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University Museums as a Strategic Tool. On Communicating University Values.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Who is Alma mater? And what is she? How do we come face to face with her? And which is the role of the university museums in producing and passing on knowledge, ideas and values?

As you know we are standing in one of the oldest university buildings of Uppsala. I guess that you already have heard that it was the remarkable professor Olaus Rudbeck who redesigned this house in the 17th century. When he built the Anatomical theatre he wanted to create facilities for teaching and research, but I'm quite convinced that his main aim was to create an impressive house, conveying authority and communicating values. Rudbeck himself wrote that he wanted the building to impress foreigners. The university should stand out in all its splendour. Buildings, collections and the people of the university play a symbolic role in the drama of the contemporary society – it is true of the 17th century and it is true today.

Alma mater is not a secluded monastery any longer. The universities are big, they are in continuous touch with society at large, constantly negotiating between the esoteric and the exoteric – between complicated

theories of modern science and the openness of a diversified and democratic educational system.

In my view the university museums play an important role both within the universities and as a sort of interface between the academic world and society. But it is of overriding importance that there is a dynamic collaboration between the museums and their universities. We must justify the existence of university museums and reflect on their purpose. In my talk I am going to concentrate on the university museums as tools for communication – and especially tools for communicating university values. It must, however, be remembered that my perspective is the perspective of an outsider. I'm a professor of literature at Uppsala university, and I'm fairly well acquainted with the eminent work that is done at our museums. But I'm no museum man myself. This means that I am honoured – but also somewhat intimidated - to have the opportunity of making a contribution to this conference. Many thanks to the organizers and the committees.

Over to the first point I want to make. The university museums must identify themselves as a part of the university. And the universities and the faculty must consider the museums as an integrated part of the university world. This means that the museums have to think about the interests of the university, its teaching and its research. The museums are servants to Alma mater – they can be pensioned off if they do not contribute, just like derelict departments. But on the other hand – the university and its faculty must understand what an asset the collections and their professional keepers represent. I guess that shortsighted fights over funding often are taking place, they are at least in our part of the world. Money is always lacking and hungry eyes within teaching and research are looking for new funding for

vital projects. The answer to this conflict is to formulate common goals, argue for the uses of collections and museum competence within research and education, and to realise the museums' potential in public relations. There is a need for strategies, not for short-term tactics. Tactics never win wars, strategy does.

The university museums are an asset. There might be situations when the kind of contributions that the museums make could be met in other ways. But in most circumstances the museums ought to be able to contribute significantly to the core objectives of the university – finding new knowledge and transferring skills and intellectual ability to new generations. And they ought to be eminently able to promote the underlying values at a vital and modern university. The university museums should – among other things – be used for communicating university values. Let me make an attempt to list some of these.

First: openness and freedom. The university must – at all times – stress the importance of open communication among scholars, but also of open communication between university and society. The concepts of academic freedom, integrity and of disinterested inquiry are basic. These values should be highlighted and dramatised through the collections and the university history. Let me give an example. On one sad occasion in the 17th century the otherwise formidable professor Rudbeck simply locked the door to this building to stop a disputation on a thesis that he couldn't accept. The ideas in the thesis went against his own theories. However, the academic congregation fetched a ladder, climbed into Gustavianum and conducted the disputation. Isn't that a nice story about the fight for basic university values?

A further group of values have to do with how things should be done at the university. Key-words are creativity, contribution, excellence and

professionalism. The university riches in these areas must be made vivid, given material body and accompanying stories. The impressive botanical or zoological or paleontological collections from the past tell heroic stories about the nature of science and scientists. The row of remarkable oil portraits of Uppsala university professors – imposing and slightly daunting – are stating, in an unabashed way: "We are creative, we are excellent, we are good". There is quite some snobbery in these statements, but it is also necessary to dare to promote excellence.

A third group of values focus on the responsibility of the universities in society. Central concepts are public service, democratic education, cultural diversity and diversity of opinions, perspectives and interests. I like the well-known quotation from L.P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." There are few areas within the university that could be better equipped to show the changes in the area of academic opportunities and diversity than the university museums.

And finally I want to emphasize a sort of over-riding university value, or perhaps rather a responsibility. I am thinking of the management, promotion and dissemination of intellectual wealth. In this task – identifying and communicating the riches of the university world – the museums are important.

Well, this was lot of nice words. I am talking the talk, but can I walk the walk? I do not know. But I think that the university museums are, or can develop into, strategic tools for the universities, not least because of their greater range of freedom in meeting various audiences. Most of the scientists, scholars and teachers within the university work towards a set audience – classes, other scientists, typical reading audiences. The museums

seem to me to have an opportunity to use not only the voice of the academic lecturer – concentrating on facts and relations – but also a chance for emotional appeal: a museum visit should be an experience. And – and this is important to stress - this educational and emotional address is made in the name of the university. The university ethos is essential. In Sweden the universities are the institutions in society which are ranked highest when it comes to trust and confidence. The university museums differ from most other museums in that they are the voice – definitely not the only voice - but still *one* of the direct voices of the university.

Education, Emotion and dedication to the university Ethos should be three central E:s in the work of the museums.

I am still on a rather abstract level, talking about ways of communicating and ways of persuading. What about the concrete situation? I find the material collections important, I find the buildings in which the university museums are housed important, I think that the professionalism always should be stressed, and I am convinced that the question of identity is of overriding importance. The stress should not be university *museum*, but *university* museum.

What is needed to reach the goals? The answer is simple: money and will. Most important is the will. The uses of the university museums must be stressed in various ways, and mutually beneficial alliances must be formed. The museums must be understood as rather expensive but on the same time necessary and organic parts of a prosperous and self-assured university.

But: are they not *too* expensive? The museums usually cost a lot, they surely do. But what the university has to do in its accounting is to put a price-tag on good-will and cultural capital. I am told by people in economics that both social and cultural capital is rentable and possible to invest. And in

this bigger game of accountancy the value of university museums is probably very high indeed.

To conclude. To me the university museums represent, cultivate and embody a number of university values. I would like to maintain that the singular position of the university museums offers a chance of communicating these values in an exceptional way. This chance must be taken, but for a successful strategy the identity of the museums as an integrated part of the university is paramount.

I think that it is a duty within the university at large to consider the potential worth of university museums. And I think that you, who represent university museums from all over the world, have a marvellous opportunity to show Alma mater in her past and present fineries, on a catwalk that can be found in no other place, inside or outside the university.