

ICMM, Esbjerg, October 2009

Jørgen Selmer

The new Danish Maritime Museum

The new Danish Maritime Museum opens to the public in 2012. The intention of the Museum is to add a global perspective to the country's civil maritime activities and to reach out to new groups of visitors.

The vision for the Museum involves two main thrusts: one is to carry out the main functions of a museum, and the other is to act as an ambassador for the maritime industry and profession, with its wide range of activities that are conducted far away from Denmark and are largely unknown to most Danes.

The Museum will mirror Denmark's historical and contemporary role as one of the world's leading maritime nations. It will be placed in a unique building that has been designed by the company of BIG Architects, and it will be placed below ground level in and around the dry dock of an old shipyard.

The new museum wants to reach out to new groups of visitors who when they leave, will have a feeling of fascination, and new knowledge gained in a serious and entertaining manner.

The Dutch exhibition architects Kossmann.dejong will be in charge of the design of the new exhibitions. In recent years, Kossmann.dejong's exhibitions have been particularly commended for their rich use of pictures and exciting designs, and for their ability to attract new audiences who are not accustomed to museums.

Since its foundation in 1915, the Danish Maritime Museum has been located at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore. This fine building, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List, is, however, not the ideal setting for modern museum operations, and a potential relocation of the Museum had been discussed for years. The discussion culminated in 2003 when a report from the Danish Heritage Agency on the future of the Danish national museums, proposed moving the Danish Maritime Museum to Esbjerg and merging it with the Fisheries and Maritime Museum in order to create a strong and united maritime museum.

This idea was unpopular to many. The Museum's subject field and collections are national and, for a major part, related to the Copenhagen area where the majority of shipping companies have their headquarters. As a result, a major study was implemented with the support of the Danish Shipowners' Association, and the study indicated potential locations in the metropolitan area. The debate reached a positive conclusion in the autumn of 2005 with a decision that the new museum should maintain its historical attachment to Elsinore and Kronborg at the approaches to the Sound, and through this to the Baltic Sea. The Museum will be placed in Dock 1 of the former Elsinore Shipyard between Kronborg and Elsinore's future main library and cultural centre in the old yard buildings.

The choice of location created the basis to continue a comprehensive fundraising effort, an architectural competition and clarification of the major project.

It was clear that the project was not only about relocation to a new building, but also about another weighting of the Museum's research and information activities, so that the present time and contemporary maritime trade would take a more central place. It was also a requirement that the Museum should be designed and operated so that it would attract not only a larger number of visitors, but also a much broader user group with emphasis on young people and both sexes.

A significant asset for the Museum and its exhibitions will be the creation of unique architecture on the basis of the old dry dock from 1953 which was previously an important part of Elsinore Shipyard.

In the book *"Yes is more – an archicomic on architectural evolution"*, the architect, Bjarke Ingels, describes the thought the architects had when, in connection with the architectural competition in 2007, they visited the abandoned dock that had been selected to accommodate the new museum. In order to maintain an open vista towards Kronborg, the developers wanted an underground maritime museum, close to the sea but without a sea view. It could easily become an extremely dull cellar if they simply covered the dock area and used it as a museum. Instead, BIG won the competition for their proposal to build the museum around the dock and let the dock area remain an open space as an impressive industrial monument in the original raw concrete. For this purpose they sketched three bridges across the dock. The surface/roof of the bridges along with the bottom of the dock will be integrated into Elsinore's urban space, while the lower floors of the bridges will be part of the Museum and provide exciting passages and areas, with lots of light on both sides. All visitors to Kronborg Castle will pass closely by the museum in the dock. The bridges will thus offer a view down into the dock and through the windows to the exhibitions and events in the museum halls, and to large exhibits placed outside at the bottom of the dock – and perhaps a basin for model ships.

The walk around the exhibitions will be on a slightly sloping floor that almost unnoticeably takes the visitors around the building and down to the level of the dock floor at the same time as the floor-to-ceiling height increases. BIG describes this with a reference to the myth about Columbus who, on discovering America in 1492, found that even though the earth seemed flat, it still arched slightly. Without feeling it, the earth forms a circle if you travel far enough!

