

Museums in a time of migration

Rethinking museums' roles,
representations, collections, and collaborations

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Christina Johansson & Pieter Bevelander

Introduction

Museums in a time of migration

Christina Johansson & Pieter Bevelander

Migration has always contributed to the development and reshaping of societies and urban spaces. Today, migration movements have become a global phenomenon, where the number of countries affected—socially, economically, and culturally—is continually increasing. As in the past, the reasons why people move are varied and often complex. Sometimes it is about fleeing poverty, war, ethnic conflict, environmental disaster, or persecution; yet people also move for other reasons, such as work or study, or out of curiosity and a sense of adventure.

Whereas migration is still the key concept in migration studies, defined as the movement of people over time between geographical places, countries, and states, there is an increasing diversity of migration patterns and forms—boosted by globalization—and their consequences for migrants and receiving countries. The perspectives associated with the ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences have become popular among migration researchers in recent years. As opposed to more sedentary notions of society and people, this development is sensitive to cross-border movements, which today are increasing in intensity, circularity, and transnationalism. People now move far more frequently through different channels in an increasingly interconnected world, using established links that are sustained and reproduced by an expanding web of social networks, and without necessarily establishing themselves in one country in the long term. Furthermore, as a result of the globalizing effect of the Internet and cheaper transport, even people who migrate permanently to a new country may remain active members of their earlier communities (Faist 2013).

International migration thus has profound social implications, including for the museum sector. To be in tune with the times and relevant to all citizens, the museum sector needs, more than ever, to address issues that transcend national borders.

As important educational institutions, often visited by school-children, museums have the potential to affect everyone's notions of the world. By making museums places for exploring and learning about the past and the present reality of issues such as migration, transnational connections, freedom of movement, and human rights, they not only become more relevant as cultural institutions, but also facilitate positive changes in how people relate to one another, thereby ultimately contributing to society's sustainable development.

By illuminating current research and museum practices, this book seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about museums' engagement with migration. Scholars and museum curators reflect on various aspects of museums' engagement with issues of migration. Special attention is given to the museums' roles, representations, collections, and collaborations in a time of migration. The book is a result of the conference 'Museums in Times of Migration and Mobility', arranged jointly by Malmö University and the City of Malmö in May 2016. While the conference sought to lay the scholarly foundations for a new museum in Malmö with migration as a central theme, the scope and relevancy of the book is far greater, addressing as it does the issues of migration and inclusion as represented in museums around the world.

International migration is a flashpoint in public debate today. It is a highly challenging area in many wealthy countries as well as in poorer ones. Public unease about immigration, and at times open resistance, are evident in many countries. Immigration is used as a scapegoat for social problems such as access to healthcare, jobs, education, and housing, but is also hailed as the solution to demographic change and economic stagnation. Politicians in democratic countries are often swayed by this heavily polarized situation, either keen to capitalize on it or to attempt to educate voters about this highly complex, sensitive issue. Since there are so many stakeholders involved, the resultant policies are not always rational or coherent.

International migration is also a key topic in the social sciences, since without knowing its membership and boundaries it is difficult to talk about 'society'. Immigrants are not simply a detached group; they are part of the whole, with important implications for all social arenas and for any understanding of the important features of 'us'. Social structures, institutions, and individual and group characteristics

of both immigrants and the receiving population necessarily affect the development of society. Thus inequalities in the labour market, in access to housing, education, and healthcare, and in political representation are key areas in migration studies as explored by various social disciplines.

The literature offers many theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study of migration, both international and national (see Glick Schiller et al. 1992; King 2012a; Massey et al. 1998; Urry 2007). These include explanations of migration based on distance and interaction; individual and group behavioural models; push–pull theory; micro- and macroeconomic theories; the meso-level approach to families, organizations, and social capital; Marxist interpretations; networks and systems; integration and assimilation; and the gendered nature of migration. In addition, there are examinations of the complex interaction of migration and (under)development, as well as notions of diaspora, transnationalism, mobility and culture, and identity.

To outline the current understanding, we offer here a number of dichotomies or ‘binaries’ drawn from the field of migration. In the literature, these dichotomies are often used to chart the complexities of the migration phenomenon, but in fact many of them are somewhat problematic in their own right, and have on occasion been roundly criticized. Here we follow Russell King (2012b) and King and Suter (2013).

