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Witch hunts, immigration and integration. New ‘difficult’ museums in the making

Abstract This paper discusses the development of two new museums in the Danish town of Ribe, both of which are aimed at an international audience and both of which can be said to contain elements of dark history. This makes it relevant to frame them within the context of dark tourism both in interpretational and marketing contexts. However, empirical evidence makes such framing difficult alluding to the discrepancies between professional and popular perceptions of the issues at stake – the European witch trials and immigration to America in the late 19th century. Hence this paper advocates a systematic and knowledge based approach to knowing about the audience through understanding popular uses of history relating to the topics at hand and by using this actively in engaging with potential visitors. From this perspective, dark tourism in a museum context can be seen as a cultural construct opposing any rigid framing.

Keywords witch hunt, immigration, dark tourism, Jacob A. Riis

Introduction

In 2013 the Museum of Southwest Jutland (SJM) embarked on an ambitious venture to restore Quedens Gaard, an historic building in the centre of Ribe, Denmark's oldest town. The plans entailed the idea of establishing two new museums in the block, parts of which date back to the 16th century. One museum deals with the history of the European witch trials in renaissance Europe while the other deals with Denmark's most famous emigrant to America, Jacob August Riis, whose haunting pictures of New York's poor immigrant society have claimed an iconic status in American culture. The theme therefore engages with the story of European immigration and integration in America at the end of the 19th century as well as national belonging and identity.

However, throughout the process of developing the content and vision for the museums as well as the fundraising and marketing aspects a series of issues and dilemmas have had to be considered. The paper will, from a supplier perspective, discuss two such key issues. First, both museums arguably hold a dark history that is echoed in contemporary issues such as persecution and immigration. Hence as attractions, they can be placed within the field of dark tourism and marketed as such. However, in recognizing that dark tourism attractions should also be understood as culturally constructed narratives where dark aspects are culturally defined and emphasized, it becomes relevant to reflect on the interpretative strategies chosen at each particular site. For this reason, secondly, the paper will address the importance of not only addressing difficult issues from a professional research perspective such as history but to also include systematic analysis that engages with popular uses of history in order to engage visitors in a more reflexive manner.

Below we will first introduce in more detail the background and process for the realization of each museum. Secondly we will draw together and discuss the two key issues addressed and allude to some general matters that can be systematically approached in dealing with difficult issues in an interpretational setting involving both historical research, interpretation and marketing of the sites.

A frame of darkness

In dealing with and marketing museums dealing with difficult issues the concept of dark tourism can be hard to ignore. Ethically right or wrong there is no doubting the fascination that drives a "tourism that involves travelling to places

associated with death and suffering”. In creating new museums, professionals are constantly facing the challenge of balancing professional obligations to support education and learning while at the same time generate a sustainable economy by drawing in paying visitors to their exhibitions. Dark tourism as a phenomenon and concept becomes an interesting frame for issues that can potentially help meet both demands. However, the implications from a museums management perspective are still only being unfolded and especially comparative studies are needed to gain a greater understanding (Lennon and Teare 2017).

Below I will discuss the issue of darkness in relation to the two themed museums mentioned above. First, however, a few words must be said on the theoretical concept of dark tourism. The issue has been approached from both a supply and demand perspective, with for instance Stone and Sharpely (2008) focusing on the motivational factors driving visitors towards death and the macabre. Others have focused more on the supply side perspective and ways of defining and understanding shades or degrees of darkness to be found at different sites (Lennon and Foley 2000). However, more recently it has also been theorised how dark tourism can be understood as culturally defined and hence defined by the cultural interpretations that they represent (Farmaki and Antonoui 2017). In recognition of this, the present paper wishes to take the discussion one step further in relation to themed exhibitions and museums. The purpose is to discuss how such cultural interpretations can be co-created by systematic and knowledge driven engagement with both supply and demand sides of an attraction.

When it comes to difficult issues or as termed by others dissonant heritage, negative heritage etc. (Buchholtz 2005; Digance 2003; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) it has been an issue how to justly represent the different and often conflictual interpretations of a site in meeting the public. Often such issues are related to war, conflict or ethnic or religious strife. But others have more subtle meanings. Below I will try to demonstrate how popular uses of history in general should also be addressed by professionals grappling with the framing of themes and interpretations and how this might be a way of strengthening a more co-creative approach to interpretation. The cases of the two new museums in Ribe Denmark will act as examples.

