

ON THE SURVIVAL OF RARE PLANTS – HUNGARIAN MUSEUMS IN THE DECADE OF CHANGEOVER

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to assess changes in the museum institution as a response to the social environment. A metaphor of natural evolution is employed. The idea of 'effective history' is also introduced. The case in point in this article is Hungary and its museums. The period after 1962 witnessed strong growth in the public sector. The growth was seriously hampered by inflation in the second half of the 1980s. The environment, however, did not change drastically until the 1990s when there were dramatic changes in the amount and principles of public funding. A case study is introduced to mirror these changes.

KEYWORDS: Museums • Hungary • institutions • public sector • cultural policy • privatization

Museums are very much like rare plants. It takes quite some time for them to grow from a seed and take root. Unlike rare plants, museums nonetheless seem to survive any changes in the weather and conditions after they have taken root – or do they?

At first glance, using an organic metaphor for the museum may strike us as odd. However, the museologist Peter Davis has come up with a very similar idea. In his view, museums are like species that occupy a niche in an ecosystem. The purpose of the museum is to recycle; it collects objects, specimens, ideas, and skills – and returns them to the community as exhibitions, events, and publications. In addition, just like in nature, the museum is in competition with its neighboring species. The museum has to compete for economic resources and audiences. Although peaceful co-existence prevails, there have been instances of marginalization and extinction. Therefore, Davis concludes, just as competition and adaptation are the bases for natural evolution, similarly the museum as a species has evolved through adaptation to the demands of contemporary society (Davis 1999: 32–33).

Davis' ecological metaphor is in harmony with another idea, one that has been put forward by the museologist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in her treatment of the museum throughout history. In her own words:

"Museums have always had to modify how they worked, and what they did, according to the context, the plays of power, and the social, economic, and political imperatives that surrounded them. Museums, in common with all other social institutions, serve many masters, and must play many tunes accordingly. Perhaps success can be defined by the ability to balance all the tunes that must be played and still make a sound worth listening to." (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 1)

There is one critical aspect in which this idea departs from the conventional way of perceiving museums: there is no fixed, quintessential definition for the museum. Quite to the contrary, Hooper-Greenhill emphasises the changeable nature of the institution. This is in stark contrast with museum histories that start from the ancient Greek *museion* and work their way forward to the present with the intention of describing a monolithic institution. In fact, Hooper-Greenhill writes an “effective history” of the museum. Effective history is an idea conceived by Michel Foucault. According to effective history, there may be more historiographical value in ruptures than steady lines of growth (ibid.: 9–12). In Hooper-Greenhill’s view, the “identities, targets, functions, and subject positions are variable and discontinuous” (ibid.: 193).

The purpose of this paper is to assess the survival skills and adaptability¹ of Hungarian museums under the conditions of a political changeover. Firstly, I start with an overview of the public museum system which developed during socialism; secondly, I discuss the problems that surfaced in the early 1990s, and finally, I focus on one case in rural Hungary. I reconstruct the situation of the 1990s on the basis of a Hungarian periodical *Magyar Múzeumok*, Hungarian Museums. We have to bear in mind that the severity of the difficulties the museums faced in the 1990s varied from town to town and from county to county.

THE KÁDÁR-ERA MUSEUM: THE GROWING PUBLIC SECTOR AND WELFARE FOR ALL

The second phase of Hungarian state socialism is generally called the Kádár-era after the communist leader, János Kádár, who occupied one of the top positions in the Socialist Workers’ Party during a period that lasted 32 years (Romsics 1999: 315). The era was characterized by the political leadership’s push towards ever increasing welfare in an effort to win unanimous popular support for the socialist government. This is why Kádár-era socialism also became known as “goulash-communism” or “refrigerator socialism” (Kontler 2002: 443). The majority of citizens, however, remained oblivious to the fact that after the worldwide energy crisis in the 1970s, the government subsidized its welfare program primarily through foreign loans and that the state economy had reached a point of crisis by the mid 1980s (ibid.: 457–458).

