A MUSEUM FOR THE FOOL AND THE PROFESSOR

THOMAS BLOCH RAVN, Museum Director of Den Gamle By (The Old Town – National Open-Air Museum of Urban History and Culture) since 1996. He holds an MA in Danish Local and Cultural History. From 2001, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Danish Center for Urban History, and President of the Association of European Open Air Museums 2007-11. As Museum Director, he has focused on managing and developing the museum to be in dialogue with the present society. He participates in public debates about museology and museums' relevance for the community.

In recent years, Den Gamle By has had a significant growth in initiatives such as rebuilding the Mintmaster's Mansion from 17th century Copenhagen, a Shopping Street from 1927 and a Town District depicting from 1974 plus new buildings for the Danish Poster Museum and The Gallery of Decorative Art, both of which are museums integrated into Den Gamle By.

A MUSEUM FOR THE FOOL
AND THE PROFESSOR

Den Gamle By (The Old Town) is an open-air museum dedicated to urban culture. It encompasses several museums at the same site at the heart of Aarhus: a toy museum, a poster museum and a gallery of decorative arts with exhibitions of silverware, Delftware and clocks and watches. However, basically, Den Gamle By is the national open-air museum of Danish urban culture with the characteristic open-air interplay between exteriors, interiors and living history.[1] In 2012, the museum had 386,000 visitors. The entrance fee during the peak season is DKK 135, which makes the museum the most expensive Danish museum to visit.

Den Gamle By was founded in 1914 as a popular, visitor-orientated museum in opposition to the scientific, inward-looking National Museum in Copenhagen. The Director of the National Museum at the time, Sophus Müller, was extremely aggressive towards open-air museums and supported local museum people who proposed that the renaissance timber of Den Gamle By's first house should be chopped up and sold as firewood. What it boiled down to was basically a conflict about totalities versus objects, people versus scientists and storytelling versus research.

The identity of the museum is to think differently, to do things our own way, and from time to time be in opposition to conventional wisdom. A well-known Danish patron of the arts once said that the museum is for both the fool and the professor.

We try to target a variety of users by means of a variety of measures – in other words, we play different tunes in the same symphony. We are a museum that is about people, for people and with people.

A VARIED USER PROFILE
A recent user survey of Den Gamle By documents that users generally mirror the Danish population. The survey shows a balanced visitor profile, which includes the segments defined as individual-orientated, modern individual-orientated and traditional, which are usually characterised as non-museum users according to the user survey.[2] The fact that the museum is the most expensive Danish museum clearly does not restrict the broad reach of the museum.

Museums are about preservation and research, but what matters in the end is the output for the users. How do we draw attention? How do we inspire fascination? How do we trigger imagination? How do we touch hearts?[3]

In tune with the museum's DNA, our mission statement is to bring history to people! Our practice is based on research, but we do not want the museum to appear academic. It is the museum's ambition to reach out to as many people as possible – even to people who never use museums and to people who consider museums to be elitist and boring.

In order to implement the mission we have identified three action points:

1. To update relevant storytelling.
2. To develop our brand.
3. To intensify user surveys and user studies.

In updating the storytelling and relevance, we have focused on five areas: living history, events, temporary exhibitions, modern history and outreach to a variety of target groups.

In 2001, we introduced living history to make space for people and dialogue at the museum. This was not a popular decision among museum professionals. Some classified this move as a Disneyfication of the museum.

Apart from this move, we introduced events with a view to developing additional seasons. For instance, the museum started opening during the Christmas season, and over the years, this has turned into a peak season with around 30% of the annual users visiting the museum during a six-week period.

The museum has increased its focus on temporary exhibitions based on the museum's own collections, ranging from party dresses to tobacco objects and photography of rock musicians and youth culture.

RETHINKING THE MUSEUM
In 2002, we decided to rethink the museum by adding a new town district that would depict the year 1974. We translocated houses from towns and cities all over Denmark to illustrate a mini Denmark from the post-war boom period to the beginning of the oil crisis.

We have already made a radio/TV shop, a needlework shop and several shop facades. In the summer of 2013, we opened a huge block with a tearoom, a bakery, a supermarket and a gynaecologist's practice. The block also contains a shared flat for young people, a flat for an unmarried teacher and a flat for a traditional family.

In the coming years, we plan to open a jazz pub, a kindergarten, a second-hand shop with pornographic magazines, a plumber's workshop and a room for scouts. The houses will also contain flats for a single woman and her son, a retired couple from the working class, a hippie, a blind man and a one-bedroom apartment housing six young workers from Turkey.[4]

The initiatives mentioned above are in tune with the basic ideas of open-air museums. The early open-air museums were both radical and highly relevant institutions. They were radical because they focused on the daily lives of ordinary people, and they were relevant because their storytelling targeted ordinary people.[5]

In recent years, we have developed programmes for marginalised groups, who are typically non-users of museums – from mentally disabled young people to elderly people suffering from dementia.

In the flat from the 1950s, people suffering from dementia are treated as guests who visit the housewife. The sounds, the smells – even the toilet paper – are from the period. It corresponds to a specific time and experience in the users' life when they were young, recently married and had their first child. In this context, they re-experience a highlight in their lives. The setting opens their minds and enables social interaction. This contributes to social value and well-being.[6]

The project is carried out in partnerships with the healthcare sector. Research conducted by psychologists from Aarhus University confirms the value of the project for the participants.

