

# Who Is Leading the Project? A Comparative Study of Exhibition Production Practices at National Museums in Finland and the Baltic States

Jana Reidla

## Abstract

This paper presents research into exhibition-production practices at five national museums of four Baltic Sea region countries. The focus is the changes wrought by the expansion of exhibition teams, and how researchers in the curatorial role perceive their position, especially in relation to designers and project leaders. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with museum professionals showed exhibition production at museums comprise two models: A) curator-driven, and B) manager-driven. In Model A, the curator's knowledge of museum collections is dominant. The curator creates the concept, and subsequently leads the exhibition project. The curator is the decision maker. In Model B, the field of communication is dominant. Managers are in charge of the design concept and fulfilling the exhibition. Managers are the decision makers. Curators feel their credibility as experts suffers and their competencies are underexploited, as they no longer have either authorship or leadership responsibilities.

**Key words:** museums; curators; designers; exhibitions; exhibition team; new museology

## Introduction

The ideas of the new museology have led museums in the last few decades to revise their collection and exhibition policies, as well as their structure and also the job descriptions of their staff. Contemporary attention is aimed at how museums can influence social wellbeing and react to communities' needs, and to achieve this intention, museums have had to 'reinvent' themselves (Anderson 2012). Reorganization involves exhibition production (Viau-Courville 2017) and the redistribution of curators' authority within museums (Edwards 2007; McCall and Gray 2014; Longair 2015; Wood 2019). Some empirical studies maintain that the new museology is far too theoretical and the practices of the 'traditional museum' do not easily disappear from the museal field (McCall and Gray 2014; Nieroba 2018).

Research on the relationships between museum practice and the new museology in the Baltic region countries has been, until the 2010s, a neglected field. The respective changes in the Baltic museum landscape have been recent. In Estonia and Latvia, the interest of museum researchers has focused on the challenges related to audience involvement and the democratization of museums (Tatsi 2013; Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014; Lotina 2016; Aljas 2017). The impact of new museology on in-house working relations has remained largely unstudied. There are, however, a few exceptions involving country-specific case studies, such as the implementation of new museology in Lithuanian museums (Stoškutė 2017), and Finnish museum professionals' assessments of their identity (Hakamies 2017).

This paper, in analyzing exhibition making practices in the national museums of the Baltic Sea countries, provides a needed comparative input to the discussions about curatorial authority and exhibitions production processes. It offers valuable insights into the complexity of the exhibition projects from the point of view of a researcher in the curatorial role, which is essential in understanding any dissatisfaction with their position in the exhibition team.

Questions like 'who authors exhibitions?' and 'how much agency does an exhibition-maker have?' (Macdonald 1998: 4), which were relevant in Great Britain in the 1990s, were

not emphasized in Estonia at that time.<sup>1</sup> The same situation can be extrapolated for Latvia and Lithuania according to their shared postsocialist context.<sup>2</sup> Since the 2000s, the emphasis of museums in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has become more educational and has focused more on community engagement, involving a revival of activities relating to tourism and the development of information technology, which began mainly after these countries joined the European Union in 2004 (See Kuutma and Kroon 2012; Keršytė 2016; Lotina 2016). Although the hiring of marketing and education staff increased in Finland from the 1990s (Pettersson 2011: 281), structural changes supporting communication and audience involvement only began in Estonia and Finland from the late 2000s and continued into the 2010s (Reidla 2018).

Nowadays, Estonian museum professionals' conversations at coffee breaks abound with examples of how designers (or other external specialists) have interfered in the selection of exhibits and of how some topics significant for the curator have remained in the background. The main questions a curator faces in a 'multi-skilled' team creating an exhibition are: who is leading the process and who is responsible for the result? Inspired from the Estonian case, initial questions for the comparative study emerged: why do curators doubt their authority? Is the problem widely spread? Which factors are involved? How exactly do they see their position as a curator in the exhibition team? Are the problems regarding exhibition production the same in all three countries? The main questions within this paper are how curators perceive the expansion of exhibition teams, the prioritization of communication in museum work and how this influences exhibition production or curators' motivation.

The article leads with an overview that addresses the prioritization of museum communication and the socio-economic developments affecting exhibition production, as a context to the transformation of the work relationship in the museum. Secondly, empirical data collected via semi-structured interviews in the Baltic and Finnish national museums will be analyzed with respect to the practices of exhibition production, that takes into account the responsibilities and agencies of the researcher in the role of curator.

### **Prioritized museum communication and marketization**

Since the emergence of the idea of the new museology<sup>3</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s, but especially during the past few decades, museums in Western Europe and North America have given importance to communication. The aim of prioritizing communication has been to democratize museums, sharing their authority with the public and increasing their social responsibility. At the same time the theory proceeding from the new museology contests the curator's role in shaping knowledge by means of exhibitions (see, e.g., Cameron [1971] 2012; Smith 1989; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennet 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000b). Museologist Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000a: 28) mentions how, as a positive change, curators have had to share their authority with marketing and outreach specialists. Besides democratization, which has had a positive effect on the external image of museums, giving more attention to the public has caused intra-institutional strains in the relationships between those managing collections and those targeting the audience (McCall and Gray 2014; Viau-Courville 2017; Ughetto 2017; Wood 2019).

The gradual growth in importance of the communication function at museums globally has occurred hand-in-hand with changes in their organizational structure. From the start of the 1980s, museums began to move away from being based on collections and divided into subunits according to different disciplines, towards a functional basis.<sup>4</sup> In the traditional, collections-based structure, the central place was occupied by the multifunctional curator, who was well educated in the relevant disciplines, and who compiled, maintained, and studied the collections as well as mediated them to those interested. By contrast, the staff in function-based structures comprise professionals with narrow specialization and the departments are formed to fulfil the main functions of the museum (preservation of collections, research, communication).