The Kádár era witnessed large investments in art, culture and education. The state subsidized theatre and concert audiences by paying for more than half of the ticket prices. The public library system was widespread; one in five Hungarians had a public library card and the number of books in the libraries reached 50 million (Kontler 2002: 447). The universities were able to maintain large staffs – in the 1980s there was a ratio of one academic staff member for every 4 to 5 students. Similarly to other socialist countries, Hungarian academic activity was divided into three parts: the Academy of Sciences coordinated the research as well as undertaking the so-called basic research, the universities primarily took care of the academic instruction, and finally, various smaller and bigger institutions carried out the applied research (Romsics 1999: 363, 365; Valuch 2000: 334–337).

The great number of white collar workers was a clear indication of an expanding public sector. There were nearly 24 000 academic researchers in the various institutions

of the Academy, universities, ministries and industry in 1970; in 1980 the number had risen to over 38 000 (Valuch 2000: 335). The museums showed a similar growth curve. Between the years 1960 and 1975, the number of curatorial staff in all museums had risen from 346 to 805. Similarly, there was a remarkable growth in the numbers of trained restorers (from 103 in 1955 to 294 in 1975), the variety in professional equipment, and the size of facilities (Éri 1977: 26–28; Ikvai 1983: 224). The museums were thriving. Not only did new posts open for museum professionals in the old museums, there was also a clear trend of opening whole new museums. Especially, new open-air museums saw the light of day from the 1960s onwards (Balassa 1987: 106; Kurucz 1987: 8–9).

One conspicuous reason behind the growth of the museum sector was the new county museum system which was introduced in 1963. Between the years 1962 and 1982, the number of academic museum professionals employed, outside Budapest, rose from 96 to 434. This in turn reflected general trends of decentralization and regional development policy, which were adopted by the government in 1962. In total there were 19 county museums in Hungary. The already existing museums, within one county, formed a county museum organization. The oldest and best established museum in the county capital assumed the leading role as the central museum. There were also municipal museums in smaller towns employing a smaller number of staff, as well as exhibition halls, open-air ethnographic museums and commemorative museums that did not have a permanent academic staff but were supervised by the central unit. The new system gave museums more financial freedom. Since the income from entrance fees and sales was minimal, they received major parts of their budgets from the county council. By the 1980s, some forms of sponsorship had also developed. Local industries and tourist organizations, as well as town councils, occasionally sponsored exhibitions and publications. It was also possible to apply for financial assistance for important acquisitions or events from the central funds of the Ministry of Culture (Ikvai 1983: *passim*).

The most immediate benefit from the system was the synergy it produced. The smaller museums could make use of the photographic and restoration laboratories in the central units. Also, all the county museums published annuals which were spread widely through the library exchange system (*ibid.*: 225). These annuals formed the main platform for the research carried out by the museum professionals in the counties. In this way, the provincial arts and sciences were able to keep up with the center in Budapest.

Although the county museum system was an indication of decentralization, the center still played a leading role. The various central museums in Budapest gave advice to provincial museums in their academic field. In addition, the Academy of Sciences was responsible for longer-term outlines for any field of research. The general supervision of activities was carried out by the Ministry of Culture, with the National Museum Council acting in a supportive role (Éri 1977: 23). Nándor Ikvai notes the specific problems of the county system in the 1980s as follows:

“One of the direct consequences of financial assistance and patronage is the danger of subjectivism. From time to time it occurs that a county begins implementing a project that does not fit into the national system, occasionally against the advice of the specialists at the local museum. Sometimes, local bodies support moves to found a secondary or not very desirable museum that cannot be justified from a national point of view. ... [I]t is becoming increasingly necessary to review the ques-

tion of the professional guidance exercised by the provincial museums, in order to make it more effective.” (Ikvai 1983: 227)

THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM – A FAREWELL TO THE ORGANIZED MUSEUM SECTOR?