We are living in a period when everybody is overwhelmed by a sophisticated flow of information that comes through numerous television channels and the Internet, right into people's living rooms, on the train and on mobile telephones; many can afford to travel around the world, to sail and to turn to the big old and new ships that cater for the tourist flows; and the attractions offered to children and adults can fill out much more free time than the individual can ever mobilise. Why then build a museum? This form of communication had its first main popular breakthrough 125 years ago and in the modern age depends on people's willingness to be transported to a certain place to receive information they could perhaps have obtained even more efficiently at home in front of a screen.

An essential part of the answer lies in the strength of communication that is inherent in an original exhibit. Released in the right way, this strength can make the exhibit interact with the museum visitor. The museum introduces the visitor to objects that do not only tell history but which are part of history. It is a unique feature that we must cultivate.

Another part of the answer is in the positive social experience that a visit to an attractive building with relatives or friends may be. Together museum-goers can experience a world that is entirely different to the one they see on the screen, or in their everyday life in the real world.

Despite the museum information efforts of several generations, the challenge is to reduce the distance between the messages and intentions of the museums on the one hand, and the interest and benefit of the public on the other. We often miss each other's points – either due to overly specialised language and exaggerated decoration, or unnecessary popularisation.

Serious professionalism – the fact that the museum has something it wants to convey – a meaningful experience – something that touches on our attitudes and emotions – a need for recreation and a non-committal experience! All this must interact in the good museum.

It seems natural that as a national maritime museum, the Museum should appeal to a broad field of target groups. Its expression should be inviting and not leave out any user groups. This goal is not easy to meet. But in order to achieve this, the Museum has found the Dutch exhibition architects Kossmann.dejong, whose exhibitions involve several layers of experience.

We are working to develop an exhibition concept in which the various layers involve the public in different ways. This concept must work as a physical and virtual entity but, at the same time, each layer must be an experience in itself. It is up to the user how much he or she wants to experience and in what order.

If a museum is to reach a broad public, it is necessary to catch where people are in their perceptions and feelings in relation to the maritime sphere. From that starting point, we must arouse their curiosity to know more. The result should preferably be that the Museum gives as many people as possible an understanding and lasting interest in maritime Denmark.

In exhibition planning our efforts are to touch on the visitors' feelings with a comprehensive and extensive use of pictures, film, decorations, light, sound, and smells that - without the use of words and with an absolute minimum of text along with the original museum objects - tells visitors from all over the world and of all ages that Danish shipping across the globe and at all times has been vital for all Danes.

Curiosity will be aroused with a broad range of interactive installations inviting visitors to do, try, wonder and succeed in testing their strengths against nature, navigation, ship construction, cargo and logistics.

An interest in knowing more is stimulated through meeting history and the contemporary maritime world as told through the "little" story: The intimate personal narrative reiterated by living people or through discoveries in the archives, and conveyed along with the original objects, pictures, letters, films and sound tracks in the exhibitions as well as in the exhibition's personal digital information system that comes with the admission ticket.

Feelings, curiosity, an urge to know more and continued interest can be satisfied in depth in the web-based part of the exhibition on the Museum's homepage where more stories, pictures and comprehensive accounts together with links from the entire maritime world constitute a nearly bottomless treasure box.

In the museum's knowledge centre, with its archive and library, staff will be prepared to offer further help and guidance. It will also be possible to book courses, guided tours and events.

It will be the largest and most comprehensive historical exhibition of modern times to be built up over the next few years.

In contrast to agriculture and industry, the important history of Denmark's civilian maritime trade has not been gathered in one comprehensive exhibition anywhere else.

The subthemes of the exhibition take their departure in the contemporary era and move globally and across all periods. They take a bearing of fundamental factors in connection with the shipping trade and the maritime professions: Why do we sail? (cargo and passenger transport) How do we find the way? (navigation) How do we build ships? What is life at sea like and what pleasures and dangers does it provide? What does the shipping business mean for the country's economy and for your and my life?

The basic exhibitions will include some 2,500 m² distributed across 300 metres around the dock. The tour will offer great diversity thanks to the architecture, but will be even more exciting and dramatic since each exhibition theme will have its own form of expression, aesthetic and communication technique that will continue to stimulate the senses of visitors.

Similar to the approaches to the exhibitions, the stories have not yet been finalised and defined, but we will approach them in a way so that the choice of stories strengthens the general goals we have for experiences for the general public, so that the choice of exhibition forms strengthens the experience of the stories we want to tell.

Main stories

As the national maritime museum, the Museum must accommodate the entire civilian maritime history from the middle ages to the present time. We have, however, chosen initially to illustrate a number of general themes with the working titles: "Longing for the sea", "Life of a sailor", "Goods", "Navigation", "In the shadow of war", "The last journey" and "Shipbuilding".

