

Exhibition and museum reviews

The new Danish Maritime Museum at Kronborg

Where is the new Danish Maritime Museum? When visitors come to Elsinore near the renaissance castle Kronborg, they cannot see any spectacular, oddly-angled, glass, modernist building – no big signs, no flags; there is no museum in view. The Maritime Museum has, since its establishment in 1915, been in the castle made famous as the setting of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. However, in 2000, the castle at the entrance to the Sound became a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a new museum was built on the disused Elsinore Shipyard site in the Port of Elsinore.

The 'invisible' museum was built underground in order not to spoil the view of the castle. Even signage is prohibited, so visitors can only enter the museum after a little searching to find the path down into what was previously a dry dock. The museum was designed by the architectural firm Bjarke Ingels Group, which is known for large buildings in Copenhagen, Manhattan, and Tianjin (China) and which, from 2016, will be renovating the Smithsonian museums in Washington DC.

The architects designed the museum to sit outside the 150-metre-long dry dock with windows looking into it. The location provided interesting options when the exhibition spaces were installed, as, without partitioning walls, they wrap around the dock. Most of the exhibition space has no windows; this means the exhibition architects do not have to deal with daylight. Some places, however, use the artificial light of scenography, while from the library, entrance lobby and restaurant there is an impressive sight of the vast dry dock outside and upward. Skewed angles and a staggered pedestrian bridge over the dry dock highlight the unconventional architecture. There is no sense that one is underground.

Only a few solutions seem contrived. For example, an auditorium built into a walkway is beautiful but impractical and uncomfortable.

Exhibition form

The slightly narrow exhibition space around the dock has been designed with the help of an Amsterdam firm. The concept of 'Sea Fever' is about a journey by sea through the use of film and dramatic scenography to provide museum objects with a dedicated background. The goal is to tell a story rather than show exhibits. The exhibition concept is very similar to a theatre where a good story is important and where the objects play the role of actors. As part of its emphasis on experiences that touch visitors emotionally, the museum employed a video artist from Rotterdam, who was given *carte blanche* to produce films for each of the eight thematic exhibitions. There is very little text in the exhibitions.

Interactive exhibits support the story. For example, a popular tattoo artist workshop is part of the thematic exhibition about sailors. The exhibition is also constructed from the viewpoint of visitors' needs. Cultural history museums are rarely visited for in-depth knowledge, but they are often visited by a family or friends to have a shared experience. The aim of the museum is to stimulate curiosity that leads visitors to seek more knowledge. To this end the text within the exhibition is kept to a minimum. Each exhibition space or object is introduced through a text of only 200 characters. If visitors want more detailed information they can download it instantly on their own smartphone by scanning a QR code.

Exhibition stories

The 3000 square metres are divided into eight thematic exhibitions that

utilise different designs to tell the story of Danish maritime history.

The initial exhibition 'Our Sailors' talks about the sailor's life that has disappeared in recent decades, as even giant ships now only have a crew of 9 men and can be controlled with a joystick. The beginning of the sailor themed exhibition is marked by a video installation depicting sailing on waves. Deeper into the sailors' world, visitors see Navy Cut cigarettes, a traditional sailor suit, wistful letters to and from the homeland, compensation for missing loved ones (e.g., drinking and the prostitutes at the port's taverns), and souvenirs from distant lands. A sailor's wife, waiting at home, is also part of the story. Her two porcelain dogs on the window sill told others whether the sailor was at sea or not. If the dogs' noses turned inward, the sailor was home, and any 'intimate friend' knew.

The exhibition works well. Both children and adults will be able to recognise things from life as a seafarer. Moreover, although transport museums have traditionally been seen as museums for men, in the Danish Maritime Museum exhibits are of equal interest to women.

In its review of the exhibition, the British newspaper *The Guardian* dismisses the design as 'pre-chewed food'. This is certainly true. The exhibition architects selected experiences instead of relying on the curator's traditional desire to convey factual knowledge. The artefact is now an appliance in the story where previously the objects were the prime purpose of the exhibit. Only a fraction of the museum's rich collection is on display in the new exhibition, but more will be revealed in temporary exhibitions.

The exhibition has trouble telling the story to children. The exhibition cases' 'telling heights' are for adults, and despite the exhibition's many diverse objects, children may not understand many parts of the exhibition as they cannot connect objects or pictures with something they have not experienced themselves. Only explanations from adults can assist. The tattoo workshop that gives visitors the opportunity to be tattooed is one of few places that really capture children's attention.

