

Migration History as Part of (Urban) History: The role of museums

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The history and heritage of major cities everywhere in the world include the history and heritage of the many immigrants that have passed through or settled there in the past. Most of these cities have seen large numbers of immigrants changing not only their population structures but also their social, economic, political and cultural fabric. However, very often, the important impact of migration is not reflected in the way in which the city's history and heritage are represented by our city museums.

In 2014, the STAM-Ghent City Museum set up a large-scale project dealing explicitly with the city's migration history. This project, which had the title 'Sticking Around', has been discussed at the 2014 CAMOC annual conference and in a previous edition

of the CAMOC newsletter (*CAMOCnews* 2014 #4). To round up the project, STAM invited other museum professionals who have been working on the same issues to a one-day workshop where experiences and expertise were shared, compared and discussed. The focus of the workshop was on city museums, but some of the participants represented other kinds of museums, which greatly enriched the discussion. The workshop took place on Friday, December 12th at STAM in Ghent. Below follows a short report, indicating some of the themes that were discussed that day, the participants' different points of view and approaches towards specific practices and ideas, and relating these to concrete examples of the projects each was working on. ▶

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WORKSHOP

The workshop was attended by a dozen people, representing the Museum of Copenhagen, the Amsterdam Museum, the Antwerp Red Star Line Museum, the AMSAB-Institute of Social History (Ghent), the KADOC-Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society (Leuven), the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren-Brussels) and of course the Ghent City Museum STAM. After a short presentation of the Sticking Around-project – intended mostly as a trigger for broader questions to come to the fore – and an introductory round, in which all participants presented the way(s) in which their institutions were tackling the subject of migration, the workshop participants addressed a number of questions concerning the ways in which migration history is, can or should be addressed by (city) museums. Three of these questions are especially relevant to our city museums, and the discussions came up with some very fruitful examples and ideas.

SHOULD MIGRATION BE LIFTED OUT AS A PARTICULAR TOPIC OR SHOULD IT BE SURREPTITIOUSLY INTEGRATED IN THE COLLECTIONS AND EXHIBITIONS OF (CITY) MUSEUMS?

Most participants have been treating migration as a separate topic: both STAM and the City Museum of Copenhagen have run exhibitions focusing on the history of migration to their respective cities, the Red Star Line museum deals solely with the history of migration, the Amsab and Kadoc-archives have functioned as partners in many migration-related projects, etc. As until then, migration had remained largely unnoticed in their respective institutions or cities, these projects were deemed necessary to draw attention to the subject, both among the broader public in general and among (the descendants of) migrants specifically. Having long been cast aside as a part of history belonging here (at the place of destination) nor there (at the place of departure), a lot of the stories, objects and documents that represented this history have not survived, as they have died or been discarded with the people who originally carried them. For the curators of Sticking Around, one of the main goals of making a project that focused on migration history (however clearly embedding it in a wider historical perspective, see further) was to raise awareness among institutions, organizations and families alike about the importance of this history and of the heritage documenting it,



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in order to prevent further loss and to encourage people to actively engage with their own heritage. However, these projects and specific museums should not become an alibi, discharging the institutions that organised them and other museums of the duty to integrate (the history of) migration into their permanent collections, exhibitions and daily work. This argument was forcefully argued by the Amsab-ISH, which is working hard to integrate the theme of migration into its general research and collection programme. In the end, the goal should be to mainstream migration, giving it a place that reflects its factual importance in our societies past and present. In order to illustrate the need for such a mainstreaming, the discussion likened the theme of migration to the theme of gender, a very fruitful comparison which makes abundantly clear how careful we as museums and other heritage institutions should be when we talk about migration and migration history.

WHAT IS MIGRATION HERITAGE AND HOW SHOULD IT BE COLLECTED AND PRESERVED?

Unlike scholars and journalists, who can address the topic of migration history from a knowledge-based point of view, museum and archival professionals very much need to reflect on the heritage migration has created and how this heritage could be collected, preserved and shown to a wider audience. The Red Star Line Museum in particular has been working hard on the questions ‘What is migration heritage? When does heritage become migration heritage? Where does it start and where does it end? What should be collected and exhibited, and what not?’ ▶

