



IMG. 5.45— Københavns Museum—Museum of Copenhagen, Denmark. A view of the “Becoming a Copenhagener” exhibition, November 2010–December 2013. © Anne Mette Kruse, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

Københavns Museum—Museum of Copenhagen

Museum of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

The Museum of Copenhagen was established at the turn of the 20th century. Since 1925, its collections—originally consisting of works of art, models, interiors and photographs related to the history of Copenhagen—were exhibited in the attic of Copenhagen City Hall. As the collections grew, more space was needed, so in 1956 the museum moved into the former premises of the Royal Shooting Society, a mansion built in 1787 and located in the western city district of Vesterbro, close to the city's central station and not far from Copenhagen city centre. This venue still hosts the museum's permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions today, while offices and archives are located in separate buildings.

The museum is owned by the Municipality of Copenhagen—the Copenhagen City Council is the museum's main subsidy provider, although the museum also receives state-subsidy from The Heritage Agency of Denmark on an annual basis. Its board of management consists of the City Council's Culture and Leisure Committee, and the museum is run on the basis of 4-year contracts between the museum and the municipality, with the shared objective of contributing to the cultural environment and permanent cultural heritage of the city. The museum also acts as the local archaeological authority, with responsibility for archaeological matters in Copenhagen and Frederiksberg and with the aim of “ensuring that the city's development occurs while bearing cultural insight and public memories in mind.”

In 2010 the museum changed its name from *Københavns Bymuseum* to *Københavns Museum* or Museum of Copenhagen, chosen because it was perceived to be simpler as well as more self-explanatory than its former name. The museum's collections, knowledge and communication have been traditionally focused upon the city's development and life of the citizens, as well as on some major events and personalities of Copenhagen's history, documenting the history of

Copenhagen from the 12th century to the present day. In recent years, however, the Museum of Copenhagen has been undergoing major changes, seeking to reposition and redefine its role within the contemporary urban context.

This process started in 2005, mainly as a consequence of the desire to reach more people and become more relevant to the life of Copenhagen's citizens. Firstly, besides the programmes and activities promoted by the museums, this shift is reflected in the new museum's mission, which was reformulated in 2005 and states: “the Museum of Copenhagen must participate in the strengthening of the individual citizen's sense of identity—and thus enhance the development of a feeling of ‘belonging together’ in the city.” Subsequently, the archaeological excavations connected to the new City Ring Metro—begun in 2009—have also played a central role in accomplishing this shift. The archaeological responsibilities involved in preparing for the metro have, in fact, led to growth within the museum alongside the recruitment of new staff members with new competencies and specialised skills. Since 2008, therefore, the museum's repositioning process has accelerated, becoming more complex, reorienting the museum's strategy, and promoting practices and projects aimed at fostering dialogue and “participating in contemporary discourse on the ever-changing nature of the city and its inherent plurality.”

→ SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

The transformation process that the museum of Copenhagen is currently undergoing should be related, on one hand, to the overall European scenario and the evolution of city museums and, on the other, to the cultural and political context of both Copenhagen and Denmark. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Danish cultural policy has been aimed at eco-

conomic and national revitalisation; over the last ten years, especially, the cultural discussion has, to a large degree, focused on what constitutes “Danishness,” Danish cultural heritage and national identity, as coherent narratives in a multicultural world. Documents such as the *Danish Cultural Canon* (2005) were aimed at stimulating and consolidating national identity as a force for social cohesion and cultural assimilation of public dialogue, discussions and activities on identity and nationality. At the same time, strategic plans such as *Culture for All* (2009) gave more importance to improving the national aspect of social cohesion in local societies. At the end of 2011, a new government took office. The new governmental programme, *A Denmark That Stands Together*, states that Denmark is a country “where diversity thrives” and where respect between people, regardless of their background, is promoted. The identity values introduced by the new government, as well as the economic crisis, have given rise to a debate on paradigms of identity displayed in public cultural policy, and the role of the arts and public cultural policy in the contemporary societies dominated by migration, globalisation and Europeanisation.

Copenhagen has always diverged from the national political vision, at least as it has been set up over the past decade. The municipality grounded its policies on the self image of a sustainable city, inclusive and well-integrated, with room for everyone—a vision which is also clearly reflected in recent policies, such as the *Copenhagen Integration Policy 2011-2014* and the related *Programme for Engagement in CPH 2011-2013*. Diversity is seen as an asset, and the idea of “citizenship” reconsidered; it is meant as inclusion, a “sense of belonging and integration,” as a “dynamic” and a two-way process of “involvement” and “engagement,” based on mutual understanding and respect rather than on homologation and assimilation.