The themes are not built up chronologically, but what they do have in common is that they delve down into a long history and particularly use elements from more recent history and the present time. In this way we can signal that the basis of any theme is ourselves and the world of today. The Museum explains the maritime world of today and puts it into perspective.

By not telling the whole maritime history in the exhibitions, but only selected parts of various weight, we achieve freshness and stringency in the stories that are recounted. Unlike other national museums, we will not be weighted down by having to include everything, since this involves the risk of quickly losing focus and tiring the Museum's visitors.

This means that we are working with a selection of themes and not a comprehensive chronological representation. Chronology is, however, an important orientation factor for many museum-goers. The chronology of the overall maritime history will therefore be the backbone in the deeper museum layers, particularly on the homepage. We are also working on ideas for a maritime history timeline, which in its entirety and in excerpts can be repeated several places during a tour through the building.

The following are suggestions for a tour in the new basic exhibitions with reservations for the changes that are unavoidable once the exhibition project takes off further:

Introduction: Longing for the sea

After arriving at the Museum the visitor goes through a “rite of passage” as an introduction to the exhibition: First the visitors pass through a foggy gate through which they can just barely see pictures moving in the fog. On the other side of the gate, lighthouses light up the walls with beautiful pictures from maritime history, pictures composed to tell stories without words. This evocative entrance makes the visitors leave their everyday life and step into the wonderful universe of maritime history.

Life of a sailor

This theme is about life at sea and on land. The man – the sailor – is in focus. The theme tells about the life of a sailor as it is expressed in film, music, literature and fashion, and as it really is on board a ship.

Goods

Under the theme “Goods”, the shipping business in the past 600 years is being studied through the ships’ cargos. From luxury products from China in the 18th century to mass-produced goods in containers in the 21st century!

The whole world in your shopping bag

The theme is globalisation. The exhibition starts with something people can relate to: the general consumption of clothes, electronics, foods and the suchlike. By explaining where the products come from, how they are produced, perhaps with components from different parts of the world, and how they reach the consumer, the exhibition is thought as an eye-opener in the immense importance that the Danish shipping industry has for our modern lives.

Containers

The container revolutionised the shipping industry and world trade. This exhibition shows how the container system works and lets the public try to load a ship with containers in a model setup.

The passage to China

The passage to China is about the luxury goods that were transported from the Far East to Denmark already from the 17th century. The exhibition shows the Museum’s highly valuable collection of objects from the China trade in the 18th century.

Slavery

The grimmest cargo that has yet been carried by Danish ships was people caught in Africa with the prospect of a short and hard life as slaves on sugar plantations in the Danish West Indies. In this theme we try to put a name and a face to a few of these people and provide an insight into the circumstances under which they were transported.

Bulk cargo

This exhibition illustrates the type of goods called bulk cargo such as timber, grain and coal and their transportation by ship from the medieval Cogs to the giant oil tankers of our time. The exhibition shows how the world has slowly become dependent on the transports of the large ships – from fleet supplies during the Napoleonic Wars to the importance of oil tankers for the world economy.

Navigation

In this section of the exhibition, visitors are confronted with the challenges that sailors of all times have had to overcome. From navigation with lead and compass, from sextants and chronometers to radars and GPS! Using comprehensive light and sound effects, the section gives a sense of the changing moods of the sea – from furious to quiet. The goal is an embracing feeling of elements and myths. The section ends with a comprehensive showcase presenting the Museum's large and superior collection of navigational instruments.

In the shadow of war

The two world wars also played a major role for the ordinary sailor in the merchant fleet.

The last journey

Ships end their lives as scrap on beaches in India, as wrecks on the bottom of the sea, or as fill-ups in harbours. Shipwreck is the ill-fated companion of sailing. In this section we find ourselves under water among wrecks and human fates, but also among the systematic ship breaking and reuse of our time.

Ship building

Through a series of hands-on activities this exhibition gives the public an opportunity to understand the physics behind a ship. It tells the story of Danish shipbuilding which, at its peak, was among the leading shipbuilding industries in the world. The exhibition tells of the technology and people who built the ships.

The ship wall

The Danish Maritime Museum owns one of the world's finest collections of ship models. The most beautiful models will be shown on a giant glass wall which is an element in the architecture of the building. It will display models from the oldest ages to the most modern ships.