A primary distinction in the literature is made between *internal* and *international* migration, and how migration should be understood in temporal and geographical terms (Cwerner 2001; Malmberg 1997). Here, two distinct lines of thought have evolved, with differing conceptual frameworks and models, which only recently began to be linked in shared conceptual models. These frameworks indicate that internal migration often leads to international migration, while international migrants (ethnic minorities) become internally mobile in their destination countries. Also, as nation-states become less important (with the rise of the EU, for example), the distinction between internal and international mobility becomes blurred.

There is also a common distinction between *voluntary* and *forced* migration. Whereas it is easy to think of migrations which are unquestionably forced—the slave migrations out of Africa, indentured labour from former colonies to the Americas, international movements due to ethnic cleansing or the threat of religious and political persecution—as

well as those which are clearly voluntary—North Europeans who retire to the Mediterranean or Thailand—in practice many migrations are not so easily categorized. Is a young Filipino woman sent by her family to work as a domestic servant in the Gulf a voluntary or a forced migrant? Some classify such indentured migration as voluntary, others see it as highly dubious. Does the categorization change if the same woman were to move to Canada instead? Obviously there is a multifaceted continuum of coercion and freewill in migration decisions. Besides, there are three parts to the decision itself—if, where, and when to migrate—all of them subject to pull and push factors.

The literature often makes a distinction between *temporary* migration (followed by return migration) and *permanent* migration (when there is no return). This seems simple enough, but often the intention (whether to emigrate for good or to return sooner or later) is different from the outcome. Psychologically, many migrants waver between a desire to return and the desire (or need) to stay: the ‘myth of return’ is just one way of articulating this contradiction. Another is the idea that ‘being a migrant’ becomes a permanent state of mind: a true ‘home’ no longer exists. Perhaps we could call this a state of ‘migrancy’, or a ‘transnational existence’, or a ‘diasporic consciousness’. And then there are other migratory trajectories, such as circular or repeat migration, onwards or serial migration, step migration, and nomadism.

Reflecting the globalization of migration since the end of the twentieth century and the growing perception of migration as an ‘unwanted’ phenomenon, with the rise of the discourse of ‘control migration’ (Hollifield et al. 2014), the literature differentiates between *legal* migration and *illegal* migration (although many prefer to use ‘irregular’, ‘clandestine’, or ‘undocumented’ to avoid the normativeness of ‘illegal’). There are many ways of understanding the growth of illegal migration. Migrants can become illegal when they do not return to their home country when their permits expire, for example. In public debate, some stress such illegalities to tap into the growing fear of mass migration (or what passes for it) and the need to control migration in the face of an apparently increasing pressure from people wanting to migrate, while for others it is almost the reverse, and the illegalities are taken to show that the ‘natural forces’ of migration will always triumph over regimes of control and repression. Either way,

problems arise when it comes to defining a migrant as ‘an illegal’. Is it their country of origin that matters? Their destination, the countries they have transited, some international organization?

Crucially, the field of migration studies builds on two distinct traditions, and hence has two separate literatures: the study of the *process* of migration as geographical movement (often undertaken by geographers, economists, and demographers); and the study of the ethnic communities, transnationalism and diasporas that are the *outcomes* of migration, such as analyses of integration, race relations, and cultural distinctiveness (mainly carried out by economists, sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists). While these two fields of migration studies are analytically distinct, the links between them could and should be analysed in greater depth (Brettell & Hollifield 2008). Longitudinal or life-history studies that trace migrants from their place of origin to their destinations, linking pre-migration with post-migration characteristics, sometimes across more than one generation, and often employing a social network or transnational community approach, while controlling for structural societal influences, are still too few, and could be a way forwards in understanding the migration experience in a fuller context.

Three main types of migration have dominated migration research, and do so even today to a large extent: temporary labour migration; long-term settling migration; and refugees. Over the past century, however, many new forms of migration and international mobility have emerged, especially in the wake of globalization (King et al. 2010; Martiniello & Rath 2012). All this begs the question of whether migration is the *exception* or the *norm*. Worldwide, somewhere in excess of 244 million people are estimated to be international migrants—and this is (only) some 3.3 per cent of the world population, while the number of internal migrants is now 763 million, or about 14 per cent of the world population (IOM 2017). On the other hand, given that at least in industrialized countries and even more so in the post-industrial world, probably only a minority of people are born, live their lives, and die in the same community, some kind of migration inevitably takes place. We should also remember that for many people in the world, their very existence is based on migration, not least in the EU, whether business managers, students, or temporary workers. However, at the

same time we need to remember that a substantial proportion of the world's population are *not* free to migrate. They are instead 'trapped' by poverty, social sanctions, and above all by migration control regimes put in place by rich, powerful countries to keep (poor) migrants out.