Over the last three years, The Museum of Copenhagen has informed its vision and practices according to this agenda. As the new museum director, Jette Sandahl, recently declared, the museum is “struggling to deconstruct the grand totalising meta-narratives of chronology, of

male power, and of privilege shared by so many other city museums.” Hence the museum’s efforts are currently targeted at re-examining its paradigms and turning towards a more fluid concept of identity in the belief that the museum “as scientific institution” has to “learn to contain and encourage diverse interpretations, doubts, disagreements among people, and unsolved dilemmas.” The museum is looking for new methods to “shift perspectives” and include multiple voices, foster dialogue and encourage participation, reach out from behind its walls to create a closer relation with all citizens and take part in all city discourses. A very ambitious plan, especially during the current period of serious economic crisis.

The Copenhagen Museum is currently reorganising its resources and trying to rethink its spaces as much as possible, taking into consideration also the constraints ensuing from its being hosted in a historical, protected building. In 2010, Brisac González completed a design proposal for the new premises of the museum within the confines of the historical building Christian IV Bryghus, located in the city centre close to the new Danish Royal Library (Schmidt, Hammer and Lassen architects, 1999) and the Danish Jewish Museum (Daniel Libeskind, 2004), but the museum had to give up this project due to external obstacles beyond their control.

Today, most of the museum’s permanent galleries within its historical venue, have been rearranged in order to host temporary or semi-permanent exhibitions, in the attempt to implement a more flexible approach to exhibiting. Currently, only a small part of the old “permanent galleries” (dating back to 1996) remains on the second floor; the second and the third floor display exhibitions devoted to the history of Copenhagen, while a special temporary exhibition programme has been established, and related events are mainly hosted on the museum’s ground floor, which previously hosted the gallery on medieval and renaissance Copenhagen.

Temporary exhibitions are developed by the museum to further exploit and enhance its collections, on the one hand by providing an op-

portunity to reinterpret them in a new light, while on the other, allowing the possibility for their enrichment through the acquisition of new objects—usually related to the contemporary city. Furthermore, the museum is developing a number of new outreach projects aimed at entering into dialogue with the citizens of Copenhagen and foster communication and participation; these projects sometimes also lead to short temporary exhibitions.

Examples of these experimental strategies and new approach include different kinds of initiatives, such as the exhibition “As I Am—lgbt in cph,” the history of Copenhagen’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual and transvestite population, or the project “Collecting Nørrebro,” an on-site local project involving young people, and aimed at collecting new and alternative stories from the everyday life of Nørrebro, a city neighbourhood that embodies most of the traditional conflicts in Copenhagen, but also the renewal and the emergence of new cosmopolitan hybrid cultures. The two major projects which probably represent, in the most paradigmatic way, the shift the museum is attempting to perform are the exhibition “Becoming a Copenhagener” and “the WALL.”

→ BECOMING A COPENHAGENER

“Becoming a Copenhagener” is a semi-temporary exhibition hosted on the ground floor of the museum; it was planned to last for two years, from November 2010 to December 2012, but has recently been extended for another year because of its relevance to the city’s identity and for how well it represents of the museum’s new approach.

The exhibition focuses on immigration to Copenhagen, “presenting immigration as the catalyst and pre-condition for the town’s growth and change” and interprets the current practices of migration and globalisation against the background of the city’s history and traditions. It is grounded in the belief that the identity and cultural heritage of Copenhagen reaches beyond its geographical borders, and is shaped by

the absorption and transformation of the other multifarious and hybrid cultures of many different people coming to it. “In the discourses of museums—says Jette Sandahl, the museum’s director—identity is most often linked to received interpretation of history and the past, but in real life, people seem to be less interested in where they come from, and more concerned with what is to become of them. In that context identity can be seen more in terms of choices, more in terms of where people want to go, who they want to be—as a striving, as hope for the future.” As she further explained, the aim of this exhibition is therefore to look at local history from the perspective of its relevance to the city’s future and, while focusing on migration, it wishes to trigger reflection on the cultural heritage of the city of Copenhagen, in both the past and the present. At the same time, the exhibition seeks to address a discourse about “who the Copenhageners are” and their identity, in relation to a wider reflection of what it means to be (or not be) a Dane, which is a rather contested and taboo discussion at national level in Denmark. Being a Copenhagener is thus presented as something different from being a “Dane,” as a matter of choice, an open process of becoming, rather than a closed category.