The influence of the new museology on museums has intertwined with market-led socio-economic developments. Since the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberalism has become the hegemonic discourse of western nation states (Olssen and Peters 2005: 314). A corresponding paradigm dominant in public administration – the New Managerialism or New Public

Management (Harris 2005; Billot 2010) is 'grounded in the presumption that public sector organisations need to become more accountable, more efficient, more entrepreneurial and more responsive to customer needs' (Tili 2014: 157). Although the idealizing of corporate efficiency when adapting it for academics has been criticized (see Olssen & Peters 2005; Billot 2010), in the museum landscape the prevalent discourse encourages museums to be more business-like to compete 'in the expanding leisure marketplace' (McPherson 2006: 51). As a social scientist of professions and organizations, Anwar Tili (2014: 173) claims that in Great Britain the politics of new management within museums have created 'undesirable unintended effects', as public-facing work has shadowed other working areas of the museum. Similarly, curators and scholars have been worried about the shrinking knowledge base of exhibitions (Anderson 2005; Lehmann-Brauns *et al.* 2010).

The multi-skilled team and project-based approach can be seen as a useful tool to democratize the museum's voice, reduce management hierarchy, and increase the flexibility of the exhibition process. Research has emphasized how curators have learned to integrate a horizontal exhibition making process, negotiating the decisions with multi-skilled specialists e.g. designers and educators (McDonald 1998, 2002; Morgan 2013; Alberti *et al.* 2017). On the other hand, museologist Mathieu Viau-Courville (2017) gives some critical insights into project-based exhibition making when analyzing the emergence of a professional non-curatorial managerial practice at the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec during the 1990s.

For curators, changes in management have brought about the division of their tasks between different specialists, and a managerial interlayer between curators and high-level decision makers (McCall and Gray 2014), which the former call the marginalization of their profession (Ewin and Ewin 2016). On the other hand, Clive Gray (2016: 125), who studies the politics of policy in museums, claims that even if 'curators do not necessarily see themselves as being in an exalted position in the museum hierarchy', their colleagues consider them as being important, as they are 'fulfilling multiple roles that affect their centrality'. Similarly, as a historian with a museum background, Sarah Longair (2015: 3) explains how 'an intimate knowledge and understanding of the institution's collections' has remained the basic component of curatorial authority. Besides, the relative importance of administration, info-technological and communicational tasks has gradually increased in curators' work (Edwards 2007). Curators have adapted to the need to develop their communication skills; they collaborate with designers, educators, and other professionals.

## Method

The study focused, from the perspective of researchers in the curatorial role, on the changes occurring in exhibition management in the Baltic region. The empirical design of the study required semi-structured interviews (N=40) at national museums (N=5) in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland. The criteria for the museums being selected were the proximities of geography, history and culture. All the museums are situated in a cluster of four neighbouring countries running along the north-south axis of the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea; all four countries had recently celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their independent statehood gained in 2017-2018; all five museums were state-owned during the course of the interviews; and all five had the function of being a national institution – central cultural history museums dedicated to the history of their country and nation.<sup>5</sup> The selected museums were: 1) Eesti Rahva Muuseum (ERM, Estonian National Museum), 2) Eesti Ajaloomuuseum (AM, Estonian History Museum), 3) Latvijas Nacionālais Vēstures Muzejs (LvNVM, National History Museum of Latvia), 4) Lietuvos Nacionalinis Muziejus (LtNM, National Museum of Lithuania), and 5) Suomen Kansallismuseo (SKM, National Museum of Finland).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted from November 2016 to February 2019. All museums were visited at least twice, approximately a year apart and in some cases the same interviewee was interviewed twice, due to the developments in the exhibition making process. Most of the interviewees (N=25) were those whose work contains research capability in a discipline related to their museum's collections, and the questions were concerned with a wide range of their tasks (collections' management, exhibition-production, communication and research). As the job titles are different in the museums under study (see Reidla 2018), the title 'curator' marks a museum-working researcher in the role of an (exhibition) curator. In addition,

I interviewed other professionals, such as managers, exhibition organizers, designers and educators (N=15), in order to learn about their points-of-view to gain a better understanding of the background.<sup>6</sup> The language of the interviews differed by country. Estonian was the mother-tongue of both the interviewees and the interviewer and thus used in Estonia. English or Russian was offered to the interviewees in Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland because the interviewer did not speak the mother-tongues of any of these three countries.<sup>7</sup> Being able to speak my mother-tongue at the Estonian interviews influenced the results. However, my work experience in Estonian museums meant many of the interviewees were former colleagues and this also influenced the results.<sup>8</sup> In accordance with the EU's and Tartu University's codes of ethics, the study protected interviewees' anonymity, and they are thus coded, first by a hashtag (#), then their museum's acronym and then a single letter (e.g. #AM A). For an overview of the interviewees' codes and museums' acronyms, see Table 1.

The next section, about exhibition production, reveals the impact of structural changes and prioritized communication on exhibition staging. At the museums this article focuses on, the transfer from collections-based to function-based structure has not yet been completed. Three of the museums in this paper, the ERM, the AM, and the SKM did, in the mid-2010s, raise museum mediation (exhibitions, marketing, communication, education) to the same level as collections' preservation and research. The LvNVM and the LtNM have yet to make such structural changes, which means they have not prioritized the communication field, and collections-based departments are at the centre of the museum structure.

## Two models of exhibition production

The two models of exhibition production are the older, more traditional Model A (the lead role is split between collections and research), which exists at the Latvian museum (LvNVM) and the Lithuanian (LtNM); and the more modern Model B (the lead role is taken by communication), which exists at the two Estonian museums (AM and ERM) and the Finnish SKM. In both Models, departments of exhibitions exist but their role in the production of exhibitions differs.

