

The Norwegian Museum Authority and strategic planning

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1. Background - The Norwegian museum landscape

A predominant position of museums in the capital cities is often a characteristic of other European countries. In Norway, however, large museums with really extensive collections do not exist. Reasonably strong, both national and regional museums with significant collections are located both in Oslo and in other larger cities.

A large proportion of museum funding in Norway comes from the public sector. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is responsible for 15 museums and partly responsible for the operation of more than 300 museums via contributory funding to 19 different regional authorities. The 5 university museums in Norway are affiliated with the Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs. Certain museums belong under the Ministries of Defence and of Transport and Communications. The Ministry of the Environment is responsible for cultural heritage sites and monuments.

- There are about 800 museums and collections in Norway, distributed between approximately 700 administrative units
- Almost 23 million objects are kept in the museums
- The museums hold a total of 7.5 million photographs
- There are more than 5 000 protected buildings at the museums
- The museums display more than 2 600 different exhibitions
- 9.1 million people visit the museums annually - the population of the country is 4.2 mill.
- 2 900 man-years are executed at the museums annually, slightly over half of these by permanent staff
- The museums' income is slightly above 1.2 billion NOK, or 150 mill. US \$, about 2/3 of which is allocated from government sources

In other words: Norway is characterised by having a large number of very small museums, most of them with nil to three people on the permanent staff. Of the more than 800 registered museums, 213 carry out more than 3.5 man-years of work. These 213 museums have more than 95 % of the collections, takes 95 % of the public money going into the sector, has 94 % of the permanent staff, 80-85 % of the visitors, but less than 65 % of the museum buildings. The reason is that we have many small open-air museums with old, local farm buildings, without staff, or with very small staff.

Hence, the Norwegian museum landscape is for the main part a scene for the enthusiastic generalists, the amateurs and the volunteers. It is clear that there are few resources for administrative tasks in most of these museums, not to speak about strategic planning or long-term planning.

This has of course been recognised by the authorities, not least the Ministry of Culture. As a result, the Norwegian Museum Authority was established from January 1994. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs invented this official English name, but it is really a bit misleading. A direct translation of the Norwegian name would be something like the Norwegian Museum Development Agency, which is much more to the point; it describes much more precisely what we are doing.

2. The Norwegian Museum Authority - NMA

NMA is a governmental institution giving advice to public authorities. NMA should contribute to developing and to the execution of the governmental museum policy and to carry out the tasks delegated from the Ministry of Culture.

NMA shall:

1. contribute towards all aspects of museum work; research, documentation, conservation and education/mediation/public service
2. encourage development in and co-operation between museums
3. contribute to an optimal co-ordination of the national museum resources
4. contribute towards rising the standard of the museums and increase the competencies
5. initiate and co-ordinate courses and other educational activities for museum staff
6. be an information centre of and for Norwegian museums
7. enhance participation of Norwegian museums on the international scene

So far, the Ministry is still responsible for the ordinary governmental subventions for the museum sector; the money for running the museums are still handed out by the Ministry to the regional authorities.

NMA takes care of the subventions for some specific organisations, like the Norwegian Museum Association, the national museum journal, the national committee of ICOM etc. We also have the governmental funds for museum security projects, for fire protection, theft protection etc.

More important from our point of view is that we have some means for development projects. The museums can apply for project funding. The projects have to be developmental in their scope, and it is a prerequisite that they can be disseminated to other museums. We have also funds for development projects which we initiate ourselves, and several nation-wide registration systems and standards have been or are being developed, both for cultural heritage collections, for fine art objects, and for historical photo collections.

And we have funds for training activities. We have been running courses on photographic registration and conservation, in preventive conservation, and on more administrative matters. I will say a few words about these administrative training activities, which are closely related to strategic planning.

3. NMA's place in management and strategic planning

We have so far undertaken four different tasks for strengthening the quality of management in Norwegian museums:

a) Courses on writing goal-oriented documents and plans

We have run 4 courses with very specific goals: To teach museum managers to write goal-oriented documents and corresponding plans for operations.

b) Planning and management instruments

Last autumn we followed up with a training course on planning and management instruments.