An in-house team developed the designed concept and layout of the exhibition, which is conceived as an object-based exhibition. Notable curatorial work has been carried out in choosing and reinterpreting the objects of the museum’s collections and exploring how they could give new responses to new questions. The objects on display mainly come from the museum’s collections, complemented by temporary loans from some immigrant citizens, pictures, videos, and some art works, completed by several labels and panels. The exhibition has also provided the museum with the opportunity to enlarge its collections, by acquiring some new objects related to the contemporary city, and migration in particular.

“Becoming a Copenhagener” traces the history of physical, economic and social development of the city, in relation to the various immigration flows over the course of time, from the origins of the city up to the present day. It focuses on

IMG. 5.46 — “Wanted-Unwanted” section within the “Becoming a Copenhagener” exhibition. Display on the Roma settlement including historical and recent pictures, a video and newspapers articles. © Anne Mette Kruse, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

From the panel: “(...) In the 16th and 17th century, it was decreed by law that Roma people, or gypsies, as they were known, were lawless and must be expelled from the realm (...) The severe legislation meant that the Roma people had almost disappeared from the city by the end of the 18th century (...) in 1972 a group of Roma people was allowed to settle on Amager Common. This created a heated debate. Since then the common has several times been the site of new Roma settlement causing renewed discussion of Roma presence in the city.”



IMG. 5.47 — “Cosmopolitan Copenhagen” section within the “Becoming a Copenhagener” exhibition. © Anne Mette Kruse, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

IMG. 5.48 — “Urban Communities” section within the “Becoming a Copenhagener” exhibition. © Anne Mette Kruse, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

From the panel: “(...) Copenhagen consists of a number of small, interconnected parts in the form of districts, individuals and communities that simultaneously reflect a local uniqueness and function as centers in complex, global network. Communities based on music, culture, home, language, civic virtue and resistance create and remodel the city’s many different cultures and help newcomers find their feet. At the same time, they reach beyond the city as a locality and connect the urban as a phenomenon together across borders and nationalities.”



the relationship between migrants, the city of Copenhagen and the citizens of Copenhagen, and is divided into four thematic sections—“Arrivals,” “Wanted–Unwanted,” “Cosmopolitan Copenhagen,” and “Urban Communities”: this organisation is an attempt to develop the topic thematically rather than following a pure chronological approach. Moreover, this has helped the curators deal with some difficult topics by framing them within a historical perspective—an example is the display on the Roma settlements.

The exhibition is full of stimuli, its aims and contents are fascinating and outstanding, and the project as a whole is a remarkable starting point for the development of a new museum narrative. However some messages may result too hidden and/or difficult to understand—especially for those who are not so aware of the city’s cultural and socio-political context. This partial failure in conveying the exhibition’s core messages, in our opinion, can be traced back mostly to the meagre design of the exhibition—this, perhaps, also due to a lack of resources. The exhibition design is very basic; it consists mainly of simple square wooden display cases painted white, which contain most of the objects, support pictures or video projections, and contribute to the organisation of the interior spaces by turning into benches or small walls—though the articulation they provide is not always effective in relation to the visit path and the exhibition contents. The task of conveying the exhibition’s messages is entrusted mainly to the objects themselves and to the panels. The general lack of a coordinated graphic and spatial project working with and on the objects results in an ineffective overall exhibition design, and does not contribute to getting the visitors physically and emotionally involved in the visit experience, or in orienting them within the multiple and rich contents of the exhibition; nor does it contribute to explain the exhibition’s multiple layers which would empower its communicative ability. A more articulated and researched exhibition design could have contributed to communicating the multiple messages of the exhibition and evoke its multiple layers, while a kind of synergy

with the museum’s other ongoing project “the WALL,” could help to foster and allow multiple interpretations of the exhibition itself, enriching further its contents and relating them to the opinions of citizens.

→ THE WALL

The Wall is a 12-metre long, 2-metre high interactive multimedia installation, consisting of four multi-touch plasma screens, mounted in a customized shipping container which will travel around the city for period of four years.

