Implementing Best Practices in Museum Documentation in

Developing Countries

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Abstract

Many museums are facing the challenging task of collecting, unifying and maintaining of museum artifacts information from various types of records that most of the time fragmented, incomplete or unreliable. To face this challenging task, it is needed to conduct more research, digitization and making inventories etc. for museum documentation. Thus, it is very important to adhere best practices to provide effective service to the society it serves. At the same time, it facilitates to protect the museum artifacts from various types of threats, deterioration while helping for easy access. Moreover, museum artifacts reflect a significant message and it can be historical, religion or cultural value. At this juncture, proper documentation is imperative to find out artifacts originality and to add it in to the museum collection. Once the documentation has done it is easy to identify the artifacts in its unique way. In this context, quality of document carries a lot of weight on the particular artifact, which added to the museum collection. On the other way, documentation gives a life or value to the artifact such as its history, use, social and religious value etc. Therefore, it is a collective responsibility of professionals, technical staff, senior management or minor employees who handle the museum objects to care and develop its collection. Museum documentation provides the physical evidence of the museum objects. Thus, it is important to train the staff on key aspects of collection management and make awareness on the importance of it among museum professionals, directors, curators and even among security personnel. It is important to consider collection management policy, acquisition procedure, accession, de-accession, disposal, numbering and marking of artifacts, moving, displaying etc. in this context, it is understood that everyone in the museum are connected for above work. Therefore, it is very important to implement best practices to handle the museum documentation.

Introduction

There are three levels of practices can be used for museum documentation such as basic practice, good practice and best practice. Best practices can be defined as a highest standards that museum can adhere

for documentation. There are nine broad areas that can be evaluated using those three levels of practices. Those areas can be mentioned as

1. Policy

2. Buildings

3. Storage

4. Housekeeping

5. Handling and use of collections

6. Environmental monitoring and control

7. Conservation

8. Surrogate copies and new media

9. Emergency preparedness (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2002)

Best practices are commendable actions and philosophies that demonstrate an awareness of standards, solve problems and can be replicated. Museums may choose to emulate them if appropriate to their circumstances. Museums can use national standards and best practices voluntarily to benchmark or measure their own performance (American Alliance of Museums, 2013).

Museum Documentation

There is a significant factor that an artifact is moved from its original location that its value become less and more dependent on the documentation that linked to it. Moreover, when it reaches the museum that it has given a new life and faced for different activities before it place with other artifacts in the museum. In this new life that the artifact will be studied, positioned, exhibited, restored, loaned and transferred. In this context it is important to identify the artifact in a unique way and to assist the management of each and every facet of the new life of it.

The value of a collection (whether it be for purposes of research, education or interpretation), its safety and its accessibility therefore depend to a large extent on the quality of the documentation associated with it (ICCROM – UNESCO, 2010). Therefore, it is very important to document the museum artifacts for easy retrieval, preservation and protection, loans, transfers etc. Documentation facilitates to the museums for legally protection of its artifacts. In brief, documentation can be defined as the

organization of information about artifacts in a museum. Basic documentation helps museums to manage their collection proper way. Properly managed museum collection can effectively locate their artifacts, maintain inventory, and provide unique identity, proof of ownership and safety for museum artifacts. Therefore, it is crucial to adhere the best practices in museum documentation in developing countries where you get marginal budgets for housekeeping.

Documentation system

Documentation system is used to manage the artifacts of the museums. It comprises the set of elements such as accession number, accession register, manual or computerized files etc. Accession number is a unique one that has given for each artifact to identify independently. The number assigned one artifact is not given to identify another artifact. Each artifact is linked via accession number to the document which referring to it and it is attached to the artifact. Accession register is an important one that all the artifacts should be entered in it in chronological order of accession number. It produces the documentary proof of the museum artifacts. In this manner, museum documentation brings its artifacts' a life. Documentation helps to reflect artifacts' intangible value. It can be historical, religious or social value of the artifact. In addition to that artifacts' can be produced for exhibitions, make available to the public or research studies, can be sent for conservation or plan for preventive conservation. Moreover artifacts' are legally protected by documentation.

