

# Anmeldelser / Reviews

## EXHIBITIONS

### **Göteborgs Födelse (The Birth of Gothenburg). Permanent Exhibition, Gothenburg City Museum, Gothenburg, Sweden**

Early 2017 was somewhat hectic for me. It marked a significant turning point in my life, namely moving to Gothenburg to start my doctoral studies. Like most doctoral applicants, I had devised a proposal, which despite some deviations, I have more or less stuck to. Still, it was only upon my first visit to the then newly inaugurated *Göteborgs Födelse* exhibition at Gothenburg City Museum that I was able to comprehend the material I intended to work with fully. It marked the start of an ongoing relationship, one which continually develops with every moment of contemplation; such is the life of a doctoral student. I was intrigued by the question how, and why, certain events, actors and activities were deemed to exemplify Gothenburg's historic urban environment; for whom should this story be of interest, and what had they to gain from it?

Rather than an autobiographical account, however, this is a review of the exhibition. Conceptually, this is an exhibition, not only aiming to fossilise an account of the city's genesis into public narrative but also an exploration of the "first generations of Gothenburgers" (Sandén 2017:7). In many ways, this has the hallmarks of an Authorised Heritage Debate (Smith 2006), but on closer inspection that

isn't necessarily the case. The city museum has a strong track record for critically approaching temporary exhibitions, peaking with the award of Exhibition of the Year in 2014 for their account of the lives of Roma populations in the city. In this case, *Göteborgs Födelse* represents a turn towards a critical museology for the museum's permanent exhibitions. While some of the critical approaches are more apparent, particularly in building awareness of the livelihoods of a broader spectrum of the historical society, this review also aims to clarify aspects that may be less apparent, such as the participatory nature of the exhibition's design.

Furthermore, in 2021 the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the city will be celebrated, preoccupying seemingly all institutions and organisation on a city-wide scale. The municipality has marked the City Museum as a "clear start and home base for the historical element of anniversary preparations" (Göteborg & Co 2017: 23), creating the unambiguous position that both *Göteborgs Födelse* and the urban space of the past are essential elements in the upcoming anniversary.

## **GOTHENBURG: THE FOUNDATIONS**

Enshrining the inception or foundation of a city, even one as comparatively young as Gothenburg, as an objectified space of collective identity, is commonly represented among governments and states. This not only aids the formulation of city identity and placemaking but also regularly merits

commercial value within the sphere of tourism. Through the negotiation of a sense of *longue durée* - a means of deriving a contemporary set of values from the city's foundation, there is a vague, but unmistakably evident genius loci within the centre of the city. This represents the everyday connections to the city's past through cues in the historic built environment. Thus, the decision to make the exhibition the heart of the celebration renders the role of the historic city as a 'first-place' (Santos 2017) in the city's identity all the more veritable.

The first place as performative spatiality and the associated heritage affect that Gothenburgers draw from the historic city centre, is not necessarily the same as the temporally, or chronologically first settlement associated with the geographic area. In many places, this primarily involves prehistoric settlement, though the direct influence on contemporary urban values is variable and seldom reaches beyond the landscape characteristics and settlement location. In Gothenburg's case, however, there are several intermediaries, such as the late medieval town of *Nya Lödöse*, the town of *Älvsborg* with the adjacent fortress of *Gamla Älvsborg*, as well as a short-lived predecessor to Gothenburg built by Karl IX on Hisingen in 1603. It is with these intermediaries that the exhibition begins.

Under the heading "a drama in three acts", the exhibition is demarcated into three sections, each with a specific theme: "Nya Lödöse 1473–1621"; "Göteborgs födelse 1621" and "Göteborg 1698". The visitor is then greeted with a short animation characterising the late medieval and early modern political and historical contexts resulting from the plague, *Kalmarunionen*, herring shortages and numerous outbreaks of war, that culminated with Gothenburg's establishment.

## NYA LÖDÖSE 1473–1621

We then begin with the historiography of *Nya Lödöse*, a story primarily informed by a series of recent and exhaustive excavations in the *Gamlestaden* area of the city (Cornell & Rosén 2018a), as well as several early twentieth-century interventions. Thematically, the visitor is informed that the story is one of fear, mainly of war and sickness, and this tension between survival and extinction is widely present throughout this section. In principle, the exhibition is intended to be understood through the gaze of a young girl, and her responses to the historical context around her. This has discernible consequences for the content: the Thirty Years War and the departure for New Sweden are largely absent, as it was deemed not to impact the world view of this character directly.

The first object and focal point of the exhibition is linked to this concept, focusing upon an engraved silver heart locket recovered from a grave context identified in the earlier excavations. The intention is that the object represents the heart of the city, but also it is perhaps implicit that the young girl whose perspective shapes our journey is the putative owner of the locket. The locket itself has been on display previously, but within a larger collection which was felt to lessen its impact. In this exhibition, however, it has been isolated as a 'hero object', drawing the audiences entire focus. The visitor's imagination is called upon to unlock "the secret of the heart", provoking interest from the sense of mystery rather than the complete comprehension of the object. This complements the pan-European research effort to source the locket's provenance well. The audio-accompaniment of a Poe-esque beating heart is slightly macabre, however.