In the mid-1980s many Hungarians realized that they were not gaining economic wealth although they were working ever harder to achieve it. In the second half of the 1980s inflation accelerated noticeably. According to the historian László Kontler, the economic discontent would not have been a strong enough reason on its own for political changes had not the changing climate of world politics allowed for the emergence of new domestic opposition. Kádár was reluctant to introduce any profound changes that would have put the legitimacy of communist rule into question. In the party conference of 1988 he was nominated the chairman of the party, which in fact deprived him of political power (Kontler 2002: 459–463). The economic situation and ideological breakthrough in the country made it impossible for the party to cling to power; therefore negotiations were held, during the months from June – September 1989, between the pragmatic reform communists, the main opposition groups, and a third party, which represented labor unions and the Patriotic People’s Front. In October 1989, the Communist Party was dissolved and a new western style Socialist party was founded. Democratic parliamentary elections were held in March 1990 (*ibid.*: 460–469, *passim*).

The museum institution, among other public institutions in Hungary, had to face new challenges that arose already during the late 1980s and especially after the change-over from communist rule to democracy. These fell into three categories: ownership, legislation, and public funding.

The challenge, perhaps the most immediate right after the collapse of state socialism, was tied to the ownership of the collections, which had been nationalized in 1949. The first part of the 1990s witnessed a thorough inventory of all collections in all museums in order to sort out objects into their proper categories: those owned by the state, the counties and the cities (Savolainen 2005: 131²). The professionals strongly recommended that the objects still remain in the museums after their new ownership had been determined (Talás 1996: 47).

Another challenge was the uncertain future of the 1963 county museum system. Museum professionals expected a new museum law to settle the question (Savolainen 2005: 131). The museum law of 1997 proved to be a disappointment to professionals. It all but omitted questions about the legally binding minimum role and tasks of county museums, as well as the minimum requirements for their budgeting on the part of the county government (Law CXL/1997 “On Museum Institutions, Public Libraries and Popular Education”; Savolainen 2005: 131). According to the law, the county government has a right to nominate one museum in its jurisdiction to serve as the county museum, or to found an entirely new one. The law gives a leading professional role to the county museum over other museum institutions, public or private, within a specific county; but, for some reason, specifies only archeological responsibilities (Law CLX/1997, 45§ 1–5). On the other hand, the local museums, which still are a legitimate category, are given the freedom to choose whether they are a part of the county museum or independent

units (Law CLX/1997, 46§ 2). The national museum institutions fell into the budget of the Ministry of Education, any regionally or locally governed museums into the budget of the Ministry of Interior and, in addition to these the Ministry of National Heritage took over the financial support of church collections as well as special grants available through application (Law CLX/1997, 52§). The law does not, however, specify any requirements for budgeting; one of which, for example, could have been the minimum number of employees. The general funding for all popular educational needs of any specific county are calculated on basis of the population statistics (Law CLX/1997, 92§).

Generally speaking the museum professionals regarded the meltdown of the county museum system as a very unappealing option. As mentioned above, the system had been labor efficient. Until now, the smaller museums had benefited from the synergy created by certain centrally located services, such as restoration and photographic laboratories. Furthermore, there was not the need for subject specific professionals in every city since the professionals could exchange their knowledge through planning exhibitions and projects (Talás 1996: 47; Savolainen 2005: 131). According to my informants, the county museum system dissolved in 1999. This led to very different solutions in disparate counties; some counties were able to continue as before, whereas in some counties the system dissolved altogether. In some cases, the budget plummeted to one third of its previous total or almost half of the professional staff positions removed (Savolainen 2005: 131).

The above mentioned Kádár-era inflation had already affected the museum budgets in the second half of the 1980s. The actual resources the museums had were not growing, only the numbers. In the 1990s, even the numeric values of museum budgets started to decline (Müller 1996: 43–46). My informants saw this as indicative of a lack of political will (Savolainen 2005: 132). The neo-liberal voices in national politics paid attention to a fact, prevalent already during socialism: the biggest consumers of cultural services were the wealthy middle- and upper classes. It seemed plausible to these neo-liberals that the wealthier classes take responsibility for a larger proportion of the production costs (Bácskai 1999: *passim*). As this ideology was gaining power, on the national level, the county museums became ever more dependent on the political will of their respective county governments.