Recently we brought the 'home' of a homeless person into the museum. The homeless man's name is Ulrik, and he was very active in the process of having his 'home' exhibited in a backyard at the museum. He lived there for some months sharing his story and earning his living by selling a magazine about homeless people. In collaboration with Ulrik, the museum documented his life and way of living. In this project, the museum explored new ways of learning about contemporary history.[7]

MUSEUMS FOR SOMEBODY

These projects give the museum public attention and visibility, and they start discussions about the role of museums in society. Can projects like the ones mentioned above be carried out by other public institutions? Do museums have a social responsibility? Stephen E. Weil's famous dictum from 1999 about the changing role of the museum has often been quoted: "From being about something to being for somebody".[8]

These initiatives have widened general knowledge about the museum and changed and strengthened our brand. Based on a qualitative analysis of the museum's brand, we are focused on changing our identity and brand with an emphasis on the museums within the museum and especially with projects reflecting contemporary history.

We acknowledge that it is important to be in tune with reality and to intensify our PR and marketing based on user surveys in order to change and strengthen our brand.

The founding director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, George F. MacDonald, once pointed out that: "The theme park is setting the tune to which we will all ultimately have to dance… But as museums we can use their techniques and outclass them with a value-orientated content they cannot match".[9]

MacDonald has studied attractions, museums and parks made by the Disney Corporation. I believe we can learn about service, visitor handling, PR, marketing and user studies – and how to improve storytelling in order to attract diverse user groups. Museums are and must be museums and museums must stick with their mission. However, if we have the courage, we can learn a lot from theme parks and commercial attractions – and beat them with their own means.

Endnotes

1   More information about Den Gamle By: Ravn, Thomas Bloch: *Den Gamle By. A Window into the History*, Den Gamle By, 2002; Ravn, Thomas Bloch: *Den Gamle By. History and Future*, Den Gamle By, 2009; Ravn, Thomas Bloch *Updating Den Gamle By, Acta Etnografica Hungarica: Open Air Museums in the 21st Century*, separatum 2010 pp 313-32. See also: Rentzhog, Sten: *Open Air Museums. The History and Future of a Visionary Idea*, Stockholm, 2007, pp 85-89.

2   For a description of the segments see: Jensen, Jacob Thorek & Lundgaard, Ida Brændholt: *User Survey 2012*, Danish Agency for Culture, 2013, pp 51-71.

3   Ravn, Thomas Bloch: *Managing time – in museums and in people's mind*, report from the 23rd Conference in Association of European Open Air Museums in Holland and Belgium in 2007, Holland, 2009, pp 113-25.

4   Ravn, Thomas Bloch: '1900-talsbyen på frilandsmuseum' (18th century village in open-air museum), *Danske Museer*, no. 3, 2003; Ravn, Thomas Bloch: *A 20th Century Addition to The Old Town – a project for the future*, Report of the 21st Conference of the Association of European Open Air Museums 2003, Scotland, 2005; Ravn, Thomas Bloch: *The Modern Town Project at Den Gamle By*, Report from the 23rd Conference in Association of European Open Air Museums in Holland and Belgium in 2007, Holland, 2009, pp 167-171; Ravn, Thomas Bloch: 'Our Way of Collecting the (almost) Contemporary', *Quotidian. Dutch Journal for the Study of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, 2010, pp 115-20.

5   Williams-Davies, John: 'Now Our Story is Your History: The Challenge of Relevance for Open-Air Museums', *Folk Life. Journal of Ethnological Studies*, vol. 47, 2009, pp 115-123.

6   Ravn, Thomas Bloch: 'Denmark's 'Old Town'', *Museum Practice Magazine*, London, Winter 2009; Berntsen, Dorthe: 'Den tabte tid' (The lost Time) (research into Den Gamle By's work with dementia), *Den Gamle By's yearbook*, 2012, pp 14-23; van Dassen, Anne Marie: 'Det sjoveste var at være artig' (about Den Gamle By's work with youngsters with mental diseases), *Den Gamle By's yearbook*, 2012, pp 9-13.

7   Laursen, Anneken Appel: 'a museum transmitting a message for social outcasts: A homeless man presented his life in Den Gamle By (The Old Town)', *The international Journal of the Inclusive Museum,* http://onmuseums.com

8   Weil, Stephen E.: 'From Being About Something to Being For Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum', *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 128, 1999.

9   MacDonald, George F.: *The Future of Museums in the Global Village*, Museum 155, 1987; Alsford, Stephen & MacDonald, George F.: *A Museum for the Global Village*, Hull 1989; Ravn, Thomas Bloch: 'Lær af Disney' (Learn from Disney), *Berlingske Tidende*, 7 Sep. 1995.

Credits

p. 53   The shared flat for young people in 1974, Den Gamle By.

p. 54   The shopping street 1974, Den Gamle By. Photo: Thorsten Overgaard.

p. 56   The homeless man, exhibited in Den Gamle By 2012.

p. 58   From the gynaecologist's practice 1974, Den Gamle By.

p. 60   Den Gamle By's flat for people suffering from dementia. Photo: Thorsten Overgaard.