

Investing in sustainable intercultural dialogue at Jamtli

In Sweden we know from national statistics that about 21.5 percent of the population has foreign background – which is the sum of 16.5 percent who was born in another country and 5.0 percent born in Sweden but with both parents born in other countries. In a country with a population of about 10 million people that means that more than 2 million people has foreign background. In some of the major cities the percentage is even higher. In Stockholm and Gothenburg about one third has foreign background and in Malmö four out of ten has foreign background.

This development is not new to Sweden or Europe and most probably the percentage of people with foreign background will increase further in the coming years.

The success of open air museums in the past has been based on the ability to attract very many people regardless of educational background or other socio economic characteristics. The open air museums has told the history of ordinary people for ordinary people as has been said (John Williams-Davis & Beth Thomas, 2013). Not least for the open air museums established before the First World War it is also clear that they were popular because of their ability to be sceneries and establishments which could be used to visualise national roots and pride which was used to over win the otherwise typical class confrontation (Stefan Bohman, 1997).

With this background it should be natural for an open air museum today to take on the task of being the meeting place of all people in the area – local, regional, national, European or international – and a place where everybody finds traces of culture which they claim to be part of their background. Well! It may sound easy but how can that be done?

Open Air Museums unified in diversity

There are not two open air museums who looks alike and not two who address the same challenge the exact same way. Partly this may be explained by different historical settings which inspires different traditions but another explanation is possibly found in different perception of the role of the museum in society. That could mean that some choose to look back at historical immigration époques and include such environments at the museum where others may look to the current situation.

Naturally the historical perspective is interesting and necessary in relation to immigrants or minorities who have been in the local area for a long time. In many European countries that could be Jewish settings, other different minorities and for example environments which shows how guest workers – the immigrant workers – in the 1950'ies to the 1970'ies lived and worked. Many open air museums are doing just that. For Jamtli in the middle of Sweden it has been natural to have environments which illustrates how the ethnic minority of the Sami

people lived when they mostly lived a traditional nomad life with reindeers, hunting and fishing.

But at Jamtli we have also decided since a long time that we want to make the current immigration part of our DNA (Henrik Zipsane, 2003).

We think that if we only look back it will take many years before we include the current immigration culture in our museum. If we work that way the current immigrants will not have anything from their background culture to find in our museum for many years and then they will not build a natural relation to Jamtli. That will be counterproductive to an aim of our museum being of importance through creating bonds between all people and fostering relations to the experiences at the museum.

Jamtli is located in the region of Jämtland-Härjedalen in Sweden and the population here is approximately 126 000 people and almost half the population lives in the regional capital Östersund. In August 2015 we could see that the eight municipalities in the region got ever closer to a situation where many of the refugees in our region would not be able to find accommodation outside the old military camp which was used for the interim period between arrival to our region and approval or disapproval of the asylum applications.

When we realised that this was the situation and we saw the intense debate in the media we began thinking about how our position should be. We felt a need to put straight forward humanistic values in front and see if we could combine the needs of people here and now with long term development of our museum. But how?

The Jamtli model of intercultural dialogue

Our main challenge was how to combine our long term ambition to have real, authentic and visible intercultural dialogue at Jamtli at the same time as we wanted to be of public service in a time of incredible need for many people. This situation was new to us. In the past Jamtli has had a close collaboration with the local employment office and the municipalities in our region and it has been a priority for Jamtli to have many job offers for trainees and apprentices. During recent years the percentage of people with immigrant background in these employments has grown steadily.

While we prepared our model for a bigger action for intercultural dialogue we had two smaller projects in collaboration with the asylum centre outside the city and the local Red Cross association. One project was called "A letter to our grandchildren" and was actually an activity where staff from Jamtli met with immigrant residents in the Asylum Centre and documented their stories and together formed the different stories as if it was letters which many years later should be found and read by the grandchildren. The letters were both in writing, in pictures and even in shorter videos and was exhibited in the summer of 2016 at Jamtli. It was very interesting to observe three different characteristics during the time of the exhibition.

