

Sari Salovaara 20 September 2007

Is everything better in Sweden?

With the support of the Swedish-Finnish Cultural Foundation, Sari Salovaara and Tuuli Rajavuori of the Culture for All service visited Sweden for a week to study museum accessibility there. What did they learn?

The Swedish welfare state has a comprehensive and ambitious plan. The country should also be accessible to people with disabilities, and public services will be tweaked to meet the guidelines by 2010. This has been agreed upon and set down in law ten years before the deadline. To a Finn it seems that having plans in place helps, carrots and sticks speed up the development and many good things are achieved in Sweden.

The cultural sector in Sweden is the model pupil in their internal comparisons: cultural workers will draw up accessibility plans when asked. Studies have revealed that (cultural) sites that draw up annual plans and set long-term goals are the most accessible. Museums distinguish themselves according to their own plans. They train their staff to consider the wide variety of visitors and set up advisory support groups composed of representatives of museum visitors. Visitors are treated to a bonus rare in Finnish museums: nearly all Swedish museums have a “play area” or other activity section, where visitors are allowed to experiment, play, be involved and learn. To top it all, *Kulturrådet*, the Swedish Arts Council, grants a staggering 9 million Swedish crowns annually to promote accessibility.

We have to admit that the Swedes are surpassing us – or are they? Visiting Swedish museums, we met with many familiar problems. Sometimes the staff’s enthusiasm seemed to be flagging, new investments and acquisitions are forgotten in the corner, the graphic designer has made wall texts small and difficult to read, the staff we meet are friendly but completely unaware of the accessibility of their own services. We are told that resources have been cut and it is increasingly difficult to get subsidies.

The Swedes are, however, creative. The Museum of the Visually Impaired had to give up its exhibition space, but an innovative, aesthetic and accessible exhibition is now being constructed in the storage space in the basement. And Swedes are still astonishingly rich. The outdoor museum on top of a hill in Skansen can be reached via a long escalator or a funicular railway. The Swedes are also international. While Finnish museums have only begun to accommodate cultural diversity, the Swedes have lived in a multicultural society for a long time. It is still a good idea for us Finns to go and see what our neighbours have achieved.