Through an interface which consists of a mixture of historical documents from the museum’s archive and collections and contemporary photographs of the city, users can explore the city’s history and be informed about its present. They can comment, download documents, and add personal stories through different media and supports (e.g. uploading private documents such as photos, videos, music or texts; voicing opinions in a video-blog; recording videos and pictures) both on site through the WALL interface, and from home via the WALL website.

It is difficult to define what “the WALL” is. It may be understood as a communicative tool from the museum; a travelling urban exhibition on city history; a way to knit together places and their history, and to strengthen the relationship between the city museum and the city itself; a tool to foster participation and dialogue; a repository, an archive, and an endless open catalogue of the museum’s collections, digitalized and made available to a wide public; and a strategy for documenting the contemporary city and a participatory collecting practice. It may be argued that it is at the same time all that. Perhaps it may be effectively described it is as an exploration of how to represent the contemporary city and its history in the light of Contemporaneity, based on subjective rather than objective multiple, multi-layered and alternative, cognitive maps; a metaphor for the museum’s changing orientation towards dialogue, a more open approach and the use of participation in the description and creation of city’s cultural heritage.

IMG. 5.49 — The WALL.
© Museum of Copenhagen.

The WALL is the result of the collaboration between the Museum of Copenhagen, the Gibson International production company from New Zealand, the Danish graphic studio Spild af Tid, the ProShop Europe installation company. The realisation of the WALL has been possible due to the financial support of the Copenhagen City Council, The Labour Market Holiday Fund, The Heritage Agency of Denmark, as well as through the contribution of private individuals, businesses and institutions.



IMG. 5.50 — The WALL.
© Caspar Miskin, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

From the introductory panel on the WALL:
“The WALL is a dialogue about Copenhagen—its inhabitants, history and contemporary challenges. It is a rediscovery of the capital, a rallying point at street level where citizens can exchange memories, visions and mixed feelings about the city we live in. Through the WALL you can tell your own stories about the different neighbourhoods and their strengths and weaknesses, heroes, scapegoats and magical spaces. Or you can stroll back into history and explore the stories, themes and images already at the WALL. The WALL is a celebration of the city and its diversity, our lives and our tales.”



IMG. 5.51 — The WALL.
© Caspar Miskin, courtesy of Museum of Copenhagen.

The ideation of “the WALL” was an interesting interdisciplinary process in itself, and involved theoretical reflections as well as investigations into the use of new technologies, graphic and communication design demonstrating how the use of these new technologies not only allows and foster but actually requires, a deep rethought of the visual, communicative and epistemologic approaches to history and storytelling.

On the other hand, in our opinion, some issues are still unresolved. For example, although Jette Sandahl declared that most of the museum’s work will flow through the WALL in one way or another, it is not clear today how the WALL will eventually influence the museum’s practices, and how this one-to-one relationship could be practically implemented. Other concerns are related also to the production and maintenance costs of this tool—they are unknown, but most likely not inconsiderable—and with the handling of the potentially huge amount of heterogeneous information collected through the WALL.

Moreover it must be said that some design aspects could also be improved, such as some physical problems in viewing the big screens, the light reflection on the screens, and, more and foremost, the relationship between the wall and the city’s real physical locations that host it. The design process of the WALL focused mostly on conceptual aspects, graphic design, and the technological implementation of the ideas on which the WALL project itself has been founded, neglecting the architectural impact of the equipment and its possible interaction with the physical spaces it was to occupy. As a result, the WALL remains rather indifferent to the context in which it is inserted. Inasmuch as it is an itinerant urban installation for the various squares and districts of the city, more attention could have been paid to developing a physical relationship with these spaces, embellishing and characterising them in such a way as to go beyond being merely a digital device for dialogue, and becoming a physical meeting place, capable of fostering a dynamic and a synergy not only with its self-created virtual space, but also within the urban space which hosts it.

However, these notes do not in any way diminish the value of the WALL, which among its potentialities seems to have the ability to include multiple voices and collect different points of view, overcoming monolithic and unique narrations and rediscovering the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary culture. As a practical experimentation on the shift in the collecting, communicating and exhibiting practices of museums—a shift fostered by new ways of conceiving, producing and consuming knowledge generated by the contemporary, global, multicultural and digitalized world—the WALL is a high-potential and future-oriented pilot project, opening new perspectives for the strategies and practices of city museums.

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