WORKSHOP

In general, all the tangible and intangible heritage that relates to the migration experience itself (leaving one's place of birth, travelling to another or several other destinations, and initially settling there) are easily considered migration heritage. But what about the stories and objects that document the lives of migrants before they became migrants, or after they settled permanently. The example of the German documentation centre DOMiD is referred to: this centre documents the history of migration in Germany in objects, stories, archives and audiovisual material, and collects in a very broad way, linking its materials to the stories told by their owners. Many of the objects from their collection could not be considered 'migration heritage' when seen out of context, but do acquire that status – although not everyone agrees on that – through the stories they evoke. Opinions differ: some think that museums cannot gather such widely diverse objects; others – especially the archival institutions – are of the opinion that collection should be as wide as possible, including materials that today might not be considered interesting, with a view to ensure the preservation of what might come to be considered as such by future researchers and heritage professionals. This difference of opinion, it is concluded, stems from the different roles of museums on the one hand and archival institutions and documentation centres on the other hand, both of whom have essentially different roles. It can be solved by setting up collaborative structures, as happened in the framework of the Sticking Around-project, where STAM and Amsab worked closely together for the collection and preservation of materials. Once such a broad collection can be set up, including everything that is related to migrants and migration, the question remains of what in the end should be



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selected and put on display when we as city museums want to show the history of migration and integrate it in the stories we tell about our cities. Still all too often, the objects and stories that are chosen represent an exotic image of migration, focusing on differences and presenting migration as something strange and alien. In their respective projects, both the curators from Copenhagen and STAM have actively strived to take a different approach. Based on the extensive historical research they have carried out – research that was not initially aimed at the creation of an exhibition – they have selected images and texts that were historically important and representative for the city's migration history, embedded firmly in the wider frame of urban history. By not starting from a fixed image of what needed to be represented ('we are looking for pictures of x and y') but from the results of a more generally conceived research ('this is what has come out of the research'), a more balanced and diverse picture of migration history was drawn that was less exotic and more realistic, showing e.g. mixed groups of colleagues at the workplace, 1970s' immigrants with flared trousers and John Travolta-hairdos, etc. In Sticking Around, the selection that was made was also based on what immigrants themselves thought should be shown – which brings us to our third question.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN THE PROJECTS AND IN THE PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS OF (CITY) MUSEUMS?

Until now, the role of grassroots organisations and individual immigrants in the projects set up by museums and other cultural institutions has remained rather limited. Also in the projects of the participants to the workshop, the relations with migrants and migrant organizations were mostly constructed upon personal relations, but not institutionalised and thus dependent upon specific members of staff. The archival institutions had experience with projects run by migrant organisations themselves, where they instead functioned as subordinate partner, but mostly, things are the other way around. This is a matter of institutional functioning – not only migrant groups, but also other minority groups rarely have a decisive voice in our cultural institutions, although many city museums are currently setting up new models to change this and to effectively introduce a real participatory approach to their daily working. However, here, the opinions of the ▶

EXHIBITION

discussants differ. While some believe that actively involving grassroots organisations (be they migrants organisations or others) is practically unfeasible and paralyzes the decision making process, others believe it is a necessary step to a more democratic practice of cultural heritage. Generally however, all agree that the endeavour to preserve migration heritage and make it accessible to a wider audience – and especially to (the descendants of) migrants, should be a participatory endeavour, and that migrant organisations and interested individuals should be closely involved. In most cases, this is a struggle far from won, as our institutions are not always prepared to allow for the new methodologies and approaches such a participatory design asks for.

As cultural diversity and its impact on the identity of the societies that are characterized by it becomes ever

more important, the topic of migration and migration history provides an interesting angle for our museums to address this issue. However, when tackling this topic, there are many questions to be asked and things to be taken into consideration. Further, a great degree of openness of mind and readiness to incorporate new ways of thinking and acting are required of the museum as an institution and of its staff, both in their professional and personal capacities. More established and larger-scale institutions particularly struggle with these questions, whereas our smaller scale and closer-to-home city museums often have more freedom and flexibility to adapt. Less concerned with prestigious projects and more with the necessity to reflect the story of all people making up the urban population, city museums could be the pioneers in this particularly interesting field of heritage, that is strongly developing at this very moment.

The “Cybertheque. Kraków – Time and Space” Exhibition

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A journey through time and space by balloon.
Photo: © Historical Museum of the City of Kraków

The Krzysztofory Palace is situated on the west side of the Main Square in Kraków. It is one of the most impressive residences in the city, taking prominent second place to Wawel Royal Castle in terms of rank and glory. Currently, the building is regaining its former magnificence thanks to careful restoration, infrastructure modernisation and the adaptation of the building to meet modern museum standards.

On 30 October 2014, in the renovated interiors, the “Cybertheque. Kraków – Time and Space” permanent exhibition opened. The idea behind this exhibition was to present Kraków in a modern way in terms of its urban development. Cybertheque is a digital treasury of knowledge about Krakow and will be systematically expanded and replenished. At this primary stage, you can see the development of Kraków from the pre-settlement period (before 1257) to the implementation of the “Great Kraków” project at the beginning of the 20th century. The exhibition is a showcase of the museum’s achievements in ▶

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