Shipping is still important to Denmark. The Danish consciousness around Denmark as a maritime nation, however, is disappearing as the port becomes inaccessible (fenced because of the threat of terrorism) or because traffic is moved from the cities and mega container ports are removed. The exhibition topic of the harbour, 'The Gate to the World', shows how the former was a visible and accessible area, teeming with industrious port workers, cranes, warehouses, and more.

The theme 'Aboard' punctures the myth of the seaman's exciting life through stories of monotonous work, solitude and danger. 'Navigation and World Views' depict navigation history, including technical developments and an expanding view of the world. Previously, the Maritime Museum showed an impressive collection of ship models. Only a few of the best have been kept, and in the exhibit 'Ships of all Times' different ship types with their characteristic loads and shipping lanes are explored rather than displaying a chronological account of shipbuilding. The most touching part of the exhibition is 'In the Shadow of War'. Here, visitors learn about the biggest danger, deliberate sinking.

Maritime transport has helped to create globalisation. 'Tea Time – The First Globalization' is the title of one themed exhibition. It begins with a large family portrait of a rich family around a tea table on which there are various imported items. An interactive game demonstrates the workings of international trade. Contemporary globalization is addressed in 'The World in Your Shopping Basket', where a large shipping container rests in a display as one of the museum's most important contemporary museum artefacts.

Altogether, the exhibition is a treat for all the senses, and it can definitely be recommended as a place to visit. There is, however, room for improvement. Several of the setups take the objects' aesthetics into greater account than their story or use. The curators should regain some of the power they have lost to the exhibition architects, so there is at least an explanation of the background and context of the objects. The second criticism of the museum relates to the perspective of

children. Physically, many display cases are designed for adults, and even the many interactive forms of communication lack versions for youngsters. Finally, because children may not grasp what a dry dock is there should at least be a small exhibition about the former shipyard.

The huge model of the 400-metre-long container ship Maersk McKinney Moller is very symbolic. The late shipping magnate was one of the major donors behind the new \$60 million building. The generous donation says a lot about the current state of museums. They need spectacular (and therefore expensive) buildings that help to sell the product and make being in the building part of the experience. The large construction around the dry dock exhausted the budget. Among other engineering, there are 461 anchors 42-metres deep to prevent the building rising from water pressure. Rain led to water damage a few days before the museum's official opening, which had to be postponed. The museum's operating budget was not well-managed and the Ministry of Culture placed it under enhanced supervision. The museum managed by laying off employees. The initially large visitor numbers responding to the novelty value of something new may not be sustainable.

The *New York Times* featured the museum and its architecture in its distinguished list of the world's most interesting places – '52 Places to Go in 2014'. Those interested in museum architecture should consult Bruce Peter's *Museum in the Dock* by Bruce Peter (Arvinius förlag, 2014).

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London Transport Museum's wartime centennial tribute

In August 1914 the world hurtled into a cataclysmic war. One hundred years later we are engaged in remembrance. The centenary of the First World War provides an opportunity for museums of all kinds to focus attention on the contribution of ordinary people to an

extraordinary event. The London Transport Museum has extended that concept to vehicles as well. The exhibition *Goodbye Piccadilly: From Home Front to Western Front*, named after a line in the popular 1912 song *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, not only commemorates the sacrifice of Londoners in the Great War but it profiles the role of the London bus as well.

The London Transport Museum has planned a full range of activities for the centenary year, including talks, symposia and auxiliary exhibitions that open up connections between London life, especially as it affected transport, and the Great War. By developing intersecting activities the museum can offer visitors a richer and deeper experience if so desired. For example, in November 2014 the exhibition operated in conjunction with the Symposium: *1914–18 From Home Front to Western Front*. The collaboration gave visitors an opportunity to explore the exhibition's themes more deeply through targeted talks. Similarly, the exhibition could be viewed in conjunction with the launch of William Ward's book, *Ole Bill: London Buses and the First World War* or Jerry White's book *Zeppelin Nights – London in the First World War*. The anniversary of World War I has provided an obvious focus. In addition, 2014 in London is also the Year of the Bus, launched by London Mayor Boris Johnson in January 2014.

Goodbye Piccadilly begins by informing visitors about the various commemorative events that coincide with the centenary of World War I in 2014; the Year of the Bus, 60 years since the first red 'Routemaster' bus was built (1954–69) and 75 years since the iconic RT-type bus went into service. The RT-type bus was on London streets from 1939 to 1979. Both bus designs became quintessential symbols of London transport. The exhibition, however, concentrates on the way the war changed London and Londoners. It tells the story of how the B-Type London bus, first introduced onto London streets in 1910, was commandeered for war service and was sent to the front as the 'Battle Bus'. As part of the exhibition