The Jacob A. Riis Museum – a history of hope or despair

Part of the Quedens Gaard block was the childhood home of Jacob A. Riis. Although, the name might not ring a familiar bell with everybody, the images

of poor American emigrants will have been encountered by many, just as the title of Jacob A. Riis' ground breaking book *How the Other Half Lives* is basic historical knowledge among American schoolchildren (Yochelson and Czitrom 2007)

The history of Jacob A. Riis makes for a fascination history. Growing up in the town of Ribe with an unloving father and as sole surviving child, Riis also had to give up on marrying his great love Elisabeth who chose to accept a proposal from somebody else. Searching for, but never receiving, the approval of his father Riis embarked for America at the end of the 19th century.

Arriving in America, he went on to become a newspaper journalist covering crime stories for several newspapers. His work drew his attention to life amongst the poor immigrants in the New York slum and the aim to help improve living conditions in these areas became one of his focuses. In doing so, he not only tested new technologies of photography in the New York tenement houses but he also created a strong social network for himself becoming a close friend of president Theodore Roosevelt and creating a legacy for himself that is still very much alive even until today.

The childhood home of Jacob A. Riis is situated in the historic building Quedens Gaard in Ribe. The idea of creating a museum dedicated to his history and legacy has been around for the last decade, but it is only within the last five years that the plans have begun to materialize. In creating a new grand plan for the Quedens Gaard block, the museum created a vision for Sortebrødregade 3 to become the Jacob A. Riis Museum. In doing so, the museum set out to create the narrative that was to set the stage in the museum and to communicate the history that we wanted to pass on to the visitors. It became a museum driven by a note in Riis' diary in which he quotes a poem containing the words "never give up". In short the museum was to focus on the biography of Riis as a Danish immigrant leaving his life and love in the town of Ribe to work his way up from being a poor immigrant to living the American dream and to draw attention to others not so lucky. Although not uncritical about some of his political stances and reasons for action, the basic story of the museum was one where hope ultimately triumphed despair.

The choice of this focus could, of course, be considered to rest on the amazing story of Riis himself. However, it also rested on questions of relevance to the audience of today. Here the issues that sprung to mind were contemporary worries about global migration, the international refugee crisis high on the political and media agenda at the time of creating the content

for the museums, as well as quests of ensuring reasonable social conditions for all inhabitants of a nation. Riis' mission and belief in the possibility of improving the conditions for New York's poor immigrants stood out as one of hope and moral mobilization. This again seemed to ring a bell with certain funds who liked the positive message of building a better future for all.

But the museum could also have chosen to focus more on Riis' credentials as a voyeuristic journalist, forcing his way into the immigrant slum and exposing people's most private lives to further his cause. Slum tourism has been defined as belonging within the category of dark tourism (Steinbrink 2012) and the attraction of the images voyeuristic fascination is undeniable. The poverty and miserable condition of the slum inhabitants could potentially be a cue making the history represented in the material relevant to for example tourists, who did not know of Jacob A. Riis before arriving in Ribe. For this reason, from a marketing perspective, the framing of the Riis story might not support the ambition to draw not only locals but also parts of Ribe's many international tourists to the museum.

As it would turn out, though, the logic of neither the Riis museum work group nor the theoretical approach of dark tourism were able to fully comprehend the complexity of the visitors approach to the theme and museum as will be discussed below. First, however, I will shortly introduce the other museum project to become the neighbour to the Jacob A. Riis Museum; the Witch Museum Ribe.

