
The Norsk Folkemuseum

Forward planning at the turn of the century



Open-air exhibit, the Setesdal farm, in winter



Open-air exhibit, the Setesdal farm, in summer

Liv Hilde Boe and Timothy Ambrose discuss the process of review and development under way in Oslo.

The Norsk Folkemuseum was founded in 1884. Since that date, it has developed a remarkable collection of cultural heritage material from the medieval period onwards. The collections have been drawn from mainly rural but also urban contexts throughout Norway and focus predominantly on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is perhaps best known for its large collection of 153 re-erected traditional buildings drawn from all over the country, which are displayed in the parkland around the museum.

The museum has some 85 full-time staff, with additional staff in the summer season, and receives 240,000 visits per annum. It is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, which provides it with 60-65% of its operational revenue, with the remainder being made up from admissions charges, retail and catering, and sponsorship. It receives no financial support at present from the City of Oslo.

The Norsk Folkemuseum is currently working to develop a new

five-year forward plan and has reached an important stage in its development at the start of the new century. It has invested considerable resources, both human and financial, in recent years, and particularly since its Jubilee Year in 1994, in improving the quality of its collections management. The museum has achieved some significant results and its new five-storey collections storage facilities, which house some 60,000 objects, are among the best of their type in Europe. In addition, the electronic documentation of the collections has been carried out with exemplary thoroughness and the museum has set new standards for collections care and management through this work. There is more to do – the museum's object collections run to 250,000 items, which may be individual objects or groups of objects. However, the work over the past five years has provided an extremely strong foundation for the future.

In terms of its public services, the museum has made significant strides in developing new reception facilities, archive and study facilities and retail provision and has sought to attract new public interest in its work through a programme of imaginative temporary exhibitions. The latest of these are an exhibition on folk art and farming, 'The

Proud Farmer'; a major exhibition on the novel and film *Sophie's World*; and an exhibition on 'The Role of Women in Norwegian Society'. This approach has had the dual benefit of showing that the Norsk Folkemuseum is seeking to explore the cultural history of Norway up to the present day through its exhibitions and associated events and activities, while at the same time developing facilities to serve new audiences in the museum.

While much progress has been made, the museum faces a number of challenges in its forward planning. A number of the permanent galleries are closed to the public and it is not possible to display the museum's core collections – its key strength – through the galleries or through the buildings of the Open Air museum.

The market context

The museum's location within Norway's major population centre is a considerable strength in marketing terms – in addition to being a major point of entry into the country, Oslo and the Oslo Fjord area hold some 33% of the country's population. Of the museum's 240,000 visits per annum, c.20-25% are made by foreign visitors, with the remainder made by Norwegian residents. The proportion varies through the year, with foreign tourist visitors accounting for 60% of visitation in the summer months. The very significant support the museum receives from the resident population in Norway (75-80% of visitors) reflects how important the resident market is and will continue to be. Retaining the interest of that market will be critical for the museum's future success.

Future vision

The Norsk Folkemuseum has a strong symbolic value in Norway. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the development of a strong national identity, as part of the process of political separation. The museum's opening in 1894 was only 11 years away from the founding of the modern independent state in 1905. The museum was thus in a very real sense a *cultural mirror for the nation*. Its founding vision and mission were up-to-date and entirely relevant for the time.

While that vision and mission have in many ways been sustained over the succeeding century, not least because of the continuity of the museum's direction, it is generally recognised that the museum today has to re-establish its vision and mission as a major Norwegian cultural destination entering the next century. In particular, it has to take account of the very real differences in the political, economic, social and technological environments in which it now operates. It has to define its role and purpose with clarity to command the attention and support of the marketplace within which it operates and the many stakeholders on whose backing it relies.

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This is not an exercise in 'throwing the baby out with the bath water'. As a national museum, much of what it has done in the past – research and scholarship, collections care and management, children's programmes, and temporary exhibitions, for example – will continue to be entirely relevant for the next century. But critically, its collections and their associated data are, at present, not being used systematically or comprehensively to tell 'the Story of the Nation'. Like many other social history museums of this type, it is weak in terms of systematically collected twentieth-century material. If the museum is to reflect change and continuity in 'The Story of Norway' in a comprehensive way from the Middle Ages up to the modern day, then this is one issue – with all the implications for collecting and collections management which it carries – that will need to be rigorously addressed for the future.

