

Change التغير Wandel

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CHANGE

Everything is constantly changing. Whether you like it or not. Are you open for change and/or scared? Do you like to keep it ‘the traditional way’? Or are you brave in testing new things – even if they can fail or not go the way you planned? Change is inevitable and we are all effected by it.

Globally, museums are important cultural institutions. They are guardians of our history and keepers of our collective memory. Museums are places of learning, discovery, reflection, discourse, exploration and they have the potential to be powerful agents of change. However, in order to achieve this potential, museums must undergo a significant shift in their approach to their visitors and their employees. Many museums have not kept up with the times. The annual conference of ICOM Germany raised questions such as, ‘How do museums become places of social change, justice and participation? And how can they act outwardly as impulse generators for positive social change and lead towards change? What internal processes can be initiated so that museums are not only fulfilling supposed tasks, but renewing themselves from within?’¹ In the following essay I want to expand on some of the numerous aspects, triggered by current discussions and my participation in the SAWA Museum Studies Program 2022.

One of the primary changes that must be made in museum institutions is to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all visitors and employees. This means creating a space that is accessible to people of all backgrounds, abilities and identities. Barriers should be removed or at least

¹ ICOM Germany Annual Conference, 2nd-5th November 2022, Berlin.

minimized. This could include providing signage in multiple languages, making sure the museum is wheelchair accessible, and providing resources for people with disabilities. The museum should appeal to people of any social class and level of education and provide a point of contact and interest for diverse individual needs. It is not just a place for academics. Additionally, museums should strive to create a space that is free from discrimination and harassment, and that encourages open dialogue and respectful discourse.

People not only can change museums. Museums can change lives too. Participatory museums and exhibitions can make people feel welcome, heard, valued and proud. They inspire and challenge. As Mike Murawski states, museums as ‘living institutions’ are agents of social change because they bring people together and contribute to local communities. He sees the future of museums in human connection, care, empathy, healing, community power and love². In society we have to face many issues like inequality, discriminations, racism, intolerance, poverty and much more. Museums can be spaces to help us understand and discuss. They can break down barriers in following inclusive approaches. Many museums are already trying to become more accessible, working with diverse communities, sharing their collections and knowledge and listening to the knowledge outwith the museum walls. Museums have the power and resources. They have the power of people and the trust of people’s connections.

Another important change that must be made in museum institutions is to ensure that the staff profile is diverse and reflective of the communities that the museum serves. This means rethinking hierarchy, embracing co-leadership and hiring a workforce that is representative of the local population, with a range of backgrounds, ages, experiences, and perspectives. This will not only help to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment, but it will also help to ensure that the museum is providing meaningful and relevant

² Murawski, Mike: Museums as Agents of change. A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker. Lanham/Boulder/New York/London, 2021.

programming and functioning that is reflective of the community. The Instagram account ‘change the museum’³ is dedicated to this challenge and gives a platform for museum professionals who have experienced racism and social oppression.

My experience picks up at another angle. Being a young professional joining a small team of an institution that was under the same management and the same tight structures for a very long time, can feel like being contained. Is it impossible to make changes if people in positions of power don’t support you or have a different attitude and understanding of for example a museum? If the persons in charge, who have the power to decide, stick to old work methods and ways, they create a barrier for change to happen. They also have to be open for change and adapt to new methods. The personal values, culture and habitus of an individual influences the functioning in the working life. But: older generations retire and are replaced by young people, who have new ideas and can’t wait to get started. They bring new methods and ways of thinking. More and more you can find non-hierarchical structures which form a newly constructed work environment and allow a reformative definition of teamwork.

There are positions at museums in Germany especially for some young people, for example the ‘Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (FSJ)’ and the ‘Volontariat’, a traineeship. The FSJ is a gap year for any young people between 16 and 26 after finishing compulsory education which normally means completing 9th grade. During this year you will receive €410 pocket money every month, you are entitled to child benefit and the host organisation pays your contributions to social security insurances. The traineeship is exclusively for graduates with a university degree and lasts two years, in which the young people get to know the work in the museum field. It can be seen as a privilege path of education that is exclusionary to many people who don’t have the opportunity to go to university. On the one hand these jobs are great to get an insight in the work life. But on the other hand, especially the traineeship program, has very limited

³ Instagram [@changethemuseum] (13.12.2022).

job security. Most of the positions are temporary. This can make it difficult for trainees to plan for the future and may require them to constantly search for new opportunities once their traineeship ends. Furthermore, these jobs have limited financial support. Museum traineeship positions don't offer the same level of pay as permanent positions, which can make it difficult for trainees to support themselves financially or even a family. In some cases, trainees are required to get a second job on top of the full-time traineeship. This can be demoralizing and make it difficult to maintain a good work ethic and motivation. To be and to feel valued is one of the most important aspects for me for a healthy employment contract.

Finally, museums must strive to create a more equitable and transparent workplace for their employees. This could include providing competitive wages, offering flexible work schedules, and providing access to professional development opportunities and eliminate their exclusionary recruitment policies. Additionally, museums should create a culture of respect and appreciation for their employees, and should provide resources and support to those who need it. We are at the end of the essay and yet many other aspects in need of change have not been addressed, like digitization, sustainability and decolonization, just to name a few.

These raised changes are essential if museums are to remain relevant and effective in the 21st century. They will help to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for visitors and employees, and will ensure that the museum is providing meaningful and relevant programming that is reflective of the community. Many different aspects and areas for change were introduced. But now what? How should your museum change? Pause and reflect. Start with what you can change and start with one aspect. Start talking about important matters, discuss your ideas and start with one little thing. That can already have a big impact, 'just' get the process going. Change starts with us.