First of all the refugee immigrants were proud to tell their stories in an artistic format. Secondly the interest from the public was big and many interesting discussions came out of that. But thirdly we could observe that the really interesting thing about the project and the exhibition was that the museum in reality just offered a frame and professional support. The work was done by the group of refugee immigrants themselves. The second project was called "Jamtli friend" and was staff members or volunteers who invited asylum immigrants in to our museum and in smaller groups showed and discussed our different exhibitions in the indoor museum and the environments in the open air museum. The main effect of the project was to get immigrants in to the museum area and making that meeting natural. Conversation in English was often combined with discussing different Swedish words and answering curiosity about how the Swedish society works.

Both projects were valuable to us as we prepared ourselves for a bigger action.

In August 2015 we realised that in our region and even in the regional capital of Östersund is in serious lack housing possibilities. The housing and building market in Sweden as such but also vividly in our region has for several years been growing slower than growth of the needs for housing. That situation naturally worsened with the arrival of many refugees during 2014 and 2015. These people were in our region accommodated in former military garrisons located outside the city. The vast majority of the people come from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Eritrea and there were quite many young families.

Three thoughts became clearer for every day passing in August 2015 as we saw what that situation really looks like and confronting our own wishes here and now and a longer strategic thinking.

First of we all felt that it was clear to us and everybody else that the situation was extraordinary. It felt reasonable that our organisation based on humanistic values should be taking extraordinary measures in this situation in order to help people in need.

Secondly it was easy to observe that society around us offered special opportunities which could make it realistic to do something bigger. Suddenly there was for us realistic offers for bank guarantee for loans at the same time as relatively low bank interest on loans for housing.

Thirdly we realised that beside all smaller actions for intercultural dialogue here could be an opening for getting a massive continuous injection to the organisation if we could handle the situation swiftly.

In September 2015 the board of Jamtli Foundation heard about our ideas and decided that we should study the possibilities further and in December 2015 the board decided to give a go ahead. Between September 2016 and October 2017 a total of 13 houses is built at Jamtli. They are located in the end of Jamtli Open Air Museum close to the main entrance and thereby close to public transport. Nine of the houses measures 56 square metres and four of the houses are just measuring 26 square metres. In both types of houses can be installed a 15 square metres big loft with enough room for two regular adult beds.

With all the bureaucracy it is quite fast that we go from the first ideas to finalizing the project within 24 months. That has only been possible because of the extraordinary circumstances and the good political will and help from public servants in the municipality and the municipal housing company combined with enthusiasm among the employees at Jamtli. We know that the first houses will be in place and ready for tenants at the beginning of December 2016 and from the municipality we know that about 80 percent of people who are looking for housing at the moment are immigrants who have had applications for residence and work allowance approved. Among these there are quite many young families for whom we expect that the bigger houses will be suitable.

Long term rationale and strategy

What do we mean when we think housing can be a way to intercultural dialogue for Jamtli?

Well! We believe that the success of a museum should be measured in several different ways but one of these will always be the popularity of the museum as a tool for identity construction. The popularity is then measured in terms of which people uses the museum for that purpose and who does not.

From that follows that it is not acceptable for our museum if every fifth of the people living in our country or local community do not have a relation to the museum. In the non-existing perfect museum everybody in the community feels a strong relation to the museum because the museum contains traces of everybody's history. By that it becomes relevant to everybody and whatever the individual finds interesting in the museum contributes to the identity of that individual by offering both a mirror of the individual and an option for reflection.

If this assumption or rationale is correct – and at Jamtli we believe it is – the next step is to consider how to achieve the relevance of the museum for as many as possible. When we invite young families with immigrant background to have their residence at the open air museum we hope that we will see effects relatively soon through the simple participation of the residents in different activities. One type of activities will be for example to use the museum as a venue for different celebrations or commemorations from the cultural, national or religious background of the immigrants. Another type of activities will be for the residents to discover and explore how they want to use the museum for activities we cannot foresee in advance. We will see if or when the residents with immigrant background want to take part in the traditional use of the museum which the Swedish majority culture has created and formed through generations and the same goes for the new traditions which younger people in Sweden may think are very Swedish but which we know has been imported during the latest decades from for example United States such as Halloween.