The globe

After the tour of the basic exhibition, visitors are introduced to the final large interactive element which is Danish shipping across the world. On the wall at the exit staircase, a large "hemisphere" will be placed. A world map will be projected onto it showing the positions of all Danish ships in real time. The globe can also be used to show sailing routes, voyages of discovery, the consequences of global warming etc.

The exhibitions – events for businesses and organisations

The Museum must be able to offer a variety of events for businesses, private individuals and public organisations. These functions will be catered for in the building through exciting and unconventional conference rooms in the area in the bridge across the dock, and in a large room at the dock bow and in the café. The exhibition area itself also constitutes a major asset. The rooms under the other bridges can be used for large exhibitions or receptions, and there are plans to offer the business community special events in the exhibitions. The exhibition concept with the "show controlling system" that controls all the building's many projections on walls and other places makes it possible to "change films" for instance in the Navigation Exhibition and let the relevant customer's requests for pictures on the walls be included as an element in the event. Similarly, special exhibits and pictures can be displayed during specific events,

combined with the participation of the museum staff who can, for instance, give welcome introductions or lectures.

The idea is also to use the Museum's interactive installations and instruction programme for teambuilding events or as accompanying programmes for business conferences and the suchlike.

The unique architecture, the exciting interactive exhibitions and the possibility of flexibility and customised events with a maritime angle will be the Museum's best competitive parameter in the conference market.

Exhibitions and educational institutions

On principle, all sections of the basic exhibitions will, in terms of physical appearance and information effort, be designed so that they are suited for educational purposes.

All courses will include dialogue-based instruction in the Museum's classroom, use of interactive learning installations and a presentation of original objects in the exhibition. Some of the courses may involve role plays and costumes, or games that provide an insight into the economic interaction of the world.

The maritime educations

A significant target group for the new Maritime Museum will be students in the country's maritime studies. The new Maritime Museum will contribute in giving future employees in the shipping industry a strengthened professional identity and awareness of the historical and social significance of their profession.

Students in the maritime education programmes are highly practice-oriented, and the programmes do not place any particular emphasis on the history of the Danish maritime sector. The new Maritime Museum will offer introductions to first-year students aimed at giving them an understanding of the traditions that their coming professions are based on, and the significance of the shipping business for our society, both in an historic and a contemporary perspective. The maritime educations are highly diverse and so are the students. As a result, the courses will be individually designed to the various programmes, putting the shipping business in the perspective of each individual profession – from the shipbuilding apprentice to the shipping student.

Schools

Another target group is elementary and high schools in which curriculums are currently divided up according to clear academic requirements. As a consequence, a classroom will be specially designed and the new exhibitions developed so that they fit into the academic requirements. This means that the courses can be used directly by the teachers as part of the curriculums in subjects such as history, nature and technology, social science and the suchlike.

The chosen exhibition concept also makes the Museum attractive for pupils whose strength is in the practical rather than at the academic level. The concept accordingly meets one of the new requirements in education.

Special exhibition profiles

The Museum will budget for one or two larger special annual exhibitions.

- Externally produced special exhibitions and activities such as a presentation of educational options, exhibitions from individual companies in the maritime sectors for instance on new technological opportunities, or special exhibitions from other maritime museums.
- The Museum's own productions, for instance special exhibitions relating to popular topics and introducing an historic perspective. One of the first themes for a special exhibition will be contemporary and historical piracy. The Museum is already in the process of collecting objects and knowledge for this theme. Other themes in the melting pot include environmental impacts, colonial history, and ferry traffic.

Exhibitions and architecture will support each other. The BIG architects have created a varied and dramatic progression of rooms that Kossmann.dejong uses in the dramaturgy of the exhibitions. The idea of Kossmann.dejong for an exhibition structure is not that elements are moved into the house without consideration for the architecture, but that elements and effects including projections directly on the walls of the house benefit from, and emphasise the architecture of the building.

Finally, we hope that, after the opening of the Museum, the exhibitions can be supplemented by the old stone pitched Dock 2 in front of the Culture Yard as a harbour for veteran ships. We can hopefully establish this in the years following the opening of the new Museum. Exploration of specific ships has already started.

The goal:

A museum which, in all the layers of its informative efforts, involves the users by touching them wherever they are, irrespective of interests and life phase, and with the help of the Museum letting them explore the maritime world and embark on a voyage in time and space that, in the completely new Museum around the dock, is unparalleled anywhere in the world.