The central theme of this component of the

122 exhibition is the difficulties of balancing the prosaicness of everyday life with the disruption of political unrest in *Nya Lödöse*. The exhibition elucidates upon the periodic attacks on the settlement warranting the evacuation of the population for long and short periods (Cornell *et al.* 2018:193). This aspect of the exhibition is paralleled with the experiences of the present citizens; the notion of packing up one's livelihood in a chest and fleeing from war and strife is one shared by numerous migrants throughout the city, imbuing the exhibition with a far greater sense of proximity and immediacy.

Much of the exhibition was shaped by workshops with a test group of teenagers from a mixed area school in the city. While the collaboration with community groups for exhibitions such as "We Are Roma" was well documented, this is the first time such an exercise has been undertaken for the museum's permanent exhibitions. The result was the complete transformation of the previous seventeenth-century displays; making emotional affect the objective, rather than absoluteness, to captivate a teenage audience. The results were significantly manifested in the thematic approaches, object selection and the depth and precision of the accompanying texts.

It is the test group that we have to thank for the display of late medieval weaponry. Perhaps this may not add a great deal to the narrative to the adult visitor, though having spent my childhood regularly roaming the halls of the Royal Armouries in Leeds, I can undoubtedly relate to its inclusion. The selection of objects, in general, is sufficient, and the 'hero object' model serves the narrative thread well – in particular, highlighting the poor living conditions in *Nya Lödöse*. When combined with the scenography aesthetic envisioned

by Kistone (2020), the consultants on the exhibition, the curated narrative is allowed to flow without being hampered by excessive text or object focus. In some cases, such as the juxtaposition of the statues of the Virgin Mary, St. Bridget (both deemed to be a better fit for the world view of a young girl than a Jesus figure) and the Archangel Michael with the squalor and sickness present in the settlement, the result is great empathy and serenity.

### GÖTEBORGS FÖDELSE 1621

Next follows a departure from the main narrative thread, showing how the plans and dreams for the city of Gothenburg became a reality. It begins with a more theoretical installation comparing More's *Utopia* with the planning of the city (fig. 1). Whilst the Utopian connections were not Swedish, and as Cornell *et al.* (2018:188) point out these connections were generally not Early Modern in provenance but the product of twentieth-century architectural theorisation, the exhibition's conflation of utopic values and the grid systems of the renaissance concept of the *Città Ideale* create a neat theoretical representation of the planning of the city. The defensibility and symmetry of the fortification is particularly well illustrated by the high-resolution scans of the original technical drawings of the city, commissioned from *Krigsarkivet* by the museum. Here, Gothenburg is presented as a product of the Dutch school of architectural development, whose inspiration presumably provides the link to the Italian renaissance ideal.

From the plans of the city, we are led through to an intended gathering space for pedagogical presentations for school groups. Instead, the space is dominated by a film montage created from a digital visualisation of the seventeenth-century city. The digitalisation itself warrants

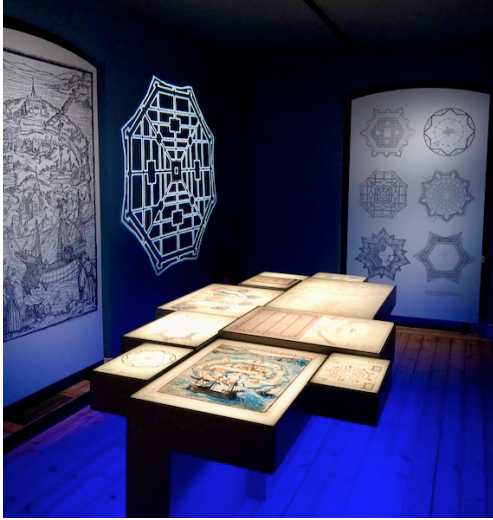


Fig. 1. Urban planning in the 1600's. Photo: William Illsley 2020.

an individual paper so, in this context, I shan't engage with an in-depth analysis of its content or construction.<sup>1</sup> Still, its impact on the narrative element is important.

To begin with, the model itself is not the product of the museum itself, but the municipal tourist board, *Göteborg & Co* and the city planners at *Stadsbyggnadskontoret*. As such, it was not clear from the beginning that it would be included in the exhibition. Moreover, because of this uncertainty, rather than focusing on the developmental stages of the city, we get a short visualisation of the foundations of *Stora Hamnkanalen* and then quickly move to a representation of Gothenburg as a fully-fledged city in 1698. Kistone's recording, representing the fledgling city's multi-ethnic workers building the canal ("Här kommer vattnet!"), no longer aligns with the visualisation. Resultantly, what ought to be the centrepiece of the exhibitions is a little jarring and disjointed.

