

29 June 2012

Working Group Workshop Report **Lydia Wilson**

The first workshop of the Universeum Working Group for the Preservation of Recent Heritage of Science in Universities was held on the 16th June 2012, 9:00-13:40 at the Universeum 2012 meeting in Trondheim, Norway.

Organisers

Marta Lourenço, Lydia Wilson, Roland Wittje

Participants of the Workshop

28 participants

Outi Ampuja (Aalto University), Jim Bennett (Museum for the History of Science, Oxford), Esther Boles (Duch Foundation for Academic Heritage), Thomas Brandt (NTNU Trondheim), Marek Bukowski (Museum of Medical University of Gdańsk), James Caplan (Université d' Aix-Marseille), Elena Corradini (Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia), Neil Curtis (University of Aberdeen), Anne-Marie Delaune (University of Limoges), Vincenza Ferrara (University of Rome 'La Sapienza'), Jennifer Guarini (Université Pierre et Marie Curie), Flavio Häner (University of Basel), Nick Jardine (University of Cambridge), Marion Lenoir (University of Bourgogne), Marta Lourenço (University of Lisbon), Ing-Marie Munktel (Uppsala University), Panu Nykänen (Aalto University), Nataliia Pysarevska (State Polytechnic Museum Kiev), Sonia Sapia (University of Rome 'La Sapienza'), Sébastien Soubiran (University of Strasbourg), Klaus Staubermann (National Museums of Scotland), Sofia Talas (University of Padua), Brigitte van Tiggelen (Université Catholique de Louvain), Anne Vähätalo (Aalto University), Cornelia Weber (Humboldt University), Lydia Wilson (University of Cambridge), Gudrun Wolfschmidt (University of Hamburg), Roland Wittje (University of Regensburg)

Introductory Presentations

Marta Lourenço introduced the day, outlining the aims and objectives of the Working Group. She emphasised that this was about **recent** scientific heritage and distinguished between general problems shared with other academic heritage and specific problems with this category:

General issues:

- information about what exists and where
- stopping the trash process
- lack of mechanisms and policies
- lack of dedicated (scientific heritage) office, custodian
- lack of storage/security

Specific issues of post-war scientific heritage:

- property issues (including private/public and intellectual property/secretcy)

- ethical issues
- speed of use, obsolescence and disposal
- conservation (new materials) and storage (size/complexity) issues
- health and safety issues
- individual objects may emerge (instead of merely collections)
- interpretation issues (going beyond the 'black box' and the 'ugly')
- associated documentation (oral and digital, plus issues of intelligibility)
- operators/developers/technicians/scientists are alive

Nicholas Jardine (Cambridge, History and Philosophy of Science) talked about the work being done elsewhere on this subject, concluding that, despite very strict rules in place for both research collections and accredited university museums there is little in place that really tackles the problems of recent scientific heritage and its preservation. In particular, there is little consultation with scientist-experts for disposal guidelines. He advocated the coordination of dispersed collections across science department, using examples from the universities of Toronto and Leeds, noting the advantages of such an approach: it increases the amount of heritage which can be preserved; second, it will be easier to keep associated documentation and material heritage in one place; and third, the expertise necessary for selection, preservation, display and contextualisation is on hand. He suggested steps towards a policy which would encourage this set-up in universities. First, grant recognition to these collections, including recognition of their (often informal) custodians and perhaps setting up a consultative “forum” of these people; encourage Heads of Department to appoint such a custodian if there isn’t one; and if possible have a “Scientific Heritage Officer” to coordinate activity across the institution. Specific guidelines run into the so-called “Bennett’s law”: the best is the enemy of the good.

