

Peter Reid, Professor of Librarianship at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland,
p.reid@rgu.ac.uk

Book review:

Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Transition Change, challenges, and convergence in a Scandinavian perspective

*Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Kerstin Rydbeck, and Håkon Larsen (Eds.) (2023).
Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Transition: change, challenges, and
convergence in a Scandinavian perspective. Abingdon: Routledge.*

In my day job, as Professor of Librarianship at Robert Gordon University in Scotland, I often find that I direct my Masters students to look at examples of policies and practices in Scandinavia when teaching them on our Managing Library Services module. For that reason, and because half my own family are Danish, it was, therefore, a pleasure to read *Libraries, Archives, and Museums in Transition: changes, challenges, and convergence in a Scandinavian Perspective*. This anthology explores the rapidly changing environment in which these organizations find themselves in the twenty-first century, and how certain common threads or 'convergent developments' in libraries, archives, and museum are driving their contemporary transformation.

Early on the editors address the challenges of examining the three distinct elements of libraries, archives, and museums in one volume. They also consider the important distinction that size matters in that working the national archives, or a metropolitan art gallery is not the same as working in a provincial local heritage museum. However, as is noted (p5) all of the cultural sector has been influenced by prevailing trends or imperatives in recent decades that transcend the differing professional backgrounds and approaches of libraries, archives, and museums. These include digitization, collaboration and partnerships, user instruction, and more recently, participation and engagement, as well as being part of the experience economy.

The volume is edited by Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen of the Department of Communication (GLAM Section) at Copenhagen University, Kerstin Rydbeck, Professor of Information Studies at Uppsala University, and Håkon Larsen, Professor of Library and Information Science at Oslo Metropolitan University, brings together a diverse, informative, and lively selection of chapters from contributors across the three Scandinavian countries.

The anthology is divided into three sections. The first explores the historical background to libraries, archives, and museums in Scandinavia, as well as the policies which shape, govern, and influence their activities and approaches. This is done sectorally for each rather than divided by the three nations. In doing so, the reader is provided with helpful comparison across Norway, Sweden, and Denmark in each of the three sectors covered by the book. Part Two focuses on collections, exploring issues around whether collection still constitute libraries, archives, and museums, the curation of collections, and knowledge organization in libraries, archives, and museums. These three chapters raise many interesting points such as the extent to which the care and mediation of collections has become just one of many missions for cultural organizations of this kind, the social, cultural, and technological impacts of digitization, as well as the consequence of the more participatory nature of libraries, archives, and museums, a theme which emerges in a number of places throughout the book.

Part Three could be said to be the main focus of the volume; the challenges for libraries, archives, and museums in the twenty-first century. Here there are discussions of digitization, digital communication, learning, literacy, and education, participation, the legitimacy of LAMs in contemporary Scandinavia, community engagement, a debate around neutrality and taking a stand, as well as the increasingly important issues around sustainability.

This section contains some very insightful contributions exploring examples of practice across the Scandinavian countries, as well as engaging in a deep and meaningful philosophical discussion of the matters in hand. I was drawn to much in these chapters. Perhaps inevitably given some of my own work with small heritage organizations, I was particularly drawn to the chapter by Isto Huvila, Jamie Johnston, and Henriette Roued-Cunliffe on LAMs and the participatory turn. Roued-Cunliffe's earlier work with Andrea Copeland on participatory heritage having significantly influenced my own work and thinking around community-led heritage, audience engagement, the importance of individual heritage narratives, and crowdsourcing of heritage information. The model exploring types of participation as well as the participation matrix which Huvila, Johnston, and Roued-Cunliffe explore is very widely transferable to other places and contexts and this, like many of the chapters, is one I feel sure I shall come back to time and again in the future.