New migration groups settle in new destination countries because of state humanitarianism and transnational investment, which open up opportunities for people to flee poverty and authoritarian regimes. Local commutes and long-term tourism have expanded, as have business visits, contract work, and corporate transfers. International migration because of family reunion, child- and eldercare (global care chains), marriage, study, and retirement; high-skilled migration and brain drain; migration due to climate change, human trafficking, and sexual abuse: all have been studied by migration researchers in different contexts. One of the results has been a plethora of new concepts such as 'mobility' (Urry 2007), 'transnationalism' (Glick Schiller et al. 1992), and 'diasporism' (Cohen 2008).

If we go back in history, migration's importance to the peoples, cultures, and economies of the world can hardly be overstated. It bears repeating that migration served as an early form of globalization, and how, after 1492, various forms of migration were key facets in the evolution of the global labour market in all its historical phases of conquest, colonialism, slavery, indenture, mercantilism, industrialization, Fordism, and, ultimately, today's service economies (Hatton & Williamson 2005). Moreover, migration has played a seminal role in giving character to places and to their populations—for instance, in so-called settler nations such as the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where the layering of a whole series of migrations has produced richly 'multicultural' (but also hierarchical) societies. Jumping forwards to the present, migration flows in the last five decades have been more diversified in terms of country of origin and destination, with new countries that earlier limited immigration. Whereas traditional migrant countries such as the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia still have a net migration intake per annum, many others have increasingly diversified populations due to migration (Castles et al. 2014). It is also in these newly diverse countries that the politicization of migration has grown, with the establishment of populist anti-immigrant parties. Today more than ever, it is essential to stress the importance of fact-based research in order to inform the public

and the political establishment about migration. In what follows, we pay particular attention to the roles and duties of museums in a time of increased migration.

Changing museums

In 2007, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Vienna adopted the following definition of a museum:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment. (ICOM 2017)

The roles of museums are not set in stone though, but have varied considerably over time and are still evolving. In the past, monarchs and empires used royal collections and museums as symbols of power, and museums became useful tools in the colonial project when assigned the role of organizing and exhibiting artefacts from conquered parts of the world, and giving legitimacy to domination (Aronsson 2008; Bennett 1988; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sandell 2007). Other roles have included fostering good citizens by inculcating civilizing values and social norms in the middle-class population (Bennett 1995), and building national identity (Aronsson 2008; Bohman 1997; Kaplan 1994; Knell et al. 2011; Hyltén-Cavallius & Svanberg 2016). Not least during the latter part of the nineteenth century, institutions such as museums, schools, and the armed forces became important tools for homogenization. Museums enabled each nation-state's memories to be displayed as enduring and sacred (Hettne et al. 1998).

Although many museums still take part in the processes in which national identity is created and recreated, their roles have become more intricate in recent decades. Processes such as globalization and migration and ideas about multiculturalism have challenged the notion of the sovereign state and a homogenous 'people' as the heart of the national narrative (Aronsson 2008: 209), and globalization is causing friction within the museum sector (Karp et al. 2007).

Change has been ongoing in the museum sector for decades. The revolution in the humanities in the sixties and seventies, which resulted in a stronger focus on ordinary people and socially marginalized groups, inspired museums to become more self-reflexive and democratic. The democratization of museums and their societal role, especially when analysed in terms of power, has since the eighties often been referred to as ‘the new museology’ (Baur 2008; Boast 2011; Vergo 1989). The reorientation of the museum sector continues, of course. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007) states that societal processes of change, such as new policies and fresh ideas about culture and society, have resulted in museums revising their work (see also Message 2014). Museums also have to adjust to actual changes in society if they want to be meaningful and appeal to broad audiences with varied demands (Ames 1992, in Lidchi 1997).

Evidently, museums have also begun to scrutinize their approaches to their audiences, alongside their knowledge production, their ethical and social liabilities, and their very identity (Hooper-Greenhill 2007). Hooper-Greenhill argues that, as a result, museums are successively transforming from modernist museums into ‘post-museums’. In contrast to the modernist museum, the ‘post-museum’ abandons the Enlightenment ideal of a single narrative, with its claim to objectivity and universality; instead, ‘post-museums’ shed light on previously forgotten narratives, and are in the process of becoming ‘multivocal’, since exhibitions are frequently matched with other kinds of events, including those in which communities are invited to take part (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; see also Hall 2005). Another distinguishing feature of the post-museum is an increased interest in intangible heritage, for example memories and songs, and in contextualizing the objects on display by telling stories about their use. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) also argues that the very notion of the museum space may in the future be looked on differently, viewed as a process or experience that can exist outside the museum building. Studies of Scandinavian museums show that they too are taking steps to become post-museums. One indication is that they are opening up to new perspectives, such as hybridity, transnationalism, and change (Goodnow 2008), and are attempting to convey a global outlook (Levitt 2015). There are national differences in how far this process has come (Levitt 2015), of course, and between different types of museums (Johansson 2015).

