



To Modernize a Museum

Christoffer Schander began his position as Director of the University Museum of Bergen in August 2011. Unfortunately, his tenure at the Museum was cut short; he died on 21 February 2012 after a short period of illness. He quickly saw that the Museum had resources and potential as a science museum serving the general public, individual scientists and society. He also gained this understanding from conversations he had with almost every employee at the Museum during his six months in the position.

Professor Karin Pittman was Christoffer Schander's live-in partner. Together they had many discussions about the Museum that Schander had the pleasure of leading. Thus she also gained an insight into Schander's visions for the University Museum of Bergen. In this article she shares her knowledge with us.

By Karin Pittman

Christoffer's ambition

A boyhood dream came true when Chris became Director. He knew the potential in a university museum because he had been around, in and working with museums for a great deal of his professional life. They are not all alike but they are all representatives of the culture from which they come. The uniqueness of that, the long traditions and vibrant future of research in Bergen is what he wanted to re-energize.

Talking with all colleagues - the staff is the power of the museum

He tried to meet and talk with each and every employee, get personal angles on institutional policies and uncover pressing concerns. That was the first thing he prioritized. We talked about it over the dinner table and he was only dismayed about how long it was going to take to talk with the many employees that Bergen Museum has. "Months!" He said, "Months!" So we went shopping for a coffee machine for really good coffee so that meetings with

him on campus would have at least one guaranteed bright spot. That coffee machine should keep working its magic for a while still.

The historical context - the wonderful buildings

He went out of his new office. The buildings of the Museum are many and amazing, in their architecture, in their size and in their contents. Often he would come back with a boyish smile on his face and say "You will never guess what I saw today!" He loved it. He loved less having to deal immediately with





formal procedures which had begun long before his tenure. But he was looking forward to the obvious opportunities afforded by the long-planned renovations and the temporary closing of the exhibits. The challenges for the future were hinted at in the announcement for his position. He thought deeply about how to integrate his vision of what the Museum could be in future with how it functions today.

To modernize the museum - the three goals

1) Integrate nature and culture

An overarching plan of his was to modernize the function of the museum, not just the displays. In fact he had three main goals: the first was to unify the two museum sections of Kultur and Natur with exhibits and projects that bridged both. An unusual exhibit about the roots of Black Metal music with its symbols and use of skeleton parts really was going to be brought up for consideration to utilize the assets of the Kulturhistorisk and Naturhistorisk sections. He saw nature and nurture as representing one coin, not two sides of it. Even cooking, with old and modern implements, old and modern recipes, this reflects aspects of chemistry, transport, social life. So cooking combines the biology of organisms with social impacts. He saw tasteful exhibitions as being a natural unifier, in all the meanings of the phrase. He even went undercover to see how each section of the museum organized events: we used our own costumes on Halloween to infiltrate the crowds at Kulturhistorisk that night

and he wondered if skeletons from another section could expand the impact just a bit more? Could the staff in all sections of the Museum begin to self-identify as working in the same place? This was and is a real challenge, and would perhaps be at the heart of any real change in direction forward.

2) The potential in the scientific collections, making them visible for the public

Secondly, he wanted to bring research using museum collections to the forefront by getting the archive system more organized and by profiling active research and active researchers in updated exhibits. He knew that modern research techniques applied to well-archived material breathe new life into both areas. Collected specimens of flora and fauna, some species now extinct, can still be persuaded to reveal their secrets via molecular analyses. New text research methods can elucidate the growth and spread of ideas. Interesting results put forward as hypotheses (testable hypotheses) stimulate not only the public to appreciate an exhibit but also stimulate other researchers to further investigate the Museum's riches.

One concrete short-term solution was to recreate the behind-the-scenes activity of the museum and its researchers and make these visible to the public. An example comes from a short trip we took to the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, Canada, where a huge room had interactive displays of traditional preserved animals and plants, complete with pictures of

the people doing research on parts of the collections. There were stories, audiotapes, microscopes and magnifying glasses, and especially notes that something on display had been borrowed in order to study such-and-such and would be back at a later date. This made the connection between fossil plants and current farming, between geology and urban planning, between ancient animals and upwardly mobile young minds. It is easy to reproduce such exhibits in Bergen.

We saw a further good example of bringing the research to the public on his last trip when he had meetings with luminaries in the museum world in London. We wandered around the exhibits in the new Darwin section of the Natural History Museum and took in a special live show about giant squid. As we sat among the families and couples watching two scientist-demonstrators explain about the history of finding the squid and then bringing out a plush model of one so excited people could get some "hands-on" experience, Chris leaned over and said "See that demonstrator? We both applied for that job a few years ago. I came second. This guy is good!" The guy in question had his own research to conduct in the stores of the NHM and would happily communicate this to anyone wishing to listen. He was actively cooperating with scientists around the world. I know Chris hoped to instill such Saturday-morning enthusiasm and attract such good minds to Bergen. This would have been a long term goal.





3) Manage, open up and revitalize the collections for the scientists

And thirdly, Chris planned to use his extensive contacts in the museum world to offer access to some of the unique collections in Bergen. These contacts could also help preserve some unique historical artefacts languishing in the warehouses. Opening access involves digitally archiving in such a way that collections are searchable using both common and specific search terms, and this process has already begun. With collections as large and old as Bergens, this also involves years of systematic commitment. It involves curating

and restoring valuable assets, like maybe a stuffed Tasmanian wolf or a special explorer's equipment. It involves recognizing and promoting the valuable assets.

The payoff can be huge - accreditation on an increasing number of important papers, generating new hypotheses, re-evaluating the ways of our forefathers and -mothers and the skill with which they produced their equipment. The biggest payoff can be in hosting truly invigorating conferences and inspiring more people to use the museum for its given purpose. In this way The University Museum of Bergen could begin to take its place among

the great museums of Europe.

Conclusion

Chris did not think this was too far-fetched. He saw the museum as having enormous potential to play an important role in the identity of UiB and Bergen. Unfortunately his tenure as Director was cut short. This year we lost him, a warm visionary scientist held in high regard around the world, and the loss is great. The potential for a re-energized Universitetsmuseum in Bergen is still there.

With bittersweet gratitude and love
Karin Pittman

■ *En gammel apotekerrose funnet i Etne, og nå tatt inn til rosesamlingene ved Arboret og botanisk hage på Milde utenfor Bergen.*

Foto: Per H. Salvesen

■ *An old rose (Rosa gallica "Officinalis") found in Etne, now in the Rose Collections at The Arboretum and Botanical Garden at Milde outside Bergen. Photo: Per H. Salvesen*

