European Museums in the 21st Century: Setting the framework
Vol. 2

Mela Books
European Museums in the 21st Century: setting the framework

Volume 2

edited by Luca Basso Peressut, Francesca Lanz, and Gennaro Postiglione
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Acknowledgments

These books grew out of the work of the Research Field 6 “Envisioning 21st Century Museums” leaded by the Politecnico di Milano prof. Luca Basso Peressut and Gennaro Postiglione within the European project MeLa—European Museums in an age of migrations. MeLa is a four-year interdisciplinary research project funded in 2011 by the European Commission under the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Programme (Seventh Framework Programme). Adopting the notion of “migration” as a paradigm of the contemporary global and multicultural world, MeLa reflects on the role of museums and heritage in the twenty-first century. The main objective of the MeLa project is to define innovative museum practices that reflect the challenges of the contemporary processes of globalization, mobility and migration. As people, objects, knowledge and information move at increasingly high rates, a sharper awareness of an inclusive European identity is needed to facilitate mutual understanding and social cohesion. MeLa aims at empowering museums spaces, practices and policies with the task of building this identity. MeLa involves nine European partners—universities, museums, research institutes and a company—who will lead six Research Fields (RF) with a collaborative approach, and this book is meant to report about the preliminary findings of the first research phases.

The editors would like to thank all the scholars who enriched this book with their suggestions and contributions as well as all the museums and their staff, curators, directors, designer and architects who kindly provided information, images and drawings supporting our investigations. A mention goes to the english editors and translators, and to Elena Montanari, Cristina Colombo and the staff from POLIMI, who essentially contributed with their help to the editing of this book.
The Historisches Museum Frankfurt (History Museum Frankfurt) has its origins in collections of the city and citizens of Frankfurt am Main, dating back to the 16th century. They were originally housed in the municipal library, the “chamber of curiosities” of the old imperial city of Frankfurt. Founded between 1861 and 1878 on the basis of civic initiatives, the Historisches Museum is the oldest museum in Frankfurt financed by the municipality. During the 19th century it was a kind of “universal museum” for the city of Frankfurt, which is still present today in its collections. Despite the fact that, since the early 20th century, part of the museum’s collections have coalesced into many new museums in Frankfurt, they still comprise more than 630,000 objects, including paintings, prints and drawings, photos, sculptures, textiles, furniture, musical instruments, coins, armour, pottery, toys, scientific instruments industrial historical items.

Since the 1970s, the museum has developed into a “museum-family”. The Children’s Museum (Kinder Museum Frankfurt, founded as a department in 1972, with its own dedicated site since 2008), the Museum of Caricature (Caricatura Museum Frankfurt, founded as a department in 2000, with its own building since 2008) and the Porcelain Museum in Frankfurt-Höchst (Höchster Porzellanmuseum, since 1994, in its own building). Before the new museum project was launched in 2008, the museum family attracted between 90,000 and 130,000 visitors per year.

The museum has a tradition of “re-inventions” or reforms during its long history. The general concept behind the museum was last extensively revised in 1972. With the slogans “place of learning versus temple of the muses!” and “culture for everyone”, the Historisches Museum launched a process by which the museum would become, first and foremost, a place of learning open to all strata of the population. The socio-historical issues of historical scholarship of the time became the new guidelines for the content-related work carried out by the museum staff. The museum became a disputed institution in the 1970s. In the city of Frankfurt it was heavily criticised by the conservative citizens for the “critical” and left-wing impetus of the new exhibition and the sheer quantity of textual information contained within it. On the European museum scene, on the other hand, it was one of the most visited and “quoted” examples of the new museology of the 1970s. This leading position among German museums for cultural history was already lost by the 1980s, when new ideas of scenography and new building concepts generated more attractive museums. The conceptual and didactic innovations had been accepted and adapted quickly in most of the museum concepts in the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, forty years later, the Historisches Museum is once again renewing its underlying concept in relation to the challenges posed by contemporaneity and the development of the city; it is thus restoring its buildings, redesigning its exhibitions and rethinking its spaces, and constructing a new museum venue.

As in 1972, new construction measures are currently providing an opportunity for change. The historical buildings have just been restored and were re-opened in 2012. Norbert Diezinger (Diezinger Architects), an ex-collaborator of Karl-Josef Schattner in Eichstätt, has achieved far more than merely a technical modernisation and embellishment of the façades. The unique
ensemble of five historical monuments from seven centuries (12th to 19th centuries) has now been made visible and understandable from both the outside and the inside. Every monument, heavily damaged during World War II, has its own staircase; the identities of the five buildings have also been strengthened by the materiality and colour of floors, walls, ceilings and windows. Modern additions are clearly recognisable. In addition, the new exhibitions are arranged according to the features of the five buildings, and comment on their history.