### ***Model A: Curator-driven exhibition-production model***

Model A is in operation at Lithuania's LtNM and Latvia's LvNVM. The central place in the structure of both of these museums is occupied by the departments based on collections. In the collections-based structure of the LtNM, academically educated curators mainly fulfil the tasks of collection keepers; however, curators cooperating with the management draw up the exhibitions' plan. The department of exhibitions and the department of education comprise the supporting structure. The department of exhibitions carries out technical work, and the full-time museum designer is responsible for the architectural and graphic design of the exhibitions. Curators consider the activities of the department of exhibitions as supportive of curating; if essential choices have to be made, colleague-researchers are asked to help. The department of exhibitions does not lead the process but, as an interviewed LtNM curator explains, helps to 'realize the idea'.<sup>9</sup>

The central place in the structure of the LvNVM is also occupied by the collections-based departments, at which researchers and collection keepers work. Exhibition plans are made by the management in collaboration with the department of collections and research. The department of education and exhibitions provides technical assistance in mounting exhibitions, arranges excursions and educational programmes, and administers the social media account, as well as maintaining contacts with the press. For the role of spokesperson, the museum prefers a researcher over a staff member of the educational and exhibition department. The management considers communication, public appearances and programmes to be important, and researchers are also responsible for active participation in this field.

In this model, exhibition teams operate without marketing and sales specialists or producers. An exhibition is a collaboration project of the curator, collection keeper, designer, and educator, which is led by the researcher in the curatorial role. For example, in 2018 the team of a new permanent exhibition at one of the branches of the LtNM, *Signatarų namai* (House of the Signatories),<sup>10</sup> consisted of two curators of this historical period, the chief treasurer, and the museum designer; for multimedia an external agency was hired.

The exhibition department in this model offers support in the technical issues of exhibitions, and later in mediation to the audience, yet it does not dominate in decision-making issues. Topics for exhibitions in annual plans are suggested by the management and curators according to research topics, 'interesting material collected', and historical dates. Although the collections- and research-based exhibitions prevail, the general-interest of the idea is considered as well: 'We have to take into account what interests the community, or else we stage exhibitions for ourselves and our friends'.<sup>11</sup> Part of the exhibition policy refers to exhibitions being staged under the leadership of the museum's own curators.

### ***Model B: Managers-driven exhibition-production model***

Model B is in operation at Estonia's AM and ERM and Finland's SKM. In this model the exhibition-policy decisions are driven by the managers of departments of museum services, and communications. The exhibitions department is a subunit of the latter department. Model B has been in place at AM in Estonia since 2013, when the communication division became responsible for exhibition production and at ERM since 2016, when the exhibition subunit subordinated to the sales and museum services department founded in 2016, which became responsible for exhibition production. Model B has been in place at SKM in Finland since 2015 when the exhibition subunit subordinated to the museum services department, which likewise became responsible for exhibition production.

The typical exhibition team comprises a curator and communication specialists and involves a producer or project leader, various designers, educators, etc. Although the researcher in the curatorial role is the author of the exhibition concept, the idea is usually proposed by the managers of the communication and exhibition divisions. Model B is a recent development, which has emerged in recent decades and was preceded at these museums by a system similar to Model A. In comparison, museums in Great Britain and Canada began transferring from the curator-directed exhibition Model A to the manager-directed Model B in the late 1980s (Macdonald 1998; Viau-Courville 2017).

Adopting Model B shows the museums' conscious wishes to become, according to the ideas of the new museology, more visitor-centred and open, as the interviewees confirmed. Consequently, researcher-curators perceived the marginalization of their role in exhibition production. They expressed the changes in the following questions: 1) whose and what kind of arguments are considered in exhibition-policy decision-making? 2) who initiates and leads exhibition projects? and 3) whose vision of the exhibition remains valid in negotiations with designers and managers? In the following section I will map how museums perceived the marginalization of the curator's role.

The curators interviewed at ERM compared current practices under Model B with those of Model A. Prior to 2016, the curators were expected to initiate and produce exhibition projects, while receiving the support of the exhibition and public relations department, and furthermore exhibitions plans were drawn up regularly alongside annual plans (for practice at ERM see Raba 2015). The curators at ERM expressed their discontent about the opacity of the exhibition policy, stating there was neither a clear procedure for initiating projects, nor a long-term plan or any selection criteria. They were concerned about the growing importance of external exhibitions, for two reasons. First, the need to earn increased revenues for the museum has become more urgent since the 2016 opening of ERM's new building. The curators presumed the management will primarily consider economic arguments in exhibition-policy decisions, emphasizing the importance of external exhibitions, instead of the museum's own collections and curators. Second, ERM's new building has considerably expanded the space for public events and displays. This space is filled with external events and exhibitions, which has caused concern among curators that the museum might lose face by not mounting their own exhibitions or not making the curators' contributions visible.

At AM, idea-pooling by the museum's staff, organized and collated by the communication department, is the basis of developing the exhibition plan. The ideas do not need to relate to AM's collections and the initiator of the idea does not have to be competent to put it into practice. The ideas are discussed by AM's management level decision-makers, who evaluate them for 'niceness' and 'attractiveness' before considering three more concrete factors: a competent curator, the budget and items in the museum collections. The first factor is

most important because it influences the budget and concept of the exhibition (including the need for items). The search for a competent curator is quite complex. AM often seeks suitable candidates from outside the museum. If there are none available, members of AM's management board suggest candidates. This, Edson and Dean (1996: 163) point out, is not an entirely suitable method because 'the personal likes and dislikes of directors or curators are not entirely adequate foundations for exhibitions'. Nevertheless, curators at AM have become sceptical about exhibition production based on ideas, as the 'niceness' of the idea is a subjective criterion and the idea is not always connected to either research topics or collections. Experienced curators, with knowledge of the collections, initiated the exhibitions prior to 2013, but now this is done by the 'exhibition invention' department. So, it is complicated for the curators to offer collection materials for topics that have emerged from beyond their expert knowledge. They also criticized the management, arguing excessive administrative power is used in decision-making instead of having discussions. According to the interviewed curators, most of whom have doctoral degrees, the administrative decision-makers, i.e. directors and department heads, who lead exhibition projects, do not demonstrate sufficient competence. They lack both a scientific degree and any exhibition making experience. It is difficult to determine whether AM's decision-makers have disregarded the curators or vice-versa. Still, the exhibition manager at AM opines that professionals could curate more AM exhibitions because, when exhibitions are curated by outsiders, which happens quite often, problems arise due to their inexperience in expressing their knowledge through exhibitions.