The situation was not helped by the fact that by the middle of the 1990s almost three quarters of the museum budgets consisted of staff salaries. The number of staff had grown too large during the decades of professionalism. It became evident that not only the number of jobs, in maintenance such as museum guards, but also professional staff had to be reduced (Müller 1996: 43–46). In smaller communities this led to situations where the local museum degenerated into an exhibition hall with no permanent professional staff (Savolainen 2005: 132). Another area which suffered considerably from the reduction of funds was scientific research and publishing (Müller 1996: 44).

The periodical *Magyar múzeumok* (Hungarian Museums) ever since its first issue in 1995 had commented on this situation. The Hungarian professionals were interested and actively looking for alternative funding and management solutions, including from elsewhere in Europe. For example, the Pulszky Society, an association of Hungarian museum professionals, and the Dutch Museums' Association set up an aid program in 1995, which aimed at finding new managerial solutions for Hungarian museums (Wollák 1996). One of my informants, who took part in this managerial training, none-

theless complained that although the training had presented new ideas, these could not be directly applied to the Hungarian institutional structure. One of the solutions was an increasing proportion of private sector sponsorships (Veres 1997: 40; Petercsák 2000: 39). In addition, the specific project grants from the state, available on application, gave relief to the tight budgets. However, the introduction of significant private, or public outside funding, seemed to be an alien concept in local politics. My informants knew of cases when external input made the county governments consider cutting back their share of the budget accordingly. This naturally made some museum professionals doubtful of the meaningfulness of acquiring outside funding since it would require a lot of effort and possibly lead to no gain (Savolainen 2005: 132).

A DECADE OF SWEEPING CHANGES – A CASE STUDY ON A LOCAL LEVEL

To illustrate the above changes, I utilize a case study from Csongrád County in south-eastern Hungary. I demonstrate how quickly the circumstances of a museum unit could change in the 1990s.

There is a place called Szer on the Hungarian lowland which – according to a medieval written source rediscovered in the 18th century – served as the stage for a gathering that marked the beginning of the Hungarian tribal state. This discovery could not but intrigue the Hungarians who, at the time, were experiencing a national awakening. Therefore, this area north of the town of Szeged had received varying national interest since the beginning of the 19th century, and there had been projects for building a national monument, a national grove, even a model town, as well as a museum in the area. However, because of the Second World War none of these projects were fully realized until the Kádár era when, in the very beginning of the 1970s, the Communist Party, the Patriotic People's Front and the County Museum set out to build a national-historical memorial park on the site. It must be noted here that the intermarriage of Communism and national feeling – we must remember that the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party had labeled nationalism as its arch enemy – is a complex matter and it deserves separate treatment. Similarly, the historical validity of the above mentioned written source, which dates a couple of centuries after the alleged gathering, also deserves closer analysis. However, they are beyond the scope of the present article. Here, I am only focusing on the institutional growth and changes within the museum. These can best be seen in the project of building the recreational museum/memorial park complex, which I outline in the following paragraphs.

The original intention of the political decision makers, in the 1970s and 1980s, had been to create a place for celebrating the Hungarian state. The celebrations focused on an annual mass gathering that was held on the national day, the 20th of August. The content of the event was both political and recreational. In the writings of those responsible, the mass gathering was seen both as a new tradition and as a renewed, improved continuation of an older tradition of gatherings (Erdei 1971: 171–173; Koncz 1988: 209). However, the memorial park that was created in the 1970s and 1980s mainly served local recreational purposes (Landers 1996: 181 ff.) and had a scientific content. The scientific content was realized through archaeological excavations (Trogmayer 1995: 3),

an ethnographic open air museum, and the construction of a central exhibition hall; although the latter did not become a reality until after the changeover (Novák 1995: 6–7). The park was a part of the local county museum. Therefore, it was the provincial museum professionals who were responsible for the content of the exhibitions. The construction of an open air ethnographic museum was a part of the national trend I mentioned above. According to the museum director emeritus Ottó Trogmayer, the park was exceptional for the amount of new buildings erected. It was not customary during the socialist era to construct new museum buildings (Trogmayer 1995: 4).