The Witch Museum Ribe – murder or magic

The historic block in Ribe, part of which was, as mentioned above, the childhood home of Jacob A. Riis, also consists of one renaissance building dating back to the time, when the fear of witches was widespread. In this period the region of Southwest Jutland became a 'hotspot' for witch hunts with Ribe to become the home of Denmark's most famous witch. This, combined history of authentic buildings from the period and the noticeable representation of trials for witch craft in the area, made it logical that the museum dedicated part of the building to creating a whole new museum with the intention of interpreting the history of the Danish and European witch trials in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was clear from the beginning, that while the building offered an unique and authentic frame for the museum, it would also be a challenge to physically present the story in what is now a protected building with low sealing, small

rooms and other physical challenges and limitations. For this reason, there was a firm decision to focus on the trials and punishments of witches and only to a limited extent deal with the historical aspects of superstition and magic.

The work group involved in the Ribe Witch Museum began its work focusing on the issue of fear (Kallestrup 2018). It was the intention to build up the key narrative in the museum around the topic of fear and how fear can be perceived to constitute a key factor to understand central dynamics involved in the European witch trials, estimated to have cost approximately 100,000 Europeans – mainly women, their lives. There was no doubt that the museum would be developed as a dark attraction. Hence a lot of effort was put into thinking about how the topic could be presented in a way that would make the seriousness and depth of the theme understandable to a greater public while not frightening the children who could be expected to also visit the museum. Suggestions involved, amongst other things, using more abstract interpretational means, which could not be decoded by children, but would still be understandable for adults.

In short, from a supply side perspective we were dealing with a clearly dark attraction understood as place telling a story of death and suffering. What we expected were visitors who would be in search of a dark and sinister story about the persecution, torture and executions of hundreds of Danes and thousands of Europeans primarily during the renaissance. Again, the perceptions and focus of the work group was somewhat readdressed in tapping in closer to what potential visitors actually expected of a museum dealing with witches and their history.

Blurring the lines

While working on both the Jacob A. Riis Museum and the Ribe Witch Museum we had the opportunity of digging a bit deeper into the subject of visitor's expectations.¹ Below I will focus on one particular group of visitors, Italian tourists, who visit Ribe in large numbers during the month of August. In the month of August 2017, we were lucky to have an Italian native speaker employed to interview tourists on their perceptions and expectations of our two new themed museums. In all 55 tourists were interviewed.

1 The results were reported in an analysis authored by Federica Danes, an Italian master student, who interviewed 55 Italian tourists on the subject.

First, it is important to notice that the Italian tourists were prone to luck at the two museums relationally. Meaning that they seemed to value one against the other. For this reason it was decided to only introduce one museum, the Jacob A. Riis Museum, in the last part of the interview rounds as its theme always seemed to fall short of matching the interest in the witch museum. This meant that 23 of the people interviewed were only presented to the plans for the Jacob A. Riis Museum and as a result, people's interest in the Jacob A. Riis Museum seemed to rise, but they also seemed more interested in elaborating on the interest or reservations about such a museum. These reflections on Riis and the museum will be presented first.

The most surprising result was that many Italian tourists did not catch on to the message of hope, which had become a central narrative for the museum. On the contrary, several Italians expressed their reservations about a museum dealing with a topic, which, for them, was very urgent and present – the issue of immigration. At the time, Italy had been a central destination for illegal immigrants from North Africa leaving many Italians feeling challenged by the inflow. Some tourists perceived the topic as being too close to home with the massive media coverage and the negative atmosphere surrounding the issue at home.

However, as the interviewer tried to emphasize more the thought of Italian history being part of the Jacob A. Riis heritage, people seemed to become more positive. This would fit well with previous research that demonstrates how Italians are particularly proud of their heritage around the world as they have travelled and settled during the Italian Diasporas (Dixon et al. 2018). From this perspective, they seemed to connect the issue to their own heritage and hence saw the museum in a more positive and interesting light.

The issue was somewhat different for the Witch Museum Ribe. Here, there seemed to be an instant interest in the topic of the witches as most Italian tourists preferred this museum to the Jacob A. Riis Museum as mentioned above. However, while this in itself might seem less surprising it actually constitutes a stark contrast to the work groups' reflections on focus and theme. There was a clear tendency for the tourists to express their expectations to the witch museum in lighter terms. Although agreeing that the theme constitutes a somewhat dark topic, most families with children also perceived it to be the better entertainment for a day out with the children – with some even calling it fun. This is, of course, also an expression of certain commercial tendencies (Cush 2007) surrounding the phenomenon of witches, but it makes the issues no less relevant.

