

From UK to University of Helsinki – Interview with Suzie Thomas

In this interview Suzie Thomas (PhD), the new museology lecturer in the University of Helsinki will tell us a little about her work and how she ended up moving to Finland.

When did you officially start your work at the University of Helsinki?

1st April 2014 – so I still feel quite new!

Where did you live before moving to Finland?

I was working in Scotland at the University of Glasgow, and living in the West End of Glasgow near to some beautiful places such as the Kelvingrove Museum and Botanical Gardens. I'm definitely English though, not Scottish!

Could you describe your present work at the University of Helsinki?

Right now, I am the University Lecturer in Museology at the University of Helsinki. I'm based in the Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies, and have responsibility for teaching the courses for the minor subject of museology. On top of this, I co-supervise a PhD student, and have responsibility for developing my own research projects and of course publishing my work.

What made you want to come to Finland?

I'd only been to Helsinki a couple times, before 2013, one time just passing through on the way to Russia, another time for a conference. Then in 2013 I won an International Development Partnership Fund grant from the University of Glasgow to spend time at an institution outside of the UK. At that time I was focusing on the Baltic region and the interface between the EU and the Russian Federation. For many reasons, Helsinki was a logical place to base myself for the four weeks that I was to spend abroad. I had a very fruitful time, forming research links with colleagues at the university and also gathering some very interesting data (two papers have been produced by me as a direct result of the data that I gathered – Thomas 2014a and Thomas 2014b).

Suffice to say that I absolutely loved my time in Finland. I genuinely felt very sad to be leaving at the end of my 4 weeks (which were in March/April, so I even saw some snow and -12 degree weather, it didn't put me off in the slightest). I kept in contact with colleagues at the university, and was involved in the writing of a successful Academy of Finland Project proposal (http://webfocus.aka.fi/ibi_apps/WFServlet?IBIF_ex=x_HakKuvaus&CLICKED_ON=&HAKNRO 1=275497&UILANG=en). I also wrote my own postdoctoral fellowship proposal to the Academy, so it was pretty clear that I wouldn't mind being in Finland some time in the future.

When I noticed one evening last summer that a lectureship was being advertised in a discipline with which I was very familiar, I knew that I had to apply. In early Spring 2014, I was moving countries and starting an exciting new job.

You majored in archaeology, what made you want to specialize in museology too?

My Bachelor degree at the University of Sheffield was in Archaeology and Prehistory, but then my Masters was in Heritage Education and Interpretation, followed by a PhD in Heritage Studies – both at Newcastle University. So really, while I started out in archaeology ‘proper’ as it were, I quickly found that I was much more interested in the heritage- and museum-related aspects of the discipline – why people were fascinated with the past, how we communicate heritage to the public, and how we can try to protect this often fragile resource. Before I started my MA degree, I had a year working in Visitor Services at the Galleries of Justice museum in Nottingham, and during the summer after the MA picked up a seasonal job as a Heritage Ranger at Creswell Crags Museum and Education Centre in Derbyshire, so I was already gaining some professional experience, albeit at junior levels.

Not long after starting my PhD I was appointed as an Education Assistant at Bede’s World in South Tyneside, and later promoted to Education Officer – Lifelong Learning, with responsibility for adult education opportunities, volunteer management, events planning and assisting the curator with the temporary exhibitions programme. This was one of the best jobs I have ever had, as in such a small museum there was opportunity to be involved in so many areas of its running. During my PhD I also had stints working as a Research Assistant for an archival research project in the History Department at Newcastle University, and as Secretary for the north of England regional branch of the Council for British Archaeology – CBA North. I did a lot of the ‘usual’ PhD student jobs as well, like occasional lecturing and seminar leading, coordinating field trips and marking assignments. But I think it is fair to say that museums and cultural heritage have always been a part of my professional life.

Could you tell us about your previous work and research?

My doctoral dissertation was called “The Relationships between Archaeologists and MetalDetector Users in England and Wales: Impact of the Past and Implications for the Future”. So it looked at the development of the metal detecting hobby in the UK (focusing on England and Wales for ease – Scotland and Northern Ireland have different legal frameworks), within a social, historical and political context. This included going through archival material from the 1940s onwards, interviewing people from organizations such as the British Museum, National Council for Metal Detecting, and even the UK Parliament about their respective roles and opinions, and interviewing hundreds of contemporary metal-detector users on-site at metal detecting rallies, club meetings and other settings. It was situated within Heritage Studies as its ‘parent’ subject, but like Heritage Studies itself, it was very much an interdisciplinary exercise.

Can you tell us about your work in Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research? How did you end up working there and what was the project you were working with?

One of the aspects that has always interested me about what might broadly be called treasure hunting, is what happens when the laws are broken and archaeological sites are looted. I joined the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow in 2012 as a Research Associate on the ‘Trafficking Culture’ project, which is funded by European Research Council under FP7 (see <http://traffickingculture.org>). I was hired in part due to my existing knowledge, and I joined a team of researchers from different disciplines such as Archaeology, Criminology and Law, all with interests in different parts of the globe. Many of my duties were to do with the general running of the project, such as developing and then maintaining the website, assisting the PI and Senior Research Fellow with their own data collection, and developing teaching materials around our subject area. However, I also had time to develop my own research activities, and due to language abilities in Russian and an interest in the cultural heritage of northern Europe, I decided to focus on the Baltic region in particular as a potential transit point for illicit cultural objects, although I continued to write about metal detecting in the UK as well (I always will!).

You are also a founding member of the Journal for Community Archaeology and Heritage. Could you tell us about this journal?

