

Our way of collecting the (almost) contemporary

Thomas Bloch Ravn

In Denmark most funds are and have always been allocated to the archaeological museums, but as in Holland we also experience a stronger focus on the contemporary and the almost contemporary.

At my museum, Den Gamle By (meaning The Old Town open air museum), we have found, I think, our own way of dealing with the almost contemporary and I think that we have done that in tune with the museum's basic concept.

Allow me to begin with quoting the four basic guidelines of my museum:

1. At Den Gamle By we do not run the museum for what is past, neither for the objects – because the past is gone and the objects are dead. No, we run the museum for the people – now and in the future.
2. At Den Gamle By we deal with the past, but we are aware that we do so in the present – and with the future in mind.
3. Everything we do will be based on research and knowledge – but we do not want the museum to appear academic.
4. We believe it should be enjoyable to visit museums, and we are convinced that providing museum visitors with a good experience will open them to further reflection, which really is the museum's true purpose.

Den Gamle By is a very complex museum with a great variety of collections, but basically it is an urban open air museum depicting the typical preindustrial Danish town.

When the museum was founded in 1909 it was the idea that it also should include the more recent history, which grownups could relate to – in 1909 that meant up until the mid-1800s.

Ten years ago we realized that this did not apply anymore. Time had passed, but Den Gamle By had not been updated. This recognition became the starting point for a huge project aimed at adding two town districts to the existing preindustrial market town. One district showing the 1920s and one depicting the 1970s.

Here I shall focus on the project about the 1970s and more precisely on 1974. We chose this year for several reasons:

- The first is, as Stijn Reijnders put it, that ‘collecting too hastily and too instantly is of no use. It would be better to let a few years pass’. We believe that the distance in time would make it easier for us to choose what stories to focus on and what objects and totalities to collect.
- Secondly we realized that 1974 was the end of a long period of growth and change in the society, which would give us the opportunity to present elements of history and culture 10, 20 and even 30 years back in time from 1974, because these elements would still exist in the chosen focus year.
- In 1974 the oil crisis stopped the development for several years, which meant that focusing on 1974 in reality would show the rather static townscape as it was until the 80s.
- And fourthly it was our expectation and experience that it was still possible to collect not only key objects from this period, but even the totalities which are the characteristic feature of open air museums.

We managed to raise the necessary funds (around 30 million Euros), and we began to collect houses, homes, shops, offices and special objects for this huge exhibition in three dimensions and in a scale of 1:1.

Doing this we carried out numerous investigations and research projects interviewing people, studying photos, scientific literature, magazines, papers and archives – and, of course, our own memory. We acknowledged that we could not study and collect everything; therefore we had to focus and select in order to produce a concentrated, trustworthy and still complex picture of a typical urban district in a provincial Danish town in 1974.

Then we made lists of priorities as to which types of houses, shops, homes, objects etc. would be top priority and which would be second and third priority in order to have some guidelines for the collection.

Defining the priorities we were aware of the two very important points, which also Stijn Reijnders underline: focusing on objects and totalities that really have been used, and focusing on themes that are integrated in greater stories or have symbolic surplus value.

We know that we are not Gods; we do not know everything, and our priorities can and will be subject to discussion. But we believe that we do have to trust our own professionalism, and we are convinced that Den Gamle By’s professional staff – young and old, male and female, historians, architects, ethnologists, conservators, craftsmen etc. – together will have the collective competence – and obligation! – to make the selection.

So even though we agree with Stijn Reijnder’s statement that objective or neutral collecting is a myth, we maintain that the collective professionalism of the museum is of the utmost importance in the process of collecting for the project.



In 2010 Den Gamle By opened a Radio-TV shop from the year 1974.

At Den Gamle By we agree that some museums give ‘a disproportionate amount of attention to migrant groups’. But on the other hand, we think that it is also important, especially for an open air museum founded in the period of nation-building and national romanticism, to give a more complex – and trustworthy – picture of the urban population.

Therefore, we will also include the history of relevant migrant groups in the project. Not over-focused, but realistic, we think.

A research project concluded that we ought to enclose Turkish workers – who came to Denmark in large numbers in the 1960s and early 1970s – and students from Greenland, which, as you probably know, is a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. And in the 1920s district it would be relevant to put a certain focus on Jews.

In Danish museums we have several ethnographic collections. On Greenlandic ethnographics, on Osmanic culture and we even have a Jewish museum. But no museum shows the Jews, the Turks and the Greenlandic people as an integrated part of Danish urban culture. This is what we intend to do in the two upcoming urban districts.

As with several other projects in Den Gamle By during the museum’s 100 years of existence, the National museum authorities neither recommended nor supported the project when it was first published. In fact, in an official report the National Heritage Agency concluded, that it ‘is not relevant to support either the establishment or the running of a 20th century town district’.

The reasons were two-fold. First the National Heritage Agency asserted that the Building Preservation Act would guarantee the preservation of a representative

section of 20th century buildings. Secondly, the Agency pointed out that museums all over Denmark hold important collections from the 20th century.

As to the first assertion, Den Gamle By maintained that building preservation by law (monuments) and open-air museum are complementary methods which cannot replace each other. The aim of building preservation is to keep the valuable, the outstanding and the important buildings, while the aim of an open-air museum is to keep ordinary buildings – buildings that most people actually lived in. And while legal building preservation has to accept that the preserved buildings are part of modern society with all the necessary modern facilities, open-air museums can rebuild buildings as they actually appeared at a given time in history without for instance electricity, running water and toilets.



The visitors can also experience a Travellers Agency and a Photo Shop from 1974.

As to the second argument, the National Heritage Agency is absolutely correct in maintaining that many museums hold important collections from the period. But the point is that these collections in general are object-oriented while the collections in open-air museums focus on totalities.

It is basically the aim of open-air museums to present totalities in three dimensions and lifesize, in a scale of 1:1.

Den Gamle By's board and management did not accept the Agency's conservative point of view, and decided to go for it, because we were – and are – convinced

that it is the right thing to do for Den Gamle By. And as the project has proven practicable, the museum has gained support from both researchers and politicians.

Some minor parts of the project are already finished, and the major part of the project will be open to the public in 2014.



This model shows how the modern 1974-part will appear when the project is finished in 2014.

At Den Gamle By we think that museum concepts are about to change. And we believe that the world of museums will become more pluralistic, open and diversified in the years to come.

Whereas the concept of a museum was very fixed and exclusive in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, at least in Denmark, we now experience a more pluralistic tendency.

We believe that museums will be still more diverse, focusing on different topics, different ways of presentation (e.g. indoors or outdoors, contemporary or non-contemporary) and targeting different groups of audience (narrow or wide, younger or older, elitist or non-elitist) – but of course always relating to the basic professional obligation of being a museum, i.e. being reliable and always working on the basis of the best knowledge available.

Literature

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Personalia

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