The very museumscape is changing. Ethnological museums are being transformed and relabelled as world museums, for example. Another trend is the establishment of specific migration museums (Macdonald 2016). They have a somewhat longer history in traditional immigration countries—the US, Canada, and Australia—than in Europe. The nineties, for example, saw the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York, the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, and the Immigration Museum in Melbourne. However, in Europe too there is a growing interest in migration museums, and dedicated migration museums have been founded: thus Paris has the Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration; in Bremerhaven in Germany we find the Emigration Centre, which since 2012 has covered both immigration and emigration; and in Denmark in Farum there is the Danish Immigration Museum. The UK has a Migration Museum Project, aimed at establishing a national Migration Museum for Britain to highlight migration’s centuries-long importance to British history. As a step in the process a temporary migration museum opened in London in April 2017. As the museum director Sophie Henderson recently noted:

It’s the topic that’s on everyone’s lips—even more so now after the EU referendum. People’s attitude to migration matters. There is such a strong case for a calm, sober, well-informed discussion and a venue for those conversations. (*London Evening Standard* 2017)

In addition to specialized migration museums, the more traditional museums have begun to address issues of migration and diversity, especially in temporary exhibitions (Baur 2008; Johansson 2017; Sandell 2005). The museum sector’s burgeoning interest in migration is also reflected in the debate among museum staff, educators, and researchers, and in the quantity of research on the issues involved. In what follows, we offer a brief account of the studies most relevant to the present book.

In the book *Die Musealisierung der Migration*, Joachim Baur (2009) compares migration museums in the US, Canada, and Australia. The recent *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* by Peggy Levitt (2015) highlights museums in different parts of the world and their curators’ understanding of globalization

and migration. *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics* (Gouriévidis 2014) considers interesting case studies of various museum spaces around the world in order to chart the museums' representation of migration, identity-building, roles, and community collaborations.

A special focus on European developments is offered by the EU-funded project, 'European Museums in an Age of Migrations', which has resulted in several wide-ranging publications (MeLa 2015). One question scrutinized by the project was the museums' representations of migration. Similarly, the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO 2016) recently developed ideas for museums' engagement with issues of migration and cultural diversity. Older initiatives are also worth mentioning. The 'Museums and Diversity' series edited by Jack Lohman and Katherine Goodnow looked further afield than Europe, but in *Scandinavian Museums and Cultural Diversity* the focus is, as the title suggests, the Scandinavian museums' engagement with diversity, including migration (Goodnow 2008). The research collaboration between Malmö University and the former Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres in Vienna resulted in publications on migration, memory, and representation in various spheres—politics, schools, and museums—in Europe (Hintermann & Johansson 2010; Johansson 2015).

The literature also reveals interesting developments in how migration has been represented in museums. Mary Hutchison and Andrea Witcomb, who in their contribution to *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics* looked at changes in the Australian museum field, identified a shift in the early nineties from the recognition of the history of migration by celebrating multicultural Australia, to exhibitions that also 'engaged with diversity as an *interaction* between cultures' (2014: 235). Similar developments can be seen in the European museum context. One clear trend is the shift from ignoring migration to a focus on individual groups (often by stressing cultural differences, and hence risking exoticizing the migrants) and on to diversity and cultural interaction. Lately, some museums also have begun to acknowledge global dimensions, transnationalism, and hybridity, alongside the history of colonialism (Goodnow 2008; Johansson 2017; Levitt 2015; Ross 2015). Certainly, it is the case that older approaches frequently coexist with newer, more innovative ones (Goodnow 2008; Johansson 2017) and even if migration truly is a border-transcending phenomenon, there is

still a tendency on the part of museums to conceptualize and narrate migration stories along national lines (Baur 2009; Johansson 2017). When portraying the multicultural nation, museums, in their determination to be inclusive, tend to represent the nation as a harmonious coexistence of diverse groups. By so doing, they run the risk of not paying enough attention to the very real frictions and inequalities in society (Baur 2009; see also Ostow 2010).