Klaus Staubermann (National Museums of Scotland) talked of the relationship between national and university museums, first noting that there is no clear distinction to be made between the two. For example, the National Museum he represents began as a University museum; the Norwegian Technology Museum holds the collections of Oslo University and the Utrecht University Museum doubles as a science museum for the Netherlands. Next, he pointed out that bigger is not always better. For example, national museums because of their size have to process large visitor numbers or because of the large collections they keep often find it difficult to do pro-active conservation. Smaller scale museums can be lighter on their feet. Moving onto collaborations, he gave three examples.:

1. As a large museum, National Museums Scotland have the means to facilitate more exhibitions, larger events etc. and often find it easier to facilitate visits, work placements and other such opportunities than smaller museums. We offer e.g. lecturers and students visits to our collections, work placements, internships, supervision, contribution to exhibitions and galleries (James Black and the Nobel-prize winning beta blocker as one example), and public outreach events etc.
2. National Museums Scotland has extensive experience in analytical research and conservation, i.e. of big objects such as Concorde and complex materials. Here, we offer knowledge sharing events that are open to university museums and are popular with curators.

3. Because we work with stakeholders across the national board we have experience with museum and collection policies. One good example is Dounreay, the first fast breeder site in the K, which is currently decommissioned and where we work with various national and local bodies in developing a joint heritage strategy.

Lydia Wilson then talked of the need for dispersed collections and building on the work that is already being done in science departments by scientists and technicians. She laid out a rough typology for such dispersed collections as follows, pointing out that we need different toolkits for each sort of activity:

1. Non-accredited museums
2. Isolated displays: display cases in Departments.
3. Stored and listed collections (or in the process of being listed)
4. Stored and unlisted collections
5. Assemblages: there is a potential overlap with “stored and unlisted”; the difference lies in the recognition and protection of the material. “Stored” means that there is dedicated space for the collection. “Assemblages” implied that they are in space which is at risk.
6. Accumulations: again, there may be an overlap with the last category, and again, the difference lies in recognition and protection. “Accumulations” are instruments in the corridors and in cupboards that have not yet been thrown away; there is no recognition of “heritage” status.

Roland Wittje argued for integrating teaching and research components into heritage strategies, as it makes the heritage visible among students and faculty, creates awareness and thus makes the heritage part of the university's main agendas: both aspects are central to a successful strategy of preserving heritage at a university. Just some courses in some disciplines where heritage can be mobilised include:

- History of science, technology and medicine
- Science studies
- Media studies
- Museum studies
- Cultural studies
- Archive and heritage programs

Contemporary heritage offers many opportunities for problem oriented and project based interdisciplinary teaching, covering both sciences and humanities; and interdisciplinary teaching can bring together not only scientists, social scientists, and humanists, but also technicians and librarians. It benefits heritage work: through projects with students, contemporary heritage can be researched, documented, exhibited, and made publicly available, and strategies for the preservation of the heritage can be developed.

It would be desirable to have a network, exchanging experiences, syllabi, models of teaching, and literature regarding contemporary scientific heritage. We have already talked about a series of European summer schools, similar to the 'Reading Artefacts' Summer Institute at the Canada Science and Technology Museum in Ottawa, organised by David Pantalony. One of these summer schools should be on contemporary scientific heritage.

It would also be desirable to have a network of research programs on contemporary scientific heritage, both, from a historical as well as from a heritage perspective.

A summary

NJ: policies/best practices; not to impose things; guidelines for advice
KS: national museums; objects from universities – shared collections; objects; heritage strategies; public/education

LW: collaboration; want to work together with scis and techs – very closely

RW: teaching and research; mobilise students; let them tackle the problems to which there are no solutions – project, problem orientated; contemporary history hasn't finished, actors are still alive.

Group work

We then split into three groups to discuss one of the aims: that of developing toolkits for the department (one aim was chosen in order to keep the discussion very focussed and to ensure some practical results). It was suggested that we imagine the scenario of going into departments on the brink of disposal of equipment, and thinking of various methods to select and preserve as much as possible. We were reminded of Jim Bennett's plenary and his point that if we concentrate too much on public engagement we might lose the other functions such as teaching and research.