The interviews conducted at the SKM, which also uses Model B, did not reveal any curator criticism against exhibition projects as clearly as in either of the Estonian museums.<sup>12</sup> Similar to the two Estonian museums, SKM's curators, prior to the change in system in 2015, used to initiate exhibitions themselves on the basis of their collections and research topics. The practice changed after the establishment of the exhibition department. This department now has three practices for staging exhibitions. First, the department brings in ready-made exhibitions through agencies from other institutions; second, the department initiates its own ideas for exhibitions, for which either internal or external curators are found; and third, the department accepts exhibition suggestions from its own curators, based on their own research. A recent trend in SKM's exhibition policy is to avoid limiting themes to Finland or SKM's collections but rather to use globally relevant issues or other cultures. Both SKM's curators and the exhibitions manager stated that, in principle, exhibitions could be staged by the museum's curators; yet, similar to AM, the SKM's exhibition department does not use the materials in its collections when planning exhibitions. The exhibition department argues that the museum's curators are excluded from curating temporary exhibitions as they are busy with other tasks, and besides, the space for impermanent exhibitions is insufficient. It was evident that the exhibitions and collections departments did not cooperate very closely, as one of the curators explained: 'our plans and objectives are so different'.<sup>13</sup> This means that 1) the work of curators is collections-centred, yet the curators are short of opportunities to stage collection-based exhibitions, as the topics they represent are not considered to be attractive; 2) the concept of a societally pertinent, open and social museum requires the curators to do so many various tasks, administration (object loans, working groups, etc.) and mediating (social media, digitalization, web-based portal *Ask the museum*, etc.) that little time is left for a deeper insight into the collections and exhibition planning.

### ***Similar trends in exhibition production***

Attracting visitor interest is a similar tendency in both models. In Model B, the curators used sales talk, for example: 'When presenting our ideas, we already consider the selling arguments'.<sup>14</sup> The need to earn their own revenue seems to be an essential factor, which increases the authority of the decision-making professionals specializing in communication, marketing and sales. In Estonia, the Ministry of Culture has incorporated the museums' own revenue into the annual budgets. Likewise, the Finnish Ministry of Culture has also decreased state financing because of the expected revenues. This is especially valid for developments in the sphere of communication: for visitor programmes and exhibitions, museums using both Model A and Model B earn income themselves.

Anticipated visitor interest impacts on exhibition planning decisions. Based on the initial spur for staging exhibitions, all five of the study's museums split them into either idea-based or collections-based. The notion that an idea is the start of the process does not mean there are no artefacts in the exhibition but rather existing collections did not initiate the concept. On the other hand, staging idea-based exhibitions may require supplementing the exhibited collections or collaborating with other memory institutions (by borrowing artefacts or curators). It is worth noting both types of exhibition are produced for both models. In both models, curators' self-censorship was visible in the collections-based exhibitions; the curators of this type of exhibition prefer to call themselves 'old-timers'<sup>15</sup> and, as one curator of LtNM stated: 'I would like to say that artefacts are the most important, but I must not'.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this self-censorship might be that collections-based exhibitions are regarded as a phenomenon of a traditional, passive museum, related to showcases and an 'eyes only' approach, without any attractive interactivity or hands-on solutions, although these two approaches are, nowadays, usually combined (see Wang and Lei 2016).

Both models have examples of collections-based object exhibitions, indicating success in both visitor numbers and audience recognition. The interviewees explained the success with interesting and attractive artefacts on display (e.g. musical instruments at the LtNM, porcelain at the AM, folk costumes at the ERM) and with curators who were professionals with deep insights into the topics. Therefore, if preparations are thorough and the displayed artefacts interesting, this kind of exhibition can prove to be a success. Also, curators working in both models opined that an exhibition without any artefacts does not have to be staged at a museum. On the other hand, several interviewees from both models considered idea-based exhibitions to be important because they appeal to audience interest a lot more than either collection-based or research-based exhibitions. The interviewees regarded how making collection-based exhibitions interesting was a major challenge. As one interviewee explained, it is easier to stage an exhibition to illustrate 'a provocative idea' rather than explain why one or another part of the collection is 'scientifically interesting or historically meaningful', and stage an exhibition based on this.<sup>17</sup>

However, researchers in the curatorial role do not like to produce other professionals' idea-based exhibitions as a curator of ERM expressed: 'I will do it, but I'm not sure whether the result will be as we wanted it to be. And will I enjoy it? I might, but I don't need to'.<sup>18</sup> Model A's curators have tried to find the golden mean of ideas and collections in the formula of curators with knowledge of collections instigating the ideas. Another middle road emphasized by the interviewees was introducing hands-on solutions and using info-technological solutions in a way that is not dominant.

Info-technological solutions, the creation of new exhibits, accompanying programmes, the involvement of visitors, combined with an attractive and functional graphic and an architectural design, require a large team to work with the curator. Preserving or losing their authority as the signature exhibitor in a large working-group has become an increasingly greater challenge for curators, which I discuss next.