The planned new construction (by Lederer Ragnarsdóttir Oei architects, LRO, Stuttgart) is aimed at creating a striking museum architecture, which is capable of merging with the complex urban-architectural situation on the Römerberg. The new building is the result of an international competition held between 2007 and 2008, involving 50 architects. The competition was greatly influenced by aspects of urban planning. Indeed, since 2005 a vigorous debate about the future of the historical city centre has led to the decision to “repair” the historic city centre by demolishing structures and the reconstruction of new buildings recalling the pre-modern history of the oldest quarter of the city. Thus, within the concept of LRO architects, the old museum buildings are completed by a new one which joins up the fragmented “Saalhof” to an adjacent court building. Divided by a new museum square, and following the tradition of the old streets (in an east-west direction) of the quarter, a larger exhibition building will be placed at the southern end of Römer place. Its double-beaked form, with sandstone façade and two gabled slate roofs, has an ambiguous effect. The double-beaked form, with sandstone façade and two gabled slate roofs, has an ambiguous effect.

In doing so the museum will adopt a new participatory orientation, which takes the wealth of its visitors’ experience and knowledge seriously and makes use of it as an integral element. It will address itself specifically to the numerous new citizens from a wide range of the world’s cultures, as well as to the international guests visiting the trade-fair town and transportation hub that is Frankfurt. Many new perspectives of the museum concept will result in the permanent exhibition “Frankfurt Now,” which will address questions such as: Who or what makes Frankfurt what it is? Who actually lives here? How do different people experience Frankfurt? Do we all live in the same city, or are there many different “Frankfurts”?

Such an exploration of the present-day town requires new forms of museological work. The museum proceeds on the assumption that every one of the city’s 700,000 residents is an expert on Frankfurt and invites them to share their expertise at the new Historisches Museum. To this end, the means are being created for a new participatory exhibition series called the “City Lab”. Here, with the participation of various groups and initiatives of the local society, exhibitions on changing subjects will be developed. These subjects will not be determined by the museum, but either proposed directly by the groups themselves or worked out jointly. The museum’s thematic spectrum will thus be expanded to include the urban society’s knowledge and experiences of its own city.

The Kinder Museum (Children’s Museum) with its 40-year experience in multi-generational and interactive museum practice plays an important role in the development of the City Lab and the other interactive formats in the new museum. It will be re-integrated into the new museum site by 2015 and will be responsible for the installation of multi-generational offers in all of the new exhibitions. It also has a leading role in designing and modifying the participative strategies of the museum – finding partners in the local/regional society, framing partnerships with these groups or initiatives and organizing the setting up of exhibitions. Moreover, since 2011, a series of experimental projects outside the museum sites have been launched in order to collect experiences with this kind of work, and create a growing network of partners of the museum within the city – examples include a project in 2011 about a changing city quarter, the “Ostend”, which presented 38 contributions from participants, or, in 2012, a project concerning the oldest public swimming pool in Frankfurt, the “Stadionbad”, founded in 1925, together with a swimming club.

Finally, this new participative strategy takes two recent developments into account – firstly, the new techniques of creating knowledge enhanced by the World Wide Web, in particular by the so-called “Web 2.0” which, with “user-generated content” such as Wikis, crowd-sourcing and other tools, have changed the public’s attitude towards institutions such as museums, libraries and archives. More visitors want to comment on the work of the museum or even to participate in their work. The new concept of the Historisches Museum responds to this trend by its participative approach, as well as by a wide range of interfaces in the exhibition media, which can be commented on or enhanced by the visitors themselves. All of the museum’s digital sources will be combined by 2015 into a “museum portal” to be accessed in the museum or via the Internet, where all the information may be commented on by the users. Secondly, the new concept takes into account the fact that the museum’s audience has changed since 1972. Frankfurt is currently the city in Germany with the highest degree of cultural diversity; only a minority of its citizens were born here, 44 percent have a migration background (either they or their parents come from other countries), and 25 percent carry a foreign passport. In this multicultural city, society is no longer the nation or national traditions which form the common ground; rather, it is the city which is shared and created by its inhabitants. In addition, Frankfurt attracts a lot of visitors from other countries, particularly from outside of Europe due to the international airport acting as a gateway to Europe for Asian and American tourists. Thirty percent of the museum visitors in 2008 came from other countries, with an increasing proportion of non-European visitors, another 30 percent came from other regions of Germany and 40 percent from the local region. The challenge is thus to combine exhibitions which attract the local and regional people, who are all in different ways “experts” of their town, and also put together attractive offers to the increasing number of tourists with hardly any knowledge of the town, or even of European culture.

As a result, within its renovated and new buildings, through collaboration with the other museum’s branches, such as the Children’s Museum, and via new exhibition design, the new museum opens a wide range of views on Frankfurt, in different formats, directed towards the diverse needs of visitors. In the recently renovated old museum buildings of the “Saalhof”, the museum offers three exhibitions focusing on the historical museum’s buildings.

1,000 m² of special exhibition space in the basement of the new building, supplemented by about 500 m² for a new exhibition format called “city-lab exhibitions” on the top floor. In the old buildings, 240 m² will be devoted to the children’s museum, and an additional 40 m² for changing presentations within the new permanent exhibition “Collectors and Donors of Frankfurt”. All in all, there will be almost 1,800 m² for temporary exhibitions and 4,200 m² for permanent exhibitions.