The content can be outlined as follows:

1. Management instruments used by the Ministry of Culture
2. Strategic management and leadership
 3. Why?
 4. How?
 5. In relation to short term and yearly plans
 6. Case study from the museum sector

7. Information as a means for management and for meeting the goals
8. How to build an internal system for planning and management in an organisation
9. Two examples (case studies) from Norwegian museums

c) Development programme for museum leaders

We have also been running a development programme for museum leaders. This is a programme with 4 hotel sessions, each of 4 full days, and with some individual work in between. We buy the services from a professional company. The third group is going through this programme during 1999/2000. The main emphasis is on communication. A positive side effect of the programme is that a good and lasting network between participating museum leaders is established.

d) Self-assessment programme for museums

The third type of programme we have been undertaking, is a programme for self-assessment, based on the ideas of the Museum Assessment Program developed by American Association of Museums.

Two pilot or test rounds have been run before we had the final version ready. In the test rounds, the participating museums were closely monitored during the process of self-assessment, and the programme has been revised both to suit Norwegian conditions better than in the beginning, and also to avoid some of the unintended side-effects resulting from the process. I will come back to these a bit later.

Each participating institution has appointed a group of 4 to 5 people to co-ordinate the work. We have in the three first runs of the programme had three sessions with these groups, one as the starting point in the process, the second is a mid-term gathering, and the third a final summing-up session, each of two days. In between, the institutions are free to ask for help or advice from us, and if they wish, we will visit the institution and have a meeting on the programme with the whole museum staff present.

Even if we regard the programme as ready for a permanent dissemination, we advise museums not to start without these three sessions run by NMA. There are certain problems arising in processes like this, and it is important that the museums know about some of them in beforehand:

1. Going through a self-assessment programme creates expectations, and it is important that realistic goals are set. It is not possible to eliminate all weaknesses discovered in such a process.
2. The institutions concentrate too much on the negative sides, on the sides that need improvement, and too little emphasis is given to the strengths of the institution. This can easily lead to a somewhat depressed atmosphere in the museum as a whole.
3. The process creates energy that has to be canalised towards the main, common goals of the institution. You inevitably discover weaknesses that can seemingly be remedied with small means, and people will take initiatives accordingly. But sometimes, it is better to wait until you have gone through all aspects of the whole institution, and carefully plan the steps to be undertaken to increase the overall quality.

4. Future prospects

Just before Christmas, the Government had put forward a paper for the Parliament on the Archives, Libraries, and Museum sector. Here, the Government outlines in rather general terms the future plans. The paper will be discussed by the Parliament during the spring session. Also this will be a discussion on rather general terms, but will nevertheless be the official position of the authorities sitting on the money for the sector.

I should state that the government has a rather narrow parliamentary basis, it is really a minority government, so many things may happen. However, if things are turning out as it seems now, the NMA will have a substantial role to play in the future.

We will handle all the governmental funds for running the museums that are eligible for such subventions. And very encouraging is that the government foresees a substantial increase in these funds for running costs (40 % increase over a 5-year period). These funds will be allocated through regional authorities, and it is foreseen that NMA will go into negotiations with all these 19 regional bodies, to secure a better regional organisation of the museum sector. This will hopefully ensure a certain management quality, and higher quality on the other aspects of running museums; in research, documentation, conservation and mediation/public service.

These are indeed very challenging perspectives.

The government also states that staff and funds must be allocated to NMA to make this possible. What is also encouraging, is that the programmes we have been undertaking for the five years since the creation, seem to fit quite nicely into our future tasks. A five-year transitional period is foreseen. In this time our financial responsibilities may rise from today's NOK 35 mill. to 700 - 800 mill. What is less encouraging, is that our emphasis on development projects for the museum sector up to now, may drown in sheer management duties.

An extra negative aspect is that up to now, we have been sitting with the niceties, whereas the government has been responsible for the generally poor funding of the sector. The Government has been the shooting target for the criticism for that. We may easily get that role also.