### **Collaboration between designer and curator**

On the subject of exhibition production processes, the curator interviewees clearly highlighted, besides organizational issues, collaboration with designers. In the context of museums, these comprise two categories: in-house designers and external agency designers. In the contemporary visitor-centred museum, design is of growing importance and demonstrates broader specialization (graphic and architectural design, realization of audio-visual and interactive exhibits, etc.). Design offers ways for interpreting information and for visitors' interactive inclusion in exhibitions (Lake-Hammond and Waite 2010: 88). Since interactive exhibits are specially created for exhibitions, the role of design is 'not just in presenting content, but in actually creating it' (Serrell 2015: 33), which presents a challenge to the curator's authority. On the one hand, the curator depends on the designer for offering interpretation possibilities to the visitor, while on the other hand, researchers curating exhibitions are eager to take responsibility for addressing the audience, especially as the frequency of practice has increased curators' abilities to think spatially and visually, and to imagine how the audience is going to use the exhibition. Therefore, the collaboration between the designer and the curator

is of critical importance to exhibition production, because failure, in a worst-case scenario, can turn the exhibition halls into chaos. Collaboration with in-house designers is the norm in Model A and considered to be easier than working with external agency designers, which is becoming the norm in Model B.

### ***Museums' in-house designers***

The Model A museums in the study, Latvia's LvNVM and Lithuania's LtNM, have traditionally had their own full-time designer create and mount all their exhibitions. However, at the time of the interviews, LvNVM was staging its first ever exhibition conducted in collaboration with an external agency. One of the exhibition's curators emphasized that working with their in-house designer was different, as 'he is part of us'.<sup>19</sup> A similar attitude is also shown at the LtNM, where the curators assumed that external designers would be problematic, as they are not interested in either content or context, whereas their designer is a 'museum-person, who already knows what we do'.<sup>20</sup> Working with an in-house designer does not mean the absence of discussions. Curators accept that all designers have their own vision about presenting the material which, it's argued, is crucial, as 'it is important that the exhibition would be both aesthetical and informative'.<sup>21</sup> However, the role of the in-house designer in the exhibition process is clearly supportive in, for example, helping the curator decide what, if there is too much material, to omit. Such discussions should not be viewed as power-struggles, because by mutual agreement the curator makes the final decision.

The study's Estonian Model B museums, ERM and AM, have reduced the role of their in-house designers as exhibition designers, whereas the exhibition department of Finland's SKM does not have an in-house designer at all. The in-house designers at ERM and AM are mainly engaged in advertising and publications design. Although they sometimes design smaller displays, they are not involved in the more extensive exhibitions, which external design agencies create. The in-house designers do assist the external agencies and often find themselves acting as last-minute 'firefighters'.<sup>22</sup> Although ERM's chief in-house designer is involved in all discussions about the museum's visual identity, their counterpart at AM does not have a role in the decisions about strategic issues, and the communication department specialists decide on the exhibition design.

In the case of both models A and B, collaboration with their museum's in-house designer is a safe choice for the curator, and indeed most curators said they can rely on the experience of the in-house designer for both designing and handling exhibits. Although setbacks do occur in exhibition production due to recruiting external designers without any experience, Model B communication departments still prefer to hire new design agencies for each exhibition. The communication departments assumed designers start to be repetitive and a fresh viewpoint may bring better results. This assumption reflects the weighty authority of the communication and marketing professionals of Model B museums and expresses the essential argument for their administration: increasing sales and audience interest are supported by varied and trendy designs.

### ***External Designers***

A global trend involves the inclusion of design and architectural agencies in exhibition projects. During the past decade, the designer's role has grown 'from technical servant of the museum's curatorial intentions to active participation in all stages of the contemporary exhibition process – from concept to conclusion' (Lake-Hammond and Waite 2010: 81). In the study's museums, positive experiences of the curators did not depend on the production model the museum was classified under. The interviews revealed that those curators and managers who had gained a positive experience from collaboration with external agency designers abided by three common features of the relationship: 1) equal partnership and trust, 2) thorough preparations by the museum, and 3) constant dialogue.

Equal partnership and trust reflected mutual respect for each other's competence. Both parties wanted to authenticate their arguments but were also ready to compromise. This willingness to compromise was based on acknowledging that, although external agency designers are professionals in their field, museum staff have better knowledge of the museum



environment and more experience in exhibition production. In order for the exhibition team of museum and agency staff to operate well, curators had to explain the contexts of both the museum and the histories of the artefacts. This was especially true at SKM and LvNVM, both of which had little previous experience in collaborating with creative external agencies. Both museums decided at the outset that the external designers had to be trusted to achieve a novel and impressive result. On the other hand, curators at both museums emphasized that trusting external designers meant taking a conscious risk. Allegedly, the risk was justified in most cases, even when the curators admitted they were 'not happy about all the choices the designers made'.<sup>23</sup> The interviewees seemed to be convinced the correct decision was to let external designers make choices in design whereas curators were supposed to make content-related choices.

Thorough preparations consisted of a detailed exhibition plan prior to starting the competitive tendering process, such as the one LvNVM prepared for their first collaboration with an external agency. The LvNVM team, consisting of curators and an educator, drafted the layout and listed the artefacts for the showcases; the team also specified where to leave space for texts, maps, mannequins and screens. The existence of this precise initial data enabled the design agencies to present detailed competitive schemes. As the museum was unwilling to insure against unexpected changes in the winner's design implementation, the pertinent documentation produced for the bid was extended after the winner had been selected. This prevented the winning agency from changing their design during implementation. As one interviewee explained, this is not as outrageous as it appears: 'I have heard such stories from other museums, where the designers have said that they are going to solve something in a different way to the way they want it'.<sup>24</sup>

Constant dialogue refers to communication between external agency designers and the museums and their curators. Although the museums trusted the agency designers to do their work professionally, decision-making was collaborative. The curators' support for the external agencies was constant, especially whenever issues arose. The exhibition curator inspected all the technical solutions together with the agencies and considered the arguments of both the technical capabilities and the exhibition's concept. Dialogue also meant flexibility, as small changes could be made even in the latter stage of mounting the exhibition, because 'in reality some solutions look different than on paper'.<sup>25</sup>

The first-time involvement of design agencies proved to be positive experiences for both LvNVM (Model A) and SKM (Model B), which may be the result of beginner's caution. They learnt by the mistakes of other museums and had made thorough preparations. Museum workers' professional self-consciousness seems to be a contributory factor in maintaining equal collaboration with designers who, despite being specialists in the field of design, need guidance with museum-specific issues.