The renewal will affect not only the museum’s spaces but also its focus and approaches, transforming the museum from a specialised historical museum into an actual city museum. It aims to become a centre of information, reflection and discussion about Frankfurt, offering the multi-faceted explanations and backgrounds of the city’s past as a frame of reference. As a forum for the important topics concerning municipal society, it will contribute to the process by which that society comes to an understanding of its present and future. With its collections, exhibitions and events, the museum will place as much emphasis on reacting to the pre-existing views of historical processes as it does to raising questions about the past and the future.

In doing so, the museum proceeds on the assumption that every one of the city’s 700,000 residents is an expert on Frankfurt and invites them to share their expertise at the new Historisches Museum. To this end, the means are being created for a new participatory exhibition series called the “City Lab”. Here, with the participation of various groups and initiatives of the local society, exhibitions on changing subjects will be developed. These subjects will not be determined by the museum, but either proposed directly by the groups themselves or worked out jointly. The museum’s thematic spectrum will thus be expanded to include the urban society’s knowledge and experiences of its own city.

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IMAG. 5.63 — History Museum Frankfurt, plans of the new museum. Lederer Ragnarsdóttir Oei architects, LRO, Stuttgart.

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IMAG. 5.64 — History Museum Frankfurt. Section of the new museum.
IMAG. 5.65 — Detail of the exhibition layout for the section “Frankfurt Now!”
IMAG. 5.66 — 3D computer model of the area devoted to the display of the city’s model.
and collections, while the exhibitions of the new museum will be focused on the city itself. These exhibitions will be designed according to the above mentioned context and approaches, and put together in collaboration with different scenographers who have been engaged to create diverse environments and establish a variety of styles in the museum. (The designers for the permanent exhibition on the city's history “Frankfurt Once?” are Gillmann and Schneeg, who already designed the renewed exhibition in the old museum's buildings, and while the Kossmann DeJong studio will be responsible for the introductory installations at the entry level and the large space dedicated to the present day city “Frankfurt Now”).

The courtyard level beneath the museum square will receive visitors with two installations – the “Frankfurt Harbour” and the “Frankfurt Models”. The “Frankfurt Harbour” is an impressive archaeological find in the grounds between the old and new buildings, dating back to the late 12th/early 14th centuries. Visitors can see the archaeological remains and explore their history and meaning with several digital devices. The second installation will reflect on the identity of Frankfurt, questioning what kind of city it is: here, eight images of Frankfurt will be presented in the form of artistic town models, selected by the audience and put in place by an industrial robot in the cellar.

In the big exhibition house, temporary exhibitions will be presented on 1,000 square meters of the courtyard level. On the first and second upper levels, comprising a total of 2,000 square meters, the permanent historical exhibition “Frankfurt Once?” will spread out in four thematic sections – “Townscapes”, “Citizens’ Town”, “Money Town” and “World Town” – rather than presenting the city’s history chronologically, while the entire double-gabled attic floor will be devoted to the exhibition “Frankfurt Now”, presenting contemporary Frankfurt and its future issues, and to the “City Lab” space that will host temporary exhibitions based on the museum collection and created with the participation of local residents. With its large panorama window and 84 additional windows, the top floor will also offer a spectacular view of the town.

Overall, this important museum transformation is based on the belief that, as a contemporary city museum, it should tell not only the city’s history, but also explain the present and discusses the future of the city. It should also help the citizens and guests to read the city; it presents itself as the place for the urban themes of Frankfurt, as a kind of city “laboratory” or city “forum” and thus involves its visitors actively. In this sense, the renewed Historisches Museum aims to become a 21st century “universal museum” for the city of Frankfurt.

Jan Gerchow

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REFERENCES


An online-publication of the museum database is in preparation for 2015/16; so far the museum-website www.historisches-museum-frankfurt.de (in English and in German) with a summary description of the collections, gives basic information. Here is also available a list of publications of the museums, comprising exhibition and collection-catalogues.
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MeLa* - European Museums in an age of migrations

Research Fields:

RF01: Museums & Identity in History and Contemporaneity
examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

RF02: Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernity and Museum Practices
transforms the question of memory into an unfolding cultural and historical problematic, in order to promote new critical and practical perspectives.

RF03: Network of Museums, Libraries and Public Cultural Institutions
investigates coordination strategies between museums, libraries and public cultural institutions in relation to European cultural and scientific heritage, migration and integration.

RF04: Curatorial and Artistic Research
explores the work of artists and curators on and with issues of migration, as well as the role of museums and galleries exhibiting this work and disseminating knowledge.

RF05: Exhibition Design, Technology of Representation and Experimental Actions
investigates and experiments innovative communication tools, ICT potentialities, user centred approaches, and the role of architecture and design for the contemporary museum.

RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums
fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

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