

# ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

## Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	ESF-LiU
Conference Title:	Re-Visiting the Contact Zone: Museums, Theory, Practice
Dates:	17 - 21 July 2011
Chair:	Sharon Macdonald, University of Manchester, UK
Rapporteur:	Luca Basso Peressut, Politecnico di Milano, IT

### General Comments

The conference was very interesting, covering a wide range of approaches to the questions concerning theory and practice of museums. The conference covered a diversity of disciplines, ideas, geographies and experience. It was therefore a very rich conference and a really international one: speakers and audience came from all over the world, even very far countries, like Australia, New Zealand, Unites States....

The themes were very well thought out and broad enough to interest the diverse audience. General chair Sharon Macdonald identified very well the issues and topics of the conference between theory and practice.

The session chairs did a very good job of treating all ideas and presentations with respect despite their disciplinary differences, also making sure the senior scientists did not dominate the discussion in the sessions.

The presence of expert keynote speakers was a major accomplishment and very attractive feature of the conference.

The conference was very well built up and run and all the participants could focus on the presentations without worrying about any logistic questions.

The poster presentation added more topics to the discussion, even though there were non so many entries.

### Quality of Scientific Programme, Presentations and Discussion

The scientific program was of high quality in general. James Clifford's well known concept of "contact zone" was the unifying tool to develop the different approaches, facilitating confrontation between the different topics treated by the speakers, coming from different experiences and institutional roles (academic researchers and scholars, museum curators, etc.).

The themes were a very useful way in structuring the presentations in the different sessions. There seemed to be a very good balance between the disciplines, geography of project and nationality of the speakers. The presence of many young speakers from all over the world gave the impression of a very high quality of the ongoing research about the treated topics, with fresh new points of view about museum studies, museology and museography that testify of the importance of museums and their continuous renewal of missions and exhibition contents and forms in our age of fast changing of ideas, theories and offers to the different publics in the cultural field.

The different approaches to the "contact zone" issues by the speakers was appealing and well convincing, giving the way to interesting and intense discussions at the end of every session, confronting different disciplines (museum studies, cultural studies, curatorship, museum architecture, and exhibition design, etc.) on the common ground of the relationship between museums and society.

### Informal Networking and Exchange; Atmosphere

The atmosphere during and after the sessions was very friendly and exciting, with many discussions among the participants. As we know conferences give good opportunities to share experiences and ideas, often during coffee breaks, lunches and dinners, and this happened very well in this case with a good integration between older and younger researchers, even though the location wasn't so appealing (an hotel in the suburbs of Linköping: would be important to take care in future about this question). Time and space for informal discussion was satisfying (also during group walks outside in the nearby woods!).

I saw some very good exchanges between students and senior scientists during poster sessions, lunch and dinner. I was very impressed by the commitment of the senior scientists to spending as much time as possible with the students talking about their research and careers and from my discussions with the students this seemed a very valuable component.

## **Balance of Participants**

There was a quite good disciplinary representation giving way, especially during the discussions at the end of the sessions, to interdisciplinary representation of all the topics.

The balance between senior and young participants seemed to me balanced and I also found interesting the prevailing of young researchers among the speakers confronting with the more aged keynote speakers, with a fruitful confront between more mature experiences and a fresh and enthusiastic (even if sometimes "ingenuous") approach by the younger participants.

The combination of nationalities at the conference ensured a very diverse dynamic confront, creating sometimes a perception of too much different experiences with difficulties in comparison. It might be useful to be mindful of these differences when selecting talks.

## **Outlook and Future Developments**

From my point of view many new collaborations emerged from the conference. Museum field is today very active with many disciplines involved and many future possibilities of evolving in new configurations and missions. EU interest in these topics is testified by the rich amount of funds and grants given to researches concerning the envisioning of new ways of enhancing the role of cultural heritage and institutions in our countries. Many academic researchers and museum practicers are involved in envisioning the "museum of tomorrow" in our age of fast transformation also in cultural fields. The importance of this institution in creating a European identity, a more shared awareness among multicultural and multiethnic communities that form today's society is still undeniable, and a fundamental tool to create a lively participation in the local/global culture.

I think that more opportunities to deepen the cultural topics relating museums and heritage should be part of a future ESF strategy.

It would also be important to publish the proceedings of this conference

## **Follow-up**

The topic of the conference might be in itself useful as a follow up. Museums field is at the core of new visions and strategies that need organising a follow up more conferences to bring people together again, also organized by ESF.

It's unclear if there could be possible to find fundings for the publication of the proceedings of this conference, but I think it is really necessary to testify the results of this experience.

## **Organisation and Infrastructure**

Even though the location was not excellent in term of accessibility and nearness to Linköping downtown

It was a good accommodation, we found good food and great support by Alessandra Piccolotto from early morning until late at night.

The visit to Norrköping town and museums by bus was interesting and a useful break-up. I appreciated it very much also because I'm an architect. The general organization was well

managed and I didn't find problems during my staying in Linköping.

### **Summary & Overall Assessment**

This conference was very successful in terms of its aim to provide the opportunity for leading scholars and young researchers to meet for discussions on the most recent developments in their fields of research. In terms of its aims to act as a catalyst for creating new synergistic contacts throughout Europe and the rest of the world this conference was successful at the individual level and at the group level.

## About ESF Research Conferences

### The Scheme

This conference is part of the European Science Foundation's (ESF) Research Conferences Scheme. The Scheme aims to promote scientific excellence and frontier level research throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Conferences aim to provide leading scientists and other participants, including young researchers, with a platform to present their work, to discuss the most recent developments in their fields of research and to network.

### Conference Format

The core activities should be based on lectures by invited speakers, who are leaders in their respective fields, followed by extensive discussion periods. An informal exchange of ideas, both inside and outside the lecture room, should be encouraged, and the number of sessions in the daily timetable should be limited in order to allow sufficient time for interaction between the participants. Time should be reserved for a 'Forward Look Plenary Discussion' about future developments in the field.

Participants can take all their meals together to encourage further contact and networking, which can be particularly beneficial to younger researchers who may be less outspoken in the formal lecture room setting. In order to gain optimum benefit from the conference, both the speakers and the participants are asked to stay for the whole duration.

### Division of Tasks

The Conference Chair is responsible for ensuring the quality of the scientific programme through the selection and invitation of speakers, and through the selection of participants.

The ESF Conferences Unit is responsible for managing all the logistical aspects of the conference organisation, including the provision of an on-site secretariat.

Further information: [www.esf.org/conferences](http://www.esf.org/conferences)