Reports:

Flavio reported from Roland's group, who discussed not so much the toolkit but the step before the toolkit: who we are, how to present ourselves and what we are doing to those in science departments. We don't have a clear name for ourselves as a group or type – we just turn up and say we're interested in what they have in their departments. We have to know how to present ourselves, and also we have to prepare so that we know the specifics of the organisation; the structure, personnel, history and so on. Before giving anyone a toolkit you have to establish communication which requires these first steps. It's almost a toolkit for how to approach scientists with a toolkit, which includes recognition of their priorities and agendas.

It was also pointed out that we have to include other professionals such as librarians and archivists.

Esther reported from Lydia's group. The group discussed the early, urgent steps of dealing with material on the verge of disposal. Establishing the ownership is a priority; finding out who is interested in the department and who has the expertise to help.

It was suggested that a positive practice would be to assemble a group as quickly as possible of a variety of people to discuss the fate of equipment; to challenge and support each other in decisions.

Selection criteria was discussed and agreed it was a tricky subject, one which could only really happen on a case by case basis and which needed help from such a group, though this happens very differently in different countries and more information on this would be useful. It was suggested that someone in each country could be found to investigate practices country by country to build on the “policies elsewhere” document supplied by Lydia to the Working Group. It would be useful to assemble informal practices as well as the formal policies; Klaus agreed to circulate his own practices in this sort of situation.

The importance of documentation of what *we* do was stressed by Jim: future historians will want to unpick our choices and get behind them, almost undermine them, and we need to provide the means for this which is good documentation.

We need different toolkits for different disciplines as well as different aims and uses of collections.

The importance of collaboration for collection and expertise, including science societies and amateur networks, was stressed; the WG could provide a forum for liaison for this.

Creating software to document diverse policies, practices and situations was raised.

Sébastien reported from Marta’s group:

Wrap-up

Workshop structure feedback

- need more time for discussion in the small groups; shorter presentations
- need very specific, well-framed questions to tackle
- different questions for different groups
- have written material prepared for non-native speakers
- need list of specific issues for assembling a toolkit

It was agreed that the workshop model is the way to go to push special issues; there should also be room for general discussions and the general papers at Universeum too; we need to have some general background papers. But shouldn’t have papers and a workshop in parallel again.

Mechanism for further developments: need to assign specific tasks with a timeline.

Work should be on four fronts from now:

Assembling a toolkit: Flavio is in charge

Establishing some selection criteria: Roland

Assembling minimum requirements for preservation (to be supplied in the guise of advice rather than instructions); warning that even minimum requirements are too stringent sometimes in terms of, for example,

conservation: Marta

Compilation of:

- guidelines/policies both formal and informal (building on the table Lydia has passed on): LW to send the table around again; need volunteers from different countries to compile more
- best/good practices
- literature/bibliographies (relating to the different sections); links too; a broad category
 - policies
 - selection
 - conservation
 - documentation
 - black box
 - etc...

Smaller tasks:

- Creation of a google group: Marta

Place to share documents: google docs? Dropbox? Marta

- Written report from this workshop: abstract of 4 presentations; summaries from each group; wrap-up: Lydia

- Website (within Universeum's website): Roland

The plan is to create these documents and then test the toolkits from January 2013 onwards in different institutions, sharing information through the google group throughout.

June 2013: presentation of results of the tests in the Universeum workshop in Valencia, for consolidation, discussion, refinement and so on.

Roland is to coordinate.

Further points to think about

Thomas Brand: 1. Discuss role of Universeum: what can Universeum do besides the network/meetings? E.g. providing authority/legitimacy; 2. First aid kit; what about a pre-emptive, long-term, strategic kit?

Roland: need terminology; categories; and what can we actually do?

Neil Curtis: so much science is collaborative now between institutions and also mass produced; danger that no-one keeps anything because it's seen as of no value; collaboration needed.

In general: collaboration: circulate collecting interests around the group.

Roland: summer schools.

Marta stressed that we need to keep the discussion very focussed or nothing concrete will get done.