### **What can go wrong?**

The exhibition production process in Model A museums is largely fault-free. By contrast, there are more opportunities in Model B museums for mistakes to occur. The larger museums in Estonia, such as ERM and AM, have about ten to twenty years of experience collaborating with creative agencies and external designers.<sup>26</sup> The long-term practice involves varied experiences including tension and power-struggles in the exhibition field. The interviewees revealed three key problematic factors fostering tension and power-struggles: 1) the varying and differing approaches of the external designers and the curator to interpreting and displaying artefacts; 2) limited direct contacts between the creative agencies and curator; and 3) vagueness of the exhibition concept.

Different approaches to the display of artefacts reflect the designers' notions about artefacts in a history exhibition. Artefacts should not only speak for themselves, but an exhibition with less artefacts is also more aesthetic. Based on their practice, curators can present an abundance of examples of external designers' initial viewpoints suggesting exhibitions should feature as little text and as few artefacts as possible. The selection of artefacts for display is often the first situation in which the opinions of the curator and the external agency designers may clash. Research suggests that museology has sufficiently emphasized the

importance of the curator's interpretative role and the artefacts' inability to find a voice, as well as the understanding that the audience's societal and cultural backgrounds ensure they interpret exhibitions in distinct ways (Vergo 1989; Silverman and O'Neill [2004] 2012; Karp and Kratz 2014). Designers are not conventionally educated in museology, so the curators are responsible for explaining their museum's practices to the external designers in the exhibition team. However, curators do not always follow this practice. One of the reasons for this is new museology's critique of the curator's authority, to which they respond by being afraid to appear too authoritarian and thus surrender their decision-making power too easily. A second and far reaching reason is the recent global trend in which marketing and maximizing revenue dominates the museum sector. Indeed, those museum staff working in the fields of visitor services and communication have been given 'the authority to manage, direct and even sustain the work of museums' (Wood 2019: 18), as they are responsible for revenues.

Interviews at ERM and AM revealed that curators expect to support essential decisions from the project leader or administration, yet they feel that the latter prefers to trust designers and particularly external agencies. There have been cases when the curator confronts colleagues – such as the project leader and members of the administration – about 'what exactly a curator can say about design' and finally concludes that they do not have any say in the matter.<sup>27</sup> At SKM, the recent experiences of the curators show they are not expected to define the exhibition concept as authors but to participate in the exhibition team as experts of collections who suggest possible artefacts for display. The formulation of the exhibition concept is more often trusted to external curators. This strategy enables SKM to restrict the curators' competence as authors of exhibitions.

The second problematic factor is the restricted direct communication between the curator and external designers because the project leaders are acting as mediators. This was most obvious at AM. The museum's curators stated that the administrators would not accept their opinions about design and restricted their contacts with the external designers; the curators understood that the administrators considered exhibition content to be less important than design. In this case the curator felt the administration approved the external designer and as a result did not consider the curator's concept: 'At the very most, it might be the project leader who has contact with the designer and who says: "Yes, do it this way!"'<sup>28</sup> If the curator has scant direct communication with the external designers, the result is that the design and the content do not complement each other, and those artefacts the curator deems significant for the exhibition remain in the background. This is not an Estonia-specific problem. In Great Britain, Ewin and Ewin (2016: 326) found exhibition design frequently does not enable visitors to see important artefacts. A representative of AM's administration<sup>29</sup> explained the strategy of ignoring curators because of the 'lack of their visual imagination', excessive conservatism, and opposition to innovation, all of which not only inhibit the ideas of external designers but also ensure the administration must protect the designers. Consequently, there was no exchange of essential ideas.

The third problematic factor, the vagueness of the exhibition concept, is not a museum's conscious choice. But it can emerge if the museum engages a creative agency before it finalizes the exhibition concept. By including designers in the project at an early stage, the museum can grant them greater involvement and responsibility, and thus greater power. Depending on the amount of their contribution, designers also become co-authors of the exhibition. The interpretations of the museum's IT and multimedia specialists play a considerably more dominant role as they create a novel exhibit on the basis of the data provided by the curator. An example occurred at ERM during the staging of *Encounters*, a permanent exhibition,<sup>30</sup> when it became obvious the curators and the external designers did not understand each other. They seemed to speak different languages, especially when the idea was still too novel for the curators to understand. The outcome was, unsurprisingly, negative '... when we saw the idea that was suggested ... we disappointedly said it was not possible, we could not use it as it was completely wrong from our point of view'.<sup>31</sup>

Steven Lubar, referring to Richard Rabinowitz, a renowned historian and museum curator, argues that it is the curator's responsibility to understand design, and not to let the designer alone create the atmosphere and select artefacts, because 'curation and design are intermingled' (Lubar 2014: 75). This viewpoint was expressed most of all at LvNVM.