In understanding the logic of these visitors, it is probably necessary to recognize the changes in popular understandings that the figure of the witch has undergone within the last decades transforming in several contexts into a somewhat empowered figure in a universe of magic and adventure. The whole aspect of light entertainment seemed to be present in several tourists' minds as the spoke about the topic. For instance, one group of tourists referred to a particular museum in Holland where they had experienced the practice of weighing a woman to see if she was a witch. The woman of the family had afterwards received a diploma; which certified that she was indeed a witch. Other tourists referred to other witch museums they had visited recalling their 'nice' memories.

In summary, the ideas, associations and expectations of the audience seemed to somewhat differ from what the professionals involved in defining the focus and main narratives of the two museums had expected. In fact, when it comes to both museums, many potential visitors asked in the interviews seemed to some extent to interpret what was at stake at each museum opposite to what was intended by the professionals. Whereas the Jacob A. Riis Museum was meant to represent a positive story of engagement and hope, the Witch Museum was meant to tell the dark story of fear and persecution. So how are we as professionals to deal with such discrepancies?

We could of course, choose to ignore them and try to engage the audience on our terms. Often this would probably work ok given the right cues and technics. Certainly, the issue of engaging visitors with passion and emotion is nothing new (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998), but it also bears the risk of alienating the visitors if the experience is too far from what they expect. Instead, we have chosen to engage with the potential visitors and their motivations and meaning making as far as possible within the process frame at our disposal. For this reason, we are first looking into whether the views expressed by the Italian tourists are actually similar to other potential tourists. Gaining further knowledge of this seems an important factor in addressing the issue further.

Nevertheless, the results have also inspired some initial grips, which will, when it comes to the Jacob A. Riis Museum, probably be more integrated in the marketing perspective. Here, we will most likely attempt to emphasize the importance of Italian heritage rather than the actuality of the topic of immigration in general. When it comes to the Ribe Witch Museum, however, we have chosen to engage with the discrepancies more directly in the exhibitions, dedicating part of the exhibitions to contemporary witch mythology

and in this way attempting to connect contemporary perceptions of the witch with the history behind. We do not see this as forgetting our professional task of educating visitors of what lies behind the contemporary imagery. Such dilemmas are not new but by using a more systematic and knowledge driven approach to gaining an understanding of potential visitors' perceptions of relevance, it also becomes more legit to deal with issues more or less politicised and contested, because themes and angles have grown out of a mutual understanding.

Conclusion

Whilst the above mentioned considerations are probably often implicitly present in much work to create and interpret historical narratives whether it be in museums, individual exhibitions etc. this paper has tried to address two overall aspects explicitly.

First, within the creation and marketing of museums and exhibitions as dark attractions it is important to recognize the professional decisions to theme them as such. This involves reflecting on the level of darkness involved at each site and the meaning of this darkness to potential visitors. In this way, the elements of darkness must be recognized as culturally defined by both professionals and visitors.

Secondly, it is clear that professional perception of what constitutes relevant and engaging topics can be too rooted in national narratives and logics and are sometimes too shallowly based on what makes the popular and media agenda. While the Jacob A. Riis Museum seemed up to date and relevant based on the Danish political and media agenda of the time, it did not take into consideration one large group of potential visitors perceptions of the topic in relation to their own background and use of history and heritage. Similarly, the expectation to be able to frame the Ribe Witch Museum focusing on fear and persecution, did not smoothly fit with potential visitors ideas of magic, adventure and entertainment.

It seems, therefore, relevant for museum professionals to a greater degree and more specifically to engage – not only with potential visitors but also with the uses of history that surrounds any historical topic, before being too set on specific narratives intending to convey specific meanings. Of course, some topics will be more prone to have a lot of associations and strong feelings attached to them, as for instance witches, but as shown with the Jacob

A. Riis Museum, professional perceptions of darkness are far from a given when it comes to the visitors. The ability to, in an interpretational setting, to tap into and engage with larger and more general topics is not an isolated process but can benefit from knowledge and dialogue. Understanding the meaning making of the visitors sets the stage for a better dialog on narratives, perhaps even a more co-creative approach.

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