The national-historical memorial park was exceptional in its national importance and some of its projects occurred on a grand scale. Still, it could not escape the winds of change in the 1990s. We have to bear in mind that it was still only a department of the county museum and, as such, subject to changes in the public sector. As I already earlier pointed out, in the 1990s the budgeting of the local museums became more and more dependent on the political will of the local county governments.

The trouble for the memorial park started in 1994. Several years earlier, there had been significant new investments in the park. A new exhibition hall was to be opened and a large historic cyclorama painting was being restored. There had been a special foundation which had covered the expenses of the restoration. There were high hopes that the new facilities and exhibition could be opened in 1996, the 1100th anniversary of the Hungarian Conquest. Alas, the government had not included the national-historical memorial park on its list of those historic sites to receive support from anniversary funds set apart for that purpose. Although some arrangements could be made after an appeal, it became more and more evident that the county government would be responsible for a major part of investment in the park. It seems, based on an article by Katalin Pálffy, who has studied the minutes of the board of directors of the park, that the local political decision-makers had little faith that the park would become profitable and earn a return on the investments in the near future. Therefore, they pressed for an independent foundation or other arrangement that would take the economic burden off the shoulders of the county government. It was not a bad idea from the museum-professionals' viewpoint either, if the foundation funding the restoration, for example, could be revived. However, it was increasingly unclear who should initiate the legal procedures: the local village council, the county government or the state. Eventually, the patience of the county council grew thin, and it elected that the memorial park should be cut off from the county museum organization and become an independent unit (Pálffy 1995: 26–28).

The director of the county museum tried to change the minds of the county council, but without success. In his view, the opening of the new exhibition would have attracted enough tourists to cover the investment and, not only that, its income would have covered the annual budget of the county museum. This would have been an ideal situation for the museum struggling with budget cuts and the eventual downsizing of personnel. The way the park was rejected was met with bitter disillusionment on the part of some museum professionals who had invested a lot of time and expertise in the exhibitions. The relationship between the county museum and the park has improved after a council of scientific experts – representing the museum professionals – has been established. However, the situation is exceptional: the park operates as an economically independent unit, but all the objects in the exhibitions are still part of the museum collections (Savolainen 2005: 158–159).

The park, as an independent unit, has taken on new ways of marketing itself to audiences. The emphasis on real and invented traditions and nationalistic meanings has grown. Both the anthropologist Ákos Kovács and the art historian Katalin Sinkó have criticized the fact that the park has drifted away from its scientific roots. Kovács has focused on the cult of chieftain Árpád and its questionable usage in the park; whereas Sinkó has been alarmed by the lack of professional guidance and she has expressed her concern over whether the park and its exhibitions are increasingly becoming just a backdrop for the heritage industry and tourism (Sinkó 1996: 72–73; Kovács 1997: 98–103; Savolainen 2002: *passim*; Savolainen 2005: 193).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been my purpose in this article to demonstrate how museums, as social institutions, depend on the functioning and will of the surrounding society, trends of culture, politics and economics. It would be foolish indeed, in the field of museum studies, to focus on the museum as if it were a phenomenon completely isolated from its surroundings. On the contrary, the museum is very much an indicator of the society it serves. In the case of Hungary, we can observe how the trends of decentralization and the growth of the public sector directly impacted on the museum. We can also see how the trends of diminished state involvement and privatization can be mirrored in the museum.

To return to the ecological metaphor introduced in the beginning of this article, it seems that environmental factors play a decisive role in the evolution of the museum. Museums cannot act against the forces of their environments. Nonetheless, a metaphor of this kind is blind to the fact that the decision-makers are always real human beings and decisions involve a position of power. The historic transition highlights the evolution of an institution to challenge us to weigh the possibilities and limitations of individual and institutional concepts of power.

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NOTES

1 I would like to emphasize that I utilize these terms metaphorically.

2 The original sources (interviews) for my licentiate thesis are kept in the archives of the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Turku under the code TKU/TYKL/SPA/148.