experiences of its constituency. Hip heritage might best be understood as a *market-oriented strategy of transforming museum institutions*. As a member of the museum's leadership stated:

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Ex-patriates 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, as the farmers who came out and lived in sod houses.

In an attempt to attract funding from the Nordic countries, the agendas of the diplomats were weighed into the question of how the content of the new museum might be angled. To meet their perspective, a past with poor peasants living in sod houses needed to be downplayed, to emphasize contemporary culture in relation to sustainability and innovation. Hip heritage emerges in this case as a *forward looking strategy of institutional transatlantic connectivity*, guided by priorities made by expatriates, current Nordic diplomacy and overseas nation branding with Nordic America as a viable market, rather than from the diversity of the local communities themselves. Indeed, there was perhaps a chance that this would be a turn that would speak more directly to the shifting Seattle demography with its influx of young, well-educated engineers and IT personnel to Amazon, Google, and Expedia. 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.

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

### ***Hip heritage, fast fashion history***

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 midst of rapid social

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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 (Cohen 1985:46, cf. Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992:34-55, Watson 2007). It is a phenomenon that he notes tends to be likened to a digestive process in which communities are changed via the ingestion of outer influences. However, this is an oversimplified view that he urges us to challenge. He explains:

...social change is often marked also by a regurgitative process which is more than mere flatulence, but amounts to a veiled refusal to swallow! The social analogue of this chewing of the cud is the adoption by a community of the structural forms originating from outside which are transformed in the process of importation and fundamentally reconstituted with indigenous meaning. In this way structures imported across the boundary provide new media for the expression of native values. (Cohen 1985:46)

The Nordic, like many museums, is constantly re-imagining the past, sometimes to legitimize it and sometimes to criticize it. It is reaching out from beyond the borders of Ballard in an attempt to be of greater relevance the population of the greater Seattle area. However, its relationship to the concept of heritage is interesting. As we argued in the introduction to this volume, heritage, as it was framed in many of the classic texts of the late-eighties and nineteen nineties has been understood in terms of re-invoking the past in the present as part of the process of staking out the contours of a community and understanding of a collective identity for the future (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Klein 2000; Lowenthal 1985 & 1996). But this is not exactly what is happening presently at the Nordic. The effort there is to drop the term “heritage”, but to nonetheless select and mobilize a certain heritage (Norse mythology, Vikings, saunas, New Nordic cuisine, haute couture fashion, etc.) that is now re-trope as “contemporary” in an outward direction on the competitive catwalk of *fast fashion history*. 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 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 Nordic, it can be witnessed in museums throughout North America and Europe. Traveling and temporary exhibitions have worked in exactly this way in all of the museums we have studied in Sweden. In the summer of 2017,

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for example, Skokloster Castle which has focused upon and celebrated its seventeenth century roots for decades, featured a temporary exhibition of period costumes, which had previously been used in the production of a series of Jane Austen films. The Jane Austen exhibition was the largest crowd magnet the museum had ever experienced, attracting 11.000 visitors over the summer season. Although a success in terms of temporary audience development, the museum personnel were hard pressed to explain the connection between a seventeenth century castle and Jane Austen.

A year later the exhibition was repackaged, re-framed, and set-up at Kulturen (a late 19th century open-air museum featuring one of Sweden's largest collections of folk costumes and traditional peasant tools). At Kulturen, a curator explained that the hope was that the exhibition would draw such a large crowd that it would provide them with the buffer they needed in terms of visitor numbers, and economic resources to work with other exhibition of what she called "better quality". The theme of fashion was one which the Hallwyl Museum in Stockholm (a home that was intentionally geared to become a museum under the stewardship of Wilhelmina von Hallwyl in the first decades of the 20th century to highlight everyday life of the bourgeois culture of her time) established in 2006 and have repeatedly returned to. Among recent temporary exhibitions (and often produced by visiting curators) of dress include costumes from Ingmar Bergman's films, and male formal attire entitled "Elegance Lives". The exhibitions were not completely out of line with the orientation of the museum, but the leadership of the museum was clear about the fact that the objective of these temporary exhibitions was to draw in visitors more than it was to highlight aspects of the Hallwyl's lives or home (see Gradén & O'Dell 2018; forthcoming a & b, for larger discussions of these museums).<sup>3</sup>

All of these cases can be seen in part as attempts made on the behalf of the museums involved to try to better serve a broader public. However, this does also raise questions as to how we might understand heritage, not only as an attribute of a specific group or community identity, but also as a marketable "re-tropable" commodity in a rapidly and ever changing global experience economy. As previous research has shown, investments in heritage sites geared to tourists and new audiences, can have the contrary effect of driving away previous patrons (Mursyn-Kupisz 2013:157). These types of tensions, or at least the fear that they would play out as the museum morphed into something new were also present amongst some

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of the people we spoke with in Ballard. One of the artists who lives and work in Ballard reflected on the changes occurring there and around the museum in the following manner:

I hope it doesn't go too corporate. I hope they don't drop heritage and just become some modern thing called the Nordic, which would be a wider umbrella that would bring more shows in. I can see it happening because that's where the corporate support would be. That's the way our culture is evolving. So I just hope that the museum will remember the little people, will remember its roots of the origins of this community.

The Fenpro held about one hundred tenants: metalshops, woodshops and fine artists such as painters, photographers and sculptors. The artists we spoke with who had worked in Fenpro described their spaces as crude and affordable. The rent was low, there was no heat in the winter and horrible bathrooms. But they emphasized the community. Having lost their affordable space in Ballard most of them have moved "far away" and sought new studios outside Seattle, in Georgetown, Shoreline, Renton, and Tacoma. As artists from the Nordic countries are offered temporary exhibit space at the Nordic, some of the artists from the community have moved back to the Nordic countries.