If the museum continues to focus its efforts mainly on the story of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Norway it will be difficult to maintain a sufficient level of market interest within the resident community, which goes to make up such a large proportion of its visitors and users, or sufficient stakeholder support. The twentieth century is the period of living memory – a 'national' museum such as the Norsk Folkemuseum must encompass that recent story if it is to maintain its premier status in the destination marketplace. Nor is it appropriate to try to tell the twentieth-century story wholly through non-collections-based approaches, although clearly a greater range of other media is available to present it, or aspects of it, than for previous centuries.

The Norsk Folkemuseum's 'unique selling proposition' – and what differentiates it from other cultural attractions – is that, functionally and philosophically, it is a museum with internationally and nationally significant collections *which could never be assembled again*. It is responsible for caring for the material evidence of the nation's history and is paid by the state to do this. It needs to bring the story of the nation up to date, as it approaches the national centenary of 1905, if it is to remain relevant in the next century and demonstrate change and continuity in Norwegian society for the historical period. Locum Destination Consulting has suggested that the museum's statement of vision should encompass this recognition.

Resourcing the vision

The timing of the current review exercise is significant. The museum has been able to demonstrate to its key stakeholders that it has made progress in every area of its responsibility over the five years since its Jubilee celebrations. This is an enormously powerful demonstration of its competence and ability to move forward across the next five years up to the year 2005. Not only has it met (and exceeded) international standards in its work – for instance in the new collections storage magazines – but it has set them for others – through its computerised documentation programme, to name but one example. It has demonstrated that it can mount sophisticated exhibitions on such subjects as Germany and Scandinavia in partnership with others, and that it can provide high-quality visitor and research facilities such as the museum's new Visitor Reception Centre and its new Archives Centre. It continues to attract more visitors than any other museum in Norway.

It has proved its competence in all of these areas. The museum now needs to be resourced to put it into a position where it can meet the challenges of the next century with confidence and where it can tell 'The Story of Norway' using the very stuff of the nation's history. Locum has suggested that the year 2005, a centenary year in which the Norwegian people will celebrate the foundation of their state, should be seen as a major development target for the museum and should form a fundamental part of the vision.

The museum needs, therefore, to generate the capital and revenue funding from public and private sector sources for redevelopment across the next five-year period. At the centre of the vision is the use of its core collections to tell 'The Story of Norway' from the Middle Ages up to the end of the twentieth century and thereby maintain its currency and relevance for future generations of visitors and users.

Naming and branding

The term Norsk Folkemuseum can be translated as 'the Norwegian Folk Museum', although is better translated as 'the Museum of the Norwegian People'. In Scandinavia, the term 'folk' should be translated and thought of more holistically as 'people', rather than 'folk' in the traditions of the UK and USA, for example. 'Folk museums' in these countries tend to be thought of in terms of the past alone rather than as a continuum of past, present and future together. The question of name, and all of the branding issues associated with it, will help to draw attention to how the vision and mission of the museum can be developed in conceptual terms for the future.

The museum's brand is of critical importance. In forward planning terms, every consideration will need to be given to the museum's brand and whether it effectively meets the needs of the museum as it enters the new century. This is not just a question of naming, but of how the museum as a whole is branded. Its relationship to development, marketing, income generation and management will be of critical importance.

A new conceptual approach

The underlying rationale of the proposed vision – *The Story of Norway* – is that the museum should provide, through its collections and the information associated with them, a *synoptic overview* of The Story of Norway from the Middle Ages up to the present day. Such an overview will perforce need to hinge on theme, chronology, and geography – but the choice of themes and their presentation and interpretation will in turn need to be based on a clear understanding of market interest as well as an understanding of the collections resource. Conceptually, one might conceive of the overview as a *framework within which a core story is presented*, but which is sufficiently flexible to allow for change and renewal to maintain interest and currency. Issues of how such an overview might be physically accommodated and configured on the museum site will be part of the next stage of the review process.

Ultimately, the success of the museum will depend to a large extent on successful marketing. The museum is developing a strong marketing ethos and already has professional marketing staff in place. The role of marketing will be to support the vision and mission as defined through the development programme. An exciting challenge for marketing will be to increase interest and audiences through the process of development.

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The Holmestrand Petrol Station is a popular attraction at the museum



Traditional exhibits from the core collection like the Bookbinder's House still attract attention.