

PUTTING THE NEXT HELSINKI ON DISPLAY

Migration and Museum Group (pseudonym)

We are intrigued by your call to “create the next Helsinki.” We imagine that many of your proposals will focus on the built environment. We want to suggest that reinventing existing institutions may also help your cause. We have in mind the National Museum of Finland (NMF)—one of the key sites where the nation puts itself on display. Finland in general, and Helsinki in particular is changing. Since 1990 when there were fewer than 20,000 immigrants, more than 160,000 newcomers, primarily from Russia (62,500), Estonia (40,000), Somalia (15,000), China and Iraq have made Helsinki their home. Although these are not particularly large numbers, they are nonetheless significant for a country of only 5 million. And while migrants are transforming the city and the nation, the NMF continues to put the same portrait on display.

We believe that can change and we want to explore how. To what extent do new immigrants see themselves on the Museums walls or hear themselves in its narrative? How would they integrate their own experiences into the displays? How can the Museum help create a more diverse outside by changing what it does inside? We ask these questions at a critical moment. During the next 3 years, the NMF is undergoing a planning process. It’s permanent exhibit, where the nation is most clearly and most visibly expressed, will be totally reinstalled. This is a window of opportunity during which new stories can be told.

We propose rewriting the story of Finland in collaboration with young people of immigrant origin. We include people between the ages of 20-35 who were either born in Finland to immigrant parents or who came to the country at a young age. Because these individuals grew up primarily in Finland, they will know some version of the national story and immigrants place in it. They will know how diversity is managed. Our collaboration will involve three steps. We will first ask participants drawn from the three main immigrant origin groups to come to the Museum and familiarize themselves with its permanent exhibit based on two guiding questions—what is the overarching storyline and where do you see yourself in it? We will then ask them to create a different exhibit, either by rearranging objects, rewriting wall texts, or incorporating new items. Any number of products might grow out of this exercise – a virtual exhibit which visitors can walk through on line, a photo essay or short video in which the creator reflects on the current museum installation or changes it by inserting herself a new, or a gallery installation that disrupts the current visitor experience. We would then display these “products” in multiple settings, both inside and outside the museum, in the park and garden areas that are adjacent to it, and in the public venues at the South Bank site that are the focus of the Next Helsinki Project. We imagine some kind of interactive walls where our collaborators’ works are displayed and the public can respond by leaving messages, “tweets,” etc.

The Museum already has many contacts with immigrant communities that would make it feasible to do this project in a short time with limited resources. In 2011, the NMF launched a special program of guided tours designed to welcome foreign-born visitors entitled “Finnish History Slowly,” which staff created and evaluated in collaboration with 12 local immigrant student groups. Also that year, as part of an exhibition of dollhouses entitled “Home of Dreams, ” immigrant groups were invited to create their own dream houses and write memoirs of their experiences that were then displayed alongside objects from the Museum’s collection. A central goal at the NMF moving forward is to tell a wider variety of stories and to make the institution more open to the world—especially among newcomers to Finland.

The Museum also has the technological capabilities to make this project a success. It has ipads that participants could use to take photos or produce videos. In fact, in 2014, it hosted a highly successful workshop for high school students who “interacted” with confusing or interesting objects—taking photos or writing comments about them and then posting them on social media. These projects were also displayed in the Museum Hall.

Our team includes two migration researchers, one based in Helsinki and one in the United States, and a curator at the National Museum.

The next Helsinki is a physical and social project that must include all residents—both new arrivals and long standing residents and the young and old. It needs to take into account the people who will use the indoor and outdoor spaces created by the project and find ways to invite them in. We believe our project is an important step in that direction that may also jumpstart more lasting change at the NMF and in the cultural landscape of the city and country at large.