Before I moved to Glasgow I worked for the Council for British Archaeology as their Community Archaeology Support Officer for three years, so I had a great opportunity to get a real understanding of community archaeology as practice across the United Kingdom. Community Archaeology is an interesting term! I mean this in that it is used by many people to describe different engagements with archaeology. It has ‘sister’ terms such as public archaeology, community-based archaeology, archaeological outreach and so on. One of the simplest definitions is by an English non-professional archaeologist named Patricia Reid, who calls it “archaeology by the people, for the people”. There are also discussions about whether community can be ‘top-down’ (led by professionals), ‘bottom-up’ (led by the community), or somewhere in between. I personally feel that community archaeology should not be defined too tightly for fear of excluding potentially interesting and innovative modes of engagement. Participation and opportunities for non-professionals to shape the research and interpretation agendas should be in there somewhere though.

I think that community archaeology is important because it gives people from different backgrounds, abilities, gender and ages an opportunity to become more involved with their local archaeological heritage. I include in this archaeology under the ground, that which is kept in museums, and standing heritage such as industrial architecture and standing monuments. Studies have shown that when engagement with archaeology is carried out most effectively (it can go wrong too!), really positive outcomes connected with personal wellbeing, increases in social interaction, and even drops in crime may result. With all of this in mind, it seemed timely to have a dedicated journal about

community archaeology – and so the Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage (JCAH) was launched in 2014, published by Maney. I co-edit the journal along with Dr Carol McDavid who is based in Houston, Texas.

Who can write to this journal?

Anybody can write for JCAH! We get a lot of papers from both practitioners and academic researchers interested in community archaeology, but we have had a few papers from nonprofessionals and independent researchers as well. We would like to see more of these. We are aware that many people will not have much experience of writing for academic peerreviewed journals, and so we have a ‘buddy’ system available, where a prospective author can be paired up with a member of our Editorial Board in order to work closely with them for guidance and feedback as they develop their paper. We are also interested in exploring more non-traditional forms of journal writing, such as dialogic pieces, poetry and even graphic novels.

One interesting way in which non-professionals can contribute, if they would not like to write a full length paper or review a book, exhibition or event, is through the ‘Reflections’ series. These are shorter articles in which the author literally reflects on their personal experiences in community archaeology: in short they answer the question, what has community archaeology done for them?

We also welcome blog posts from anyone – these can be about recent projects or events, focus on pictures or even be based on audio or video. If anyone is interested in contributing in some way to the journal, please contact me and Carol McDavid on communityarchaeologyjournal@gmail.com. We’re open to discussing any possibilities!

Journal web page at: <http://www.maneyonline.com/loi/cah>.

So far, how has living and working in Finland been different than in Scotland?

It’s been brilliant moving to Finland, if I’m honest! Obviously there is a small language issue, but people have mostly been very kind when they’ve realized that my Finnish is far from oikea. I’m learning, gradually, but sometimes it is hard to fit revision in between other deadlines and work requirements. I’m confident that I will get there though (or at least to a stage where I can make myself understood in most circumstances). I really like the university environment in Finland, or at least what I know of it. The colleagues in my department are very welcoming and supportive, and there seem to be some exciting opportunities coming up to explore new avenues of research and work with some very interesting people. The teaching is a little different, as in Glasgow I taught and supervised at Masters level, whereas here they are undergraduates for the most part in museology at Helsinki. However, I am really impressed so far with how hard the students work, and they really pay attention in class!

Otherwise, there are little things that I do notice are quite different. For example, a friend in Scotland has been sending me British teabags through the mail so that I can

have a cup of tea that I am used to! But on a more serious note, I am simply thoroughly enjoying being here. My parents, who live in Nottingham in England, visited for two weeks in the summer and loved both Helsinki and Turku – they have already booked a second visit for October.

What is your favourite museum and why?

That's a tough one! I think it is a bit like movies and songs, in that your personal favourite at any one time can change according to mood, life experience, and so on. One museum exhibition that I saw several years ago, but often think about, is at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I saw it in 2004, and it struck me because of the clear way in which it had incorporated the input from members of each of the different Pueblo communities in New Mexico, in terms of what they wanted to say about themselves, even down to the order in which the visitor should view the displays, as indicated by a trail marked along the floor. That really impressed me by its apparent handing over of control from the curators to the communities themselves. I'm also really enjoying seeing as many museums in Finland as I can, from different city museums and national collections, to the smaller kotimuseot. I won't say which my favourite in Finland is at the moment, as I keep discovering new museums and new exhibitions and initiatives to admire!

Do you have any advice for students who are planning a career working with cultural heritage?

It depends on what they would like to do (e.g. follow a museum career or go into academia). Generally, I've found certainly in the UK context that experience has been a key issue, so if they are able to find opportunities to build up their museum experience, for example with voluntary work or a part time job, this helps to fill out the CV. Both museums and academia are a small world, so it's important to know who the key people in your field are, and to try to get to know them if you can. Networking at conferences and events is helpful for this. Also be prepared for setbacks - the jobs market is increasingly competitive so it might take more than one or two attempts to find your ideal job - don't give up! I know this is easier said than done, but in the meantime anything that you are doing is helping by giving you experiences and perspectives and developing you as an individual with interesting things to offer.

Thank you for this interview!

Thank you!

Interviewed by Sofia Paasikivi

Refs mentioned in Question 2 Thomas, S. (2014a) 'Movement of Cultural Objects In and Through Finland: An Analysis in a Regional Context', *European Journal on Crime and Policy Research* May 2014, DOI 10.1007/s10610-014-9245-7. Thomas, S. (2014b) 'Vulnerable by design: architectural theft at Finnish modernist buildings', *The Historic Environment: Policy and Practice* 5(3), 231-44.