Whatever will be the case the central issue here is about participation. Nina Simon characterise the necessary attitude for the museum like this: *“The first step to personalizing cultural institutions is to take an audience-centred approach to the experiences offered. This doesn't mean throwing out the things the staff thinks are important, but it means framing them in the context of what visitors want or need. Instead of starting by describing what an institution or project can*

provide, audience-centric design processes start by mapping out audiences of interest and brainstorming the experiences, information, and strategies that will resonate most with them” (Nina Simon, 2010:35-36).

At Jamtli Museum we have appointed two colleagues to be our primary contact staff persons in the collaboration with the new residents. One is contacts about practical issues as residents and the same person is in charge of for example maintenance in the area. The other staff colleague is our volunteer manager who will have activity development with the residents as a special task. The two colleagues are both members of the management group of Jamtli Museum so they have easy access to all kinds of decision making.

The overall decision to create a small village with 13 houses at Jamtli open air museum is of course made by the board of the Jamtli Foundation. In the board we see this action as an investment on two different levels. First of all the housing investment fits very well with the values of the museum and it feels right to do something very concrete in order to help people here and now. But maybe the second level of the investment is the most interesting for the museum sector as a whole.

The foundation see the erection of 13 houses as an investment in relation building between Jamtli and new citizens. We want the new citizens to create their own relation to our museum and the very straight forward reason for that is that we of course want the new citizens to be Jamtli participators, users and visitors in ten, twenty and thirty years from now. If they have good experiences with Jamtli today they will be ambassadors for Jamtli in the future.

Short term challenges as an organisation

This will most probably a cultural challenge for all the staff at Jamtli. As managing director I have heard many comments from different colleagues in the museum. Some has been critical from very different perspectives. Some colleagues has questioned if it is really that fair or smart that the residential area is located inside the open air museum. Could this cause problems with visitors to the residents during high season or events where the open air museum is a closed area where visitors needs to buy an entrance ticket? Could we have incidents where “smart” residents see an opportunity to earn money by receiving extraordinary many guests during opening hours at high season or events? Why should the residents have the advantage of not having to pay an entrance fee to have access to Jamtli all year? Are Jamtli going to “exhibit” the immigrant families to our visitors? Will the level of crime at Jamtli increase?

These are real questions and have to be taken serious and answered with care. I have said to the board, my management group and the staff that of course we will meet challenges and of course many questions will rise to the surface when people are moving in. Of course we do not have all answers in advance but we want to meet the challenges together and in the same optimistic and positive atmosphere as we usually do at Jamtli.

We are in the process of planning for two different actions which are partly related to the creation of the new Jamtli residential area. Jamtli will naturally be interested in documenting the development of the area and the participation in Jamtli activities of the people who will live there in order to be able to continuously improve the competences of the museum. As Jamtli is already expanding volunteering activities and in the next phase of that process will have more employees collaborating directly with volunteers we are planning for different actions in order to improve competences in coaching.

The whole initiative with establishing the residential area has been prepared and processed in close collaboration with staff representatives. As managing director I was proud when the staff representatives actually applauded the initiative at the very first meeting where I first presented the idea. Presenting the idea to wider community in our home region was another experience. We have mostly met surprise that a museum would engage this way. We have had a few letters to the editor in the regional newspapers which has been critical but the opposition to our engagement has merely focused on what is and what is not a task for our museum even though one may be suspicious about what has been the driving force behind such considerations. We're very much aware that some people have a relatively conservative or traditional perception of what a museum is and what we should do and not do.

Only the future will tell us if the investment in a residential area at the open air museum will be a productive way for Jamtli's ambition in intercultural dialogue as a way to create and sustain broad representative engagement.

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