Also, although the work practice at AM revealed the detachment between the curator and the designer, one of the administrators did maintain that if some of the curators had used their initiative to consult interior architects the final result might have been more realized.<sup>32</sup> Another administrator admitted an ideal curator has a particular vision about a topic, which they can present interestingly.<sup>33</sup>

The wish to give creative external agencies a *laissez-faire* environment in order to get a fresh viewpoint is understandable and results in novel impulses but, on the other hand, it can become a trap if the external agencies' decisions on key issues are not audited. Curators with strong personalities, opinions and research-visions are able to overcome administrative obstacles and the effort is worthwhile, because whatever the intermediary discussions, the curator, as the author, is still the person responsible for the outcome.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the changes that new museology has caused in museums' organizational structure and particularly the field of communication. The study was based on the presumption that the impact of new museology, which started in Western Europe and North America in the 1980s, is now global. The research object comprised five national museums: four in the Baltic states and one in Finland.

Considering the trend that exhibitions are produced by multidisciplinary project-based exhibition teams, the main challenges facing researchers in the curatorial role were studied. The museums under study demonstrated two models in exhibition production: curator-driven (Model A) and manager-driven (Model B). In three of the museums (AM, ERM, SKM) the transfer to the manager-driven model took place in the first decade of this century and in two (LvNVM, LtNM) the transfer has not yet occurred. The analysis indicated that transfer to the manager-driven model has accompanied the organizational prioritization of 'communication'. In museums, communication traditionally meant that the sharing of knowledge and experience, including exhibitions, educational programmes, events and publications, has expanded into visitor services and marketing, including also space renting, food and beverage sales and retail outlets, and the use of social media channels for sharing information.

Model A interweaves the three main functions of the museum – preservation, research, and communication – but crucially in exhibition production, the link between these three functions is the curator. Experience of museum work and intellectual knowledge are the aspects that provide the curator with this authority. The diversity of the specialist skill sets of the exhibition team in Model B ensures a situation verging on a paradox. On the one hand, the diversity of competences represented should guarantee the success of the project. On the other hand, the diversity of competences leads to the fragmentation of decision-making and a vagueness in the responsibility for the final result. No such paradox exists in Model A, where the curator is a museum-working researcher who has multiple competences. The curator not only has a profound knowledge of collections but is crucially the author of concepts, leads exhibition projects, and is a team player who asks for help from colleagues if needed.

The typical Model A exhibition team is small and consists of museum professionals. A small proportion of exhibition work requires external professionals, mainly IT assistance, and is regarded as technical assistance. The curator authors and manages the concept and is responsible for the final result. In the context of Model A, small exhibition teams were operating effectively and in one direction whereas in model B, strife occurred between horizontal team members. The strife was based on diminished acknowledgement of the researcher's intellectual authority.

Curators in Model B feel their credibility as experts suffers. This, the curators feel, is due to the increased administrative power of the communication staff. Teamwork involving multiple intermediate links between decision-makers and professionals of diverse exhibition-related fields will flounder should curators feel their competencies are being underused, mainly because authorship of exhibition concepts and leadership responsibilities are denied them. From the curators' points of view, the museum's prioritization of communication over research and collections is reflected by the large number of communication employees and their status. The notion of an exhibition starting from an idea, as opposed to the collections, is

one of the changes behind the detachment of the curators from leading exhibition production. In instances where the the communication and exhibitions departments come up with an idea, they also put together the exhibition team and the implementation process. Nevertheless, there do not seem to be any real obstacles that prevent idea-exhibitions from being an initiative of the curator.

The analysis showed that researchers in their curatorial duties feel their role in exhibition management is undervalued because communication, marketing, and outreach have gained more prominence (people and other resources) and power (the right to make decisions) at museums. Within the extended exhibition team, the problem, at least in Estonia, is that the curators no longer believe in themselves or, more precisely, in the competence of their own arguments when debating with designers, IT-developers or marketing staff. Curators say they are also ignored by their own administration. By succumbing to an approved discourse, the curators suppress their creativity and ideas. The shift in museum-working researchers no longer being involved as curators in exhibition projects is clearly visible. They are invited to participate in teams merely as experts of collections.

It may also be relevant beyond the regional scale that the multiplicity of horizontal interfaces threatens teamwork in a similar way, as was previously claimed about hierarchical management. The presence of an informal hierarchical administration is difficult to identify, as it is hidden at the level of horizontal interfaces. For example, curators are not supposed to communicate directly with all team members, but indirectly through either or both communication and management staff. Institutions need to be aware that the risk of problems of inner communication will remain hidden and only become apparent when curators leave or cease initiating exhibitions.

Further research is suggested to encourage alignment between the expectations of different participants. As the current study presents the voice of researchers practising exhibition making, further research is required to find out the views of museum managers, as well as those of external designers and creative companies serving museums. Presumably they have some opposing arguments that could demonstrate both the limitations and the opportunities that exist within expanded exhibition teams.

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### Notes

- 1 My experience of working in Estonia's museum field as a manager of exhibitions between the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s enables me to make this claim.
- 2 After 1991, when Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia regained full independence, all three states switched to a free market economy. The cultural-political context of the postsocialist transition period in the 1990s was characterized by unstable factors like inconsistent cultural legislation, uneven distribution of national subsidy, the decline of the prestige of official and state-subsidized culture and the growing prestige of commercial culture (Kulbok-Lattik 2008: 140; Mäe 2015: 82). From the middle of the 1990s into the 2000s, the elitist-conservational cultural policy prevailed which sought to take care mainly of national cultural institutions that create national identity (Kulbok-Lattik 2008: 141), but 'museum professionals became relatively marginalised in drafting and adopting policy decisions' (Kuutma and Kroon 2012: 77).
- 3 The new museology is a discourse about the social and political roles of museums, confronting the traditional museum, which focused on collections and curators studying them, with the new museum, which attends to social inclusion and communication. The turning point for activating the debate about museums' new

roles was a compendium *The New Museology*, edited by Peter Vergo, published in 1989. During the last three decades, a significant number of museologists have contributed to this discussion.