The chapter by Johnston, Jochumsen, and Edquist on communities is subtitled 'deepening connections' and I was reminded of David Lanke's dictum about 'bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities' when reading it. The importance of building effective partnerships is explored in this discussion and the model of 'inner community rings' offers reflective learning in other countries. The commentary around the challenges of community relationships is one which I found myself agreeing with wholeheartedly; sensitivities and difficulties are sometimes encountered here but there are rewards in deepening the scope of libraries, archives, and museums, and also because such collaborations can help groups or communities which otherwise struggle to make their voices and stories heard.

The chapter, by Kann-Rasmussen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, and Blomgren on LAMs as activists is very thought-provoking, straddling that difficult divide between traditional senses of neutrality and taking a stand. They note that much of the research is in an American context and it is there, in the United States, that we currently witness (certainly in the library context) some of the most profound issues

with books being removed or suppressed from collections because they 'offend' some community or another. The authors note that Scandinavian cultural policy can be viewed through the lens of being an instrument for social and political change as well as in terms of promoting or enhancing equality and social justice for decades. This is an important debate for all cultural institutions, certainly in a 'western' context with the professionals who work in these institutions subscribing to the notion that cultural engagement with libraries, archives, and museums is essentially about equality, social justice, lifelong learning, equality of opportunity, and enhancing the life chances of our fellow citizens.

Yet we know that the case is much more nuanced than this; the commentary around the work of the Progressive Librarians Guild demonstrates that our sector has often been complicit in inequality and injustice. I was reminded reading it about the work being done in my own country, at the National Library of Scotland, to examine how past approaches to cataloguing, classification, metadata and, more broadly, knowledge organization have often used colonial or outdated taxonomy and terminology which has led to certain voices not being heard, or to be viewed through one particular prism, and therefore, ultimately, to be excluded.

The volume ends with some final thoughts which I think are broadly transferable to contexts outside Scandinavia. The editors note issues of legitimation, sustainability, and democracy but for me the most important point that they note is 'the need to defend the worth of what they do'. The library profession has traditionally been good at measuring itself by metrics; quantitative measures of issues or visitors, and I have no doubt that other parts of the GLAM sector have also adopted similar approaches. More recently, of course, we have moved beyond this (whilst acknowledging the continued importance of the quantitative) to consider the value and impact of what our sector does for the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and for society as a whole. Other countries, such as my own, are not necessarily in the same beneficial place as the Scandinavian nations where, as the editors note, culture and media policy is seen as an extension of the welfare state.

The concluding remarks do, however, chime strongly with me in highlighting the importance of libraries, archives, and museums in times of societal crisis. My own research into Scottish public libraries and their response to the Covid 19 Lockdowns also identified their criticality to communities in times of national anxiety. They were perceived as being a critical service (at least by users, if not always by more senior administrators). Advocating the worth of what libraries, archives, and museums do and the value they have for their patrons, the contribution they make to our cultural landscape, and the positive impact that they have on society more generally is, therefore, important. This volume makes a substantial contribution to that debate, and indeed to the practical consideration of how we demonstrate our value and impact more widely. This anthology provides an incisive overview of contemporary issues in Scandinavian libraries, archives, and museum; but more than that, the editors and the contributors are to be congratulated on producing an accessible volume that offers much to think about for those of us outside Scandinavia.

This anthology is thoughtful and thought-provoking. It contains a fascinating range of chapters exploring diverse but inevitably interconnected themes such as technology or participation and engagement. The chapters are well-written, and the editors have done an excellent job putting together a cohesive and insightful collection. The individual chapters, each supported by extensive references, stand as accessible discourses in their own right, but the anthology, taken collectively, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the current place of libraries, archives, and museums in the twenty-first century. The Scandinavian experience affords much learning and many transferable lessons for other countries. This is an excellent volume, that has much to offer both experienced researchers and professionals in the GLAM sector but also to students studying our respective disciplines.

References

Lankes, R. David (2012). *Expect More: Demanding Better Libraries For Today's Complex World*. South Carolina: CreateSpace