

# The contemporary, the city and the city-museum

*Jacques Börger*

Indeed, the museum as such is working on a fundamental transformation. At least; the so-called (historical) city-museums. They are confronted with an urban population which seems to be only interested in the history of their own lifetime or does not see any reason to visit a city-museum at all.

The main question a city-museum has to ask these days, and what ought to motivate it, is: in what way can we be relevant to the contemporary city dweller? And the quick answer to this issue raised in the paper is: with the help of past and present cultural heritage, the city-museum has to make it possible for the citizen to 'acquire the city' and to feel comfortable with the urban processes. This answer implies that the present must be the point of departure; the past must be subservient to it. This leads to the conclusion of the thesis of the paper that the city-museum must collect the contemporary.

## The Contemporary

Reijnders is a little vague on a definition of what is meant by the idea of the contemporary. At the outset, naturally the first question is: when does contemporary history begin?

I think the contemporary must not be restricted to the most recent years; the here and now. I hope we can agree that present-day history starts in the sixties and maybe we can take the year 1960 as a clear starting point; the year the young John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States and the whole western world felt that something new was coming up.

Concerning the historical city-museum a really new period started in that decade. We observed the rise of a pluriform pop culture and the mingling of High Culture with the culture of daily life. We saw mass consumption of the telephone, the automobile and the TV. We observed the emergence of the affluent society. Our world became flooded with objects, stories, artists and, from the 80s onwards, also with a whole new heritage of digital modes of expression. For the museum it was inescapable to collect the object of 'ordinary people' as the article mentioned.

If we want to collect this enormous heritage from 1960 until the present, where and how to begin?

Take for example the television, one of the icon-objects of our time which must of course become part of our collection. But what are we going to collect? Only the very first apparatus? Or also a few later models? Black & white, smaller models, the remote control, the antenna, the cable of cable TV which lead to an overload of channels, the flatscreen. And don't we have to collect also a compilation of the programmes which were broadcasted over the last 50 years. Do we have to collect images and stories of how the family and the individual used to use the TV: from a central place in the living room to lying in bed or sitting in front of the computer. And what about videos and dvds? And what about the role screens play in our present lives. Nowadays everywhere in the city you can find screens that inform you, attract you, offer fun and entertainment. Let's momentarily end this 'urban TV collection story' with the big screens on squares and boulevards where thousands of people congregate to watch a football match, thus making public space semi-private (e.g. the Museum Square in Amsterdam). Should we collect all these elements but divide them across different museums? But then, what about the coherence of the story and the 'grand narrative' that Reijnders finds necessary.

Furthermore, is the TV or screen a subject which is interesting enough for the people to pay a visit to the municipal museum? This is the third and most important issue Reijnders raises, but I have to admit that we still cannot answer these questions satisfactorily. The process of finding answers, however, will bring us to the limits of the idea of what we traditionally call a museum; an institution which preserves, collects and presents the cultural heritage of our society.

## The City

When we look at present-day city life, is it still possible to create a shared and grand story of the contemporary city? In contrast to Reijnders I think that the 'tribal dimension' of the modern city is not the main problem. Or at least: it is not a new problem. This dimension has a long history. For example, in 17th century Rotterdam people from the centre of town regarded people from other neighbourhoods as enemies with whom one should relate as little as possible.

In order to share the contemporary city the main problem is, in my opinion, how much faster city life has become and the consequences this entails. Apart from rendering city life very transitory, it is dividing the population in 'static people' and 'dynamic people'.

Static people stick to their own neighbourhood, hardly ever venture beyond its borders and are oriented towards the past and their own interpretation of it. Everything should stay the same as it ever was. Dynamic people use the whole city as their habitat – with a strong focus on the city centre – and are always

planning for the future. Static people have a small-town morality; dynamic people a metropolitan worldview. The problem and often times frustrating factor for static people is the unstoppable spread of the urban lifestyle. The dynamic city is a suppressive force vis-à-vis life in the neighbourhoods and it seems that the inhabitants of the city are no longer able to share a common interpretation of the past and the historical process.

The separation of lifestyles and worldviews is intensified by the increasing number of migrants across the city, especially migrants with a non-western background. I disagree with Reijnders when it is stated that we are too fixated on migrant cultures. The main issue relevant to city life is that the migrant communities adhere to a fundamentally different lifestyle and make use of the city in novel ways which at times are far removed from what we are familiar with. Therefore, we have to pay extra attention to this process. Aside from that, the migrant groups are becoming more and more part of the contemporary history of the city and they are trying to find ways to participate in the sharing of knowledge, and in giving meaning and direction to the city. It ought to be a priority of the city-museum to incorporate this.

## The City-museum

Regarding these developments and keeping the question of relevance in mind, the main function for the city-museum seems to be to create a shared knowledge of and view on the process of urban life together with its inhabitants this is not the same as creating a grand narrative. Visitors can discover the meaning of urban life by looking at the relationship between the present, the past and the future. The municipal museum must offer its visitors a way of experiencing the city and 'reading its signs'.

This should not take place inside the museum building as such, but rather in a variety of places spread throughout the city. The new city-museum is a kind of museological presentation using the city itself as its exhibition-room. By working in this manner the museum can also succeed in including 'static people' into the dynamic history of their city.

Finding an answer to the question of how to collect and present the contemporary seems to be a task which we as museum professionals can and may not do alone. We need the help of other people who have experienced life in their city. Collection and presentation must take place in close cooperation with our contemporaries. With their participation we can try to find a meaningful selection of themes, contexts, images and objects.

In addition to the issues raised in 'Collecting the Contemporary', I also think that a different attitude towards history is essential when collecting the contemporary. We should not regard the past as a closed book, the sixties as a station we have passed and which can only be thought about in nostalgic terms. Rather, we

ought to think of the past as still present. We ought to display history as a dynamic process and ourselves as playing a part in it. We must see our present first of all as something which is only beginning to take form and we have to look for objects, images and contexts which can make this formation process visible and more important still; we ought to design ways in which to present this heritage as to give meaning and maybe even direction to contemporary city life. As a city museum we have to build a structure of participation which results in a shared knowledge of city life. Creating this structure is more important than collecting thousands of objects with which we hope to display a particular decade, such as the sixties, or a custom, such as watching television, or the emerging function of screens.

Personally I think developing this new socially engaged function of a city-museum will really lead to a fundamental transformation. If you look at the core-business of a museum – collecting, researching and presenting – we will have to think of a new style and method of working where the museum professional will be primarily focused towards the city and its inhabitants, and via networking and communication a kind of overall museological attitude as a dimension of contemporary urban life could be developed.

The city-museum will be first of all an urban mentality which makes use of objects and images to relate the present to the past. The ideal of the authentic object as the distinguishing feature of the museum will change to offering an authentic experience to the visitors/users of the museum. The displays must shed their static character and change into more dynamic timescapes. There ought to be a strong relationship between the presentation inside the museum building – which would give a broad urban view and the route along the historical layers of the city itself, guided by the museum. For the contemporary city-museum the city itself will be the main material, immaterial and mental object to display.

That's what really is motivating the city-museums to 'look beyond their wall and go out in the street searching for contemporariness'.

### **Personalia**

Jacques Börger is Head of the department of Communication & Education of the Historical Museum Rotterdam. He is a historian with an antropological background. Currently he is doing a participation-project on discovering the recent history of people in different neighbourhoods of the city of Rotterdam. He is also working on a new concept for the general history of the city.

Address: Historical Museum Rotterdam, Korte Hoogstraat 31, 3011 GK Rotterdam, the Netherlands