Collection Care

American Association of Museums (2005a, p.1) has defined collections care as that the museum keeps appropriate and adequate records pertaining to the provenance, identification, and location of the museum's holdings and applies current professionally accepted methods to their [collections] security and the minimization of damage and deterioration. Collection care is an important factor in a museum as it exists for present and future generations. Therefore, protection and accessibility of collection is needed. On the other hand, it is very necessary to provide information about the collection, visual documentation and should be able to answer correctly to inquiries. Museums should have standard policy documents for collection management such as acquisition, de-accession, preservation, conservation and collection care etc. Senior management (Board of Management) or Internal Committee of the museums are responsible for the acquisition for artifacts to the museum. In this connection best effort should be made to define the ownership history of the artifacts that considered for acquisition and any artifacts that has been stolen or illegally imported should not be allowed for

acquisition. Once the artifacts are acquired it is museum's full responsibility to protect and preserve them and make available them for displaying to the public. There should be a policy documents in museums for loans to exhibitions but protection of the artifacts, the intellectual merit, and the educational benefits must be primary considerations. Museums should strongly adhere the recommended and approved policy documents towards this end. In addition to that, museums should maintain a policy document for de-accessioning and disposal of artifacts from the collection. It can be sale, exchange, or other means require mainly careful examination and should be followed with great prudence and it should not be done in the demand of the moment.

Documenting Intangible Cultural Heritage

Transmitting of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is most of the time dependent on word of mouth rather than written texts. Therefore, it is important to safeguard them before it dies or disappears from the community. In this context, safeguard means transmitting of knowledge, skills and meaning. It focuses on transmitting or communicating ICH from generation to generation and making sure that it remains as a living heritage. In brief, ICH should be an active part of present generation and can be handed over to future generations. Museums can play a major role in this regard by way of identifying and documenting such heritage, and research, preservation, promotion, enhancement or transmission of it to formal or non-formal education activities. Museums can employ modern technologies to transform them into tangible presentation (Perera and De Silva, 2015).

Inventories can be used as a tool for management of museum artifacts. It provides necessary information about museum artifacts such as size, location and its significance to the particular community or to the country. In this context inventories are used for documentation tool. It can be physical inventory or computerized data base system. Thus, inventories are valuable piece of document for research, heritage tourism and for general public, which provides information about museum artifacts. Inventories are playing a significant role by way providing accurate, accessible and complete information of archeological sites, historic buildings, museums, archives and libraries. It facilitates to protect the museum artifacts legally during armed conflicts, natural and human made disasters. In general, inventories provide accurate identification of the museum artifacts and clearly express the values. Problems can arise if these values are incorrect. Therefore, it is important to maintain clear, accurate inventory data for museum documentation.

Digital Documentation versus Physical Documentation

Digital documentation can be easily deteriorated than the physical records. Physical documentation can readable at several stages of deterioration. Therefore, it is necessary to strictly adhere the alternative methods to preserve museum documentation for future use. The various guidelines presently available regarding digital documentation may be synthesized into a coherent 'best practice' specific to digital conservation documentation (Beck, 2013). Many museums in the world using digital technologies for documentation work due to many advantages offered by them. However, according to Carlston (1998) that the lifespan of the hardware used to store digital media can be as low as five years; paper and printed photographs can last as long as 100 years with minimal intervention.

The lack of documentation records from the early years of conservation parallels the loss of digital data through obsolescence and corruption that has occurred over the past quarter century in many fields. Some go so far as to say that the human record from the late 20th and early 21st century may be completely unreadable in the future (Deegan and Tanner 2006). A valuable point about the longevity of digital media has been made on multiple occasions: digital media corrupts absolutely, a stark difference from analogue media which has various stages of deterioration over time, many of which are still legible (Gschwind et al, 2005).

Conclusion

Museums documentation can be done physically or digitally. Museums can maintain digital inventories or physical inventories to access, preserve their artifacts. Technology has created a value to the local museums, academia and communities by way of providing golden age of opportunities to limitless access of museum artifacts enhancing learning and teaching skills beyond its walls. It also facilitates to upload individual stories to museum collections and to interact via social media tools. Technology bridges the information gap, enhances all forms of literacy, and facilitates to access hidden documents on demand. There are museums that provide access to their high definition digital images online. Most of them are providing documentary videos about their objects, stories with interactive sessions. They attract millions of millions virtual visitors and at the same time increase their physical audiences too. In this manner, physical museums offer visitors to gain experience on real objects and sharing their knowledge among families and friends while museums in cyberspace provide limitless access to their objects to enhance lifelong learning (Perera and De Silva, 2015). The future is not yet facing a 'Blank' in

the history of conservation. As long as conservators continue to improve and work at maintaining their documentation, future conservators may never again face a span of time from which information will be lost (Beck, 2013). In this context it is crystal clear that best practices in museum documentation can be developed and maintain physically and digitally. Moreover, it is important to follow the both methods for museum documentation.

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