- 4 Peter van Mensch, *Museology and Management: Enemies or Friends? Current Tendencies in Theoretical Museology and Museum Management in Europe*, 2003. [http://www.icom-portugal.org/multimedia/File/V%20Jornadas/rwa\\_publ\\_pvm\\_2004\\_1.pdf](http://www.icom-portugal.org/multimedia/File/V%20Jornadas/rwa_publ_pvm_2004_1.pdf), accessed 27 December 2019.
- 5 Estonia is represented by two museums, as the combined content of these two correspond to the content of the others. Latvian, Lithuanian and Finnish national museums feature a combination of political and cultural history. In Estonia the History Museum represents the political history of the state and the National Museum represents the everyday culture and the traditional peasant culture.
- 6 The list of interviewees, interview recordings, and transcriptions are in possession of the author. In the context of the interviewees' desire for anonymity, this study abides by the Code of Ethics of the University of Tartu. The interviewees are coded by the letters of their institution's acronym and a single alphabetical letter.
- 7 Speaking a foreign language could have hindered the spontaneous self-expression of the interviewees. As compared to the interviews conducted in Estonia, trying to find the correct word or simplifying an expression could sometimes be noticed.
- 8 I do not have experience of being a researcher in a museum. However, I have been involved in exhibition production from a managerial position at ERM, which may have influenced the findings of the study.
- 9 #LtNM B, interview by author, digital recording, 1 March 2018, Vilnius.
- 10 At the House of the Signatories on 16 February 1918, the Act of Independence of Lithuania was signed. A new permanent exhibition was dedicated to the centenary of the restoration of the independence of Lithuania.
- 11 #LtNM C, interview by author, digital recording, 1 March 2018, Vilnius.
- 12 The reason could partly be the earlier acquaintance of the interviewees and the interviewer in Estonia, which was not the case in Finland. In front of a stranger, internal problems are not discussed as openly as with acquaintances; therefore, the interviewees might have avoided awkward examples and used milder words and expressions, for example, dialogue instead of debate.
- 13 #SKM D, interview by author, digital recording, 23 January 2019, Helsinki.
- 14 #ERM I, interview by author, digital recording, 27 September 2018, Tartu.
- 15 #AM A, interview by author, digital recording, 24 October 2017, Tallinn.
- 16 #LtNM A, interview by author, digital recording, 1 March 2018, Vilnius.
- 17 #LvNVM D, interview by author, digital recording, 7 November 2017, Riga.
- 18 #ERM I, interview, 27 September 2018.
- 19 #LvNVM B, interview by author, digital recording, 7 November 2017, Riga.
- 20 #LtNM I, interview by author, digital recording, 24 October 2018, Vilnius.
- 21 #LtNM C, interview, 1 March 2018.

- <sup>22</sup> #AM I, interview by author, digital recording, 30 November 2017, Tallinn.
- <sup>23</sup> #LvNVM H, interview by author, digital recording, 5 December 2018, Riga.
- <sup>24</sup> #LvNVM H, interview, 5 December 2018.
- <sup>25</sup> #LvNVM I, interview by author, digital recording, 5 December 2018, Riga.
- <sup>26</sup> At ERM since 1993, when the previous permanent exhibition was prepared (Raba 2015) and at AM since 2007, when an exhibition dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the Estonian Republic was prepared (#AM I, interview, 30 November 2017).
- <sup>27</sup> #AM D, interview by author, digital recording, 30 October 2017, Tallinn
- <sup>28</sup> #AM D, interview, 30 October 2017.
- <sup>29</sup> #AM F, interview by author, digital recording, 29 October 2017, Tallinn.
- <sup>30</sup> A permanent exhibition *Encounters* at ERM (Tartu, Estonia) was opened in the brand-new museum building in October 2016.
- <sup>31</sup> #ERM J, interview by author, digital recording, 28 September 2018, Tartu.
- <sup>32</sup> #AM F, interview, 29 October 2017.
- <sup>33</sup> #AM G, interview by author, digital recording, 30 October 2017, Tallinn.

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Table 1. Interviews

Acronym of the museum's name in native language	Museum in English	Interviewees' codes	Remarks
ERM, Eesti Rahva Muuseum	Estonian National Museum	ERM A, ERM B, ERM E, ERM F, ERM I, ERM J, ERM K, ERM L, ERM M	10 individuals: 5 research/collections; 4 education/exhibitions management/outreach; 1 design
AM, Eesti Ajaloomuuseum	Estonian History Museum	AM A, AM B, AM C, AM D, AM E, AM F, AM G, AM H, AM I	9 individuals: 5 research/collections/administration of research; 3 education/exhibitions management/outreach; 1 design
LvNVM, Latvijas Nacionālais Vēstures Muzejs	National History Museum of Latvia	LvNVM A (aka LvNVM G), LvNVM B, LvNVM C, LvNVM D (aka LvNVM H), LvNVM E, LvNVM F, LvNVM I	7 individuals: 4 research/collections/administration of research; 2 education/exhibitions management; 1 design
LtNM, Lietuvos Nacionalinis Muziejus	National Museum of Lithuania	LtNM A, LtNM B, LtNM C (aka LtNM H), LtNM D, LtNM E, LtNM F, LtNM G, LtNM H, LtNM I, LtNM J	10 individuals: 6 research/collections/administration of collections; 3 education; 1 design
SKM, Suomen Kansallismuseo	National Museum of Finland	SKM A, SKM B, SKM C, SKM D, SKM E	5 individuals: 3 research/collections; 2 education/exhibitions management

### Author

Jana Reidla  
University of Tartu  
Estonia  
[jana.reidla@ut.ee](mailto:jana.reidla@ut.ee)

Jana Reidla is currently writing her PhD thesis on ethnology at the University of Tartu. Her dissertation focuses on recent transformations in curatorial work in Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Finnish national museums.