Making heritage "hip" is a survival strategy that is being increasingly used by museums that may seem innocuous at one level. It is geared to pull in as many visitors as possible, and open museums to a wider public. But it is also an effect of gentrification and change generated by a society at large. In this context it is important to bear in mind, as Waterton and Smith point out (2010:8), that it is all too easy to romantically and uncritically refer to the notion of community as a tightly knit coherent entity. What becomes apparent in the case of the Nordic, is the fact that as they worked to re-invent the museum, they found themselves facing a wide array of communities in the Ballard area, many of which had competing agendas, goals, and hopes for a new revamped museum. The complexity of this weave of communities was deepened as Seattle in general, and Ballard more specifically, underwent processes of gentrification in the wake of an expansive economy.

All of this begets the question of what happens if museums increasingly frame their activities as being oriented towards attracting a larger and larger public, and the depth of knowledge

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about particular histories and identities, is increasingly yielded to the coolest thing that brings in a large audience (Sacco 2016)? The movement we are witnessing, in the museums we have studied, is one in which the image of heritage as a cornerstone around which local communities can be built, and knowledge of one's identity can be shared, problematized, studied, and questioned is being subordinated to the goal of attracting larger audiences with easily digestible "public magnets" and "block busters". Working in this way has strategic implications for a museum that wants to grow. The choice to focus on an aura of Nordicism that might be understood in terms of design, fashion, and art on the one hand, or innovation and sustainability on the other, alleviates the risk of the museum getting bogged down in the identity politics of its multi-factional contingency. Indeed, as a great deal of research has illustrated, when heritage folds into nationalist streams of thought it becomes highly problematic. But what happens to our understanding of heritage and people's image of it as it increasingly becomes folded into the discourse of market economics? As Emma Waterton has pointed out:

When a particular image achieves dominance, other ways of taking part in the world are inevitably obscured. If these alternative discourses become more or less shut down, the dominating discourse ceases to be arbitrary and instead appears as 'natural' (Waterson 2009:38) .

In concluding we ask, what happens when museums and the publics around them increasingly expect heritage exhibitions to be hip? The truth of the matter is that the expiration date for that which is hip or trendy is never far in the future. Museum's investing in this economic paradigm of the "hip factor" will inevitably find themselves open and vulnerable to the rapidly shifting trends and fashions of the experience economy. The treachery of working in this market is bound to the fact that fashion is per definition ephemeral, more based on making and marking temporary distinctions than long term allegiances or deeper levels of understanding and shared knowledge. It requires a fingertip sensitivity to future forecasting to determine what might be popular in a year or two (the time frame which most museums need to plan, organize and construct new and temporary exhibitions).

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This is new territory in the world of heritage museums. It is, as we are arguing here, a territory in which the link heritage has to the past is increasingly shifting towards hopes about what the economic future might provide. The past is not completely irrelevant in this context. However, it is increasingly (like most catwalks) not that which stands in focus, but rather a staging upon which the latest designs, fashions, and styles can be displayed and turned into events for the moment. To paraphrase Hafstein, will we see in the future a heritage that “is collectivity by culture economy squared”? The question is, if museums increasingly continue to develop in this direction, what might this mean for the role of museums in society in the future, and how will it affect the manner in which they handle heritage and issues of diversity for a new generation of museum visitors? Working an experience economy geared to appeal to broader and broader groups of people can be seen in part as a means of serving a general public. It may also bear with it the risk of losing depth and knowledge about content such as the cultural history and heritage of smaller groups of people in local settings, such as the people who once founded the Nordic Heritage Museum, as they may find themselves constituting a small minority of the museum’s members and visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> See the section "Do no harm" on the following link from the American Anthropological Association: <http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/>. See even the ethical guidelines of the American Folklore Society: <https://www.afsnet.org/page/Ethics?&hhsearchterms=%22ethical+and+guidelines%22>

<sup>2</sup> In the case of ASI this is connected to ethnicity, as with the Danish Immigrant museum organized in 1983 and which in 2013 changed its name to Museum of Danish America or MoDa. However, the acronym trend has grown strong also among art museums such as Minneapolis Institute of Art now MIA or the Brooklyn Museum of Art, now Brooklyn Museum both name changes due to what is a fear driven attempt to open themselves to a wider audience (Presentation by director Rasmus Thorgersen and curator Tova Brandt at SASS in Minneapolis, 2017. Pogrebina, Robin. Encyclopedic Brooklyn Museum views for contemporary attention. *New York Times*, April 30, 2017.)

This text is a first draft version of a text that was published in a re-worked condition in 2018. While the final version has been reworked after peer-review remarks, this text reflects the essential results and conclusions of the research presented here. If you would like to read the final version of the text, here is the reference: Gradén, Lizette & O'Dell Tom (2018a) Striving to Grow: The Challenge of Re-imagining Nordic Heritage in North America. In *Journal of Scandinavian Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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<sup>3</sup> This list of examples could be made much longer and readily expanded to include other museums. Indeed in Sweden, a large public debate was initiated by journalist Ola Wong who accused a number of Sweden's national museums of heritage, not the least of which was the Världskultur Museerna of having lost touch with their collections and the competency to problematize their collections in the name of creating politically correct public pleasers. To date, the debate has generated 42 articles in the national newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* alone, with many more articles being published in other newspapers around the country (See for example, Lind & Wahlquist 2016; Smeds 2016; Wong 2016a, b & c).