Museums that are interested in engaging with the question of migration need to address all these various difficulties with its representation. They need to overcome the previous shortcomings, including ignorance of migration's global dimensions, the oversimplification of migration and diversity, the exoticization of migrants, and the downplaying of actual interactions (including conflicts). This is especially important given that museums' representations not only reflect society, but are also constitutive, and hence impact on people's notions of the world. The present book draws on the academic discussion to look at both the museums' roles in a changing world and their chosen representations of migration.

According to ICOM's definition of a museum, one of its core activities is collecting. However, among newer museum institutions there is a tendency to downplay the importance of this task, taking present-day issues as their point of reference rather than a physical museum collection per se. Some newer museums do not collect objects at all. However, it is important to note that there is not necessarily a conflict between new visions and collecting activities—an insight further developed in this book.

New trends in the museum sector also include the aspiration to be more inclusive and open to dialogue and collaboration with various stakeholders, for example immigrant organizations (Clifford 1997; Coxall 2006; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sandell 2012; Watson 2007). James Clifford (1997) theorized about the museum as a contact zone in the nineties, imagining a zone for meetings, dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration. However, it is important to note that the unequal relationships between the participants in these spaces mean that they are never free from conflicts and constraints (Boast 2011; Clifford 1997; Lynch 2014).

The roles of museums and their engagement with migration have evolved over time. But can museums jettison their legacy as elite institutions and former facilitators of colonial and nationalist projects?

Some researchers—such as Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel (1991) and Robin Boast (2011)—who focus on the binding role of structures, question the depth and importance of the ongoing changes; however, there are also more optimistic voices that acknowledge the very real changes in the museum sector, and museums’ potential to contribute to social change (for example, Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sandell 2012). The first step in tackling museums’ inherent structures of domination and inequality is to shed light on them—as some of the contributors to this book show.

A museum of democracy and migration in Malmö

The City Council in Malmö submitted an idea for a new museum to the Swedish government in 2015. The response was broadly positive. The government chose to fund a pilot study in 2016 and 2017 with the aim of assessing what would be needed to establish a national museum of democracy and migration in Malmö. That pilot study, conducted by the Department of Culture of the City of Malmö, has recently reported its findings (City of Malmö 2017).

The idea of this new museum also resulted in the conference ‘Museums in Times of Migration and Mobility’, at which Sweden’s Minister for Democracy and Culture, Alice Bah Kuhnke, gave the opening speech. She talked about the importance of illuminating migration’s role in Swedish history. She stated:

The idea of creating a museum, an independent institution with various types of missions with migration as the main theme, will be an important step to actually recognize migration as a major part of Swedish history and cultural heritage ... And for me as a politician it would be an important step on the road to build a more inclusive society. (Government 2016)

We can only agree with the stance that a new museum such as the one described above would be an important contribution to the local, national, and international museumscape. In the following section we present the various essays that make up this book, outlining their key insights for everyone interested in museums’ engagement with issues of migration and inclusion.

The role of museums in a time of migration and societal change

The book opens with a shortened version of Peggy Levitt's keynote lecture 'Creating national and global citizens: What role can museums play?' which posed all the key questions we hoped the conference would address. Her lecture was in turn based on her recent book, *Artifacts and Allegiances*. She explores the role that culture and cultural institutions can play in helping to create more successful, diverse societies. Since museums in the past played a major role in creating nations and national citizens, do they create global citizens in today's global world? To answer these questions, she talked with museum professionals in seven cities around the world, including Gothenburg, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, to provide a close-up view of how art, ethnographic, and history museums balance nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

The second essay, 'Migration and Liverpool' by David Fleming, the director of National Museums Liverpool, serves as an illustration of an institution that has begun the process of adjusting to globalization and migration, and is interested in taking social responsibility. Fleming begins by reflecting on the importance of acknowledging the commonality of various forms of mobility. He notes that it is the responsibility of museums to explain migration in all its complexity, and not to stand by while people use the febrile atmosphere that currently surrounds the issue for their own ends. He goes on to consider various experiences of migration (emigration and immigration) in the UK and elsewhere, including the largest forced migration in history—the transatlantic slave trade—in which the city of Liverpool played a prominent role, and the mass migration of Irish people to Liverpool in the nineteenth century, and its enduring legacy.

In Bonita Bennett's essay 'Memory is our weapon', we become acquainted with the District Six Museum (D6M) in Cape Town, South Africa. District Six was a community destroyed under apartheid, largely because the diversity of its residents contradicted the apartheid government's insistence on complete racial segregation. D6M is an example of a museum that is not only engaged with issues of societal change, but in fact emerged from a grassroots initiative. This movement campaigned for the protection of the land from which