## GÖTEBORG 1698

From there, we are led through a short passageway, briefly discussing the foundation myths associated with the city, and touching upon the city's multi-national, multi-ethnic character that has endured to this day. This acknowledgement is well in keeping with the museum's general stance on identity formation in the city, though not as overtly as their *Urbanum* installation, for example. The past is then neatly brought into the present in the next room, where the photography of surviving seventeenth-century edifices are presented, both as a testament to the enduring *genius loci* and no doubt inspire further urban exploration.

This space is perhaps the most problematic in the exhibition and demonstrates a short-sightedness in the hypothetical young girl's vision. The issue largely lies with the map of the "World beyond Gothenburg". As a *stapelstad* with the right to foreign trade (Rosén 2017:39), Gothenburg not only formed a military stronghold but was also intended to front the states mercantile interests as the key access point to the West. Due to the thematic reluctance to explore colonialism, the attempt to shoehorn the emerging city's burgeoning internationally into the exhibition fails to analytically address Sweden's approach to extra-local interests and state possessions. Unfortunately, we see a continuation of the neutral stance on colonialism seen in the far less reflective permanent exhibition documenting eighteenth-century Gothenburg and its colonial interests. There is a building momentum, demonstrated by last year's International Biennale for Contemporary Art (GIBCA 2019) to find dedicated space for accessing the historiography of the city's relationship with these colonial affairs. In this



Fig. 2. Deciding my fate in the seventeenth-century. Photo: William Illsley 2020.

instance though, reductive statements on Gold coast forts and American settlements fail to redress state-sponsored injustices and provide little added value in narrative terms for the exhibition.

Positively, through the wheel of fortune in the same space (fig. 2), a simple analogue mechanism forgoing the previous room's

experiment with digitality, allows fate to decide a proposed livelihood and lifestyle for the visitor to experience in seventeenth-century Gothenburg. The Wheel parallels the lifestyles of the powerful few to the comparably miserable majority as a means of demonstrating the social injustices of the time. Happily, I landed on 'Master Cobbler'

and would have been able to live a life of status. This route begins with a tale of what might be deemed an immigration success story, focusing on the life of Rutger Von Ascheberg, a Latvian military officer who rose to the position of Governor-General Gothenburg, Bohuslän and Dalsland. While this plays worryingly close to the 'the Good Immigrant' concept (Shukla & Suleyman 2019) we sadly bear witness to today, the intention is simply to show that wealth overcame all boundaries in the embryonic city.

Contrasted with the lives of the underclasses, it is not difficult to see why. Through the exhibition, we are privy to details regarding the legitimisation of the Swedish Jewry and the Roma, as well as the disenfranchisement of women largely addressed historically only by their gender roles – as wives or daughters. Even the concepts of capital punishment seem faintly beyond the lives of the wealthy, and the exhibition's documented account of the execution of Anna Jönsdotter for the crime of having a stillborn child reads as much to be punishment for poverty as it was for infanticide. While critically impressive, this final encounter with the seventeenth-century city is not without its flaws. Some social aspects, such as sexual repression, are a little tucked away, and some of the information could be made more upfront. Furthermore, while the object/ narrative balance remains consistent, it is perhaps at this point that the visitor craves a little more textual input. What is in most urgent need of redress is the digital stations dotted throughout this stage. On my latest visit, only one was in operation, leaving me feeling a little emptier than I ought to.

### CRITICAL CONCEPTS

Given that the seventeenth-century was for Sweden "an era of technical developments,

socio-economic change and fervent religious activities" as well as a period of violence and the establishment of political legacies (Cornell & Rosén 2018b), it is far from an easy task to encapsulate the essence of the epoch. The test group's negative responses to the previous exhibition focusing on the city's foundation, and its attempt to show all, is perhaps the best testament to this. As far as critical approaches to the complexities and nuances regarding the politics and policies that surrounded the inception of Gothenburg and its first decades as a microcosm of contemporary Sweden, *Göteborgs Födelse* performs rather well. This exhibition draws much-needed attention to the multi-vocality of life in the city. I would hope that in the future the same gaze is cast over the exhibitions focusing on later Early Modern and Industrial periods in the city, particularly in relations to the cities ties to colonial processes.

Spatially, both to Kistone and the museum's credit, the scenography and curated route benefit the narrative immensely. The test group feedback ensures that this is equally apparent to children and teenagers without impacting the general accessibility of the account, which in itself represents a success of participatory museology. Building on this and the multi-cultural nature of the test groups, it is clear there is an attempt to meet the needs of a city as socially diverse as Gothenburg. It may not be referenced by the museum in this context, but the migratory turn in museology called for by Johansson & Bevelander's recent compilation (2017) is being met here. While some issues ought not to be overlooked, particularly in regards to Gothenburg's role in Swedish colonial discourse, this is generally favourable and recommended to Gothenburgers and visitors of all backgrounds.

## 126 NOTES

1. This review represents the first element of a more comprehensive doctoral case study of the historic environment in the city of Gothenburg and is to be followed up with an analysis of the digital model and an exploration of the networks enrolled in its delivery within the compilation of my thesis.

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