

“Sticking Around”: Re-evaluating migration heritage across the city and through a virtual exhibition – STAM - Ghent city museum

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Eyecatcher E. Braunplein. Photo: Phile Deprez

The industrial heritage of the city, the subject of our 2014 CAMOC conference, should always take care to include the heritage of the industry’s driving forces, its workers. In most (post-)industrial cities in the West, many of these workers were not born in

the city itself, but came from elsewhere. The heritage of these immigrant workers therefore is part and parcel of our cities’ (industrial) heritage and should not be left aside by our city museums. ▶

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Children in the 'Brugse Poort', 1970's.
Photo: Private collection – Amsab-ISG

Many cities and their city museums, however, do not reflect this heritage in their representation of history. This is often due to a lack of reliable historical information about the immigrant populations concerned. In Ghent, this changed in 2013 when a lot of material became available as the result of a book publication and PhD research, dealing with precisely this subject. The STAM- Ghent city museum decided to take this as an opportunity to set up a large-scale project that would pay special attention to the city's migration history. To this end, both the author of the book and the PhD researcher were engaged by the museum for the course of the project. A bit tongue-in-cheek, the project was baptised 'Sticking Around', intended to set a lighter tone than the one commonly found when migration is being dealt with in the media and in politics.

'Sticking Around' was set up as a large-scale project, the main aims of which can be summarised in three points: 1) showing to wider audience the history and heritage of immigrants as an integral part of the city's history and heritage as a whole; 2) showing immigrant citizens and their descendants that the city is interested in their history and encouraging them to become actively involved in the urban heritage sector; 3) impacting on the general public's view on migration, by showing the normality of immigrant life as well as the positive outcomes of immigration.

"Sticking around" was developed as a three-part project. All three parts take place outside the museum. The choice to operate beyond the museum walls was made in order to reach as wide an audience as possible and especially to lower the threshold for those who do not belong to the traditional museum audience.

For the first and most visible part of the project, 35 places that are representative

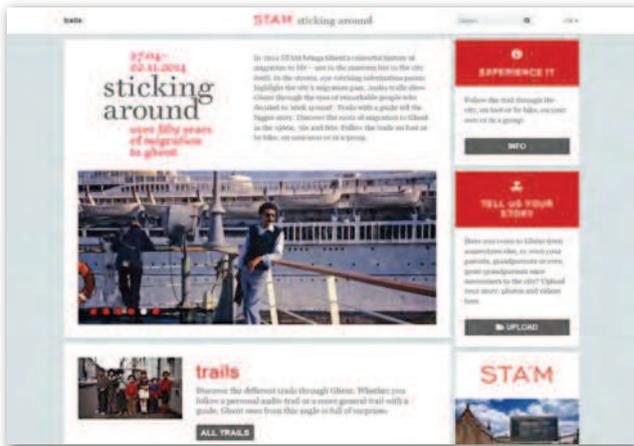
for the city's migration history were singled out and 'dressed up' with so-called 'eye catchers', columns or stickers showing historical pictures and text, to render their invisible history visible. The texts are translated into one, sometimes two immigrant languages, related to the content of what is being told. Reference is made to the project-website through the indication of a web-address and a QR-code, which brings you directly to the homepage of the site.

The second part of the project is the city-tours. On the one hand, visitors can opt for one of two guided tours, that embed the individual stories of the 'eye catchers' into a larger historical framework. These guided walks are also offered in languages such as Turkish, Arabic, Spanish and Russian. On the other hand, individual visitors can follow in the footsteps of the immigrants concerned, as they take one of the five audiotours in which first generation immigrants tell their personal stories about the city. These audio-guided tours are available in Dutch as well as in the mother tongue of the immigrants who are their protagonists: Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Moroccan Arabic and English.

The third part of the project is the project website, www.blijvenplakkeningent.be. Here, the project itself is further explained, but more importantly, the website serves as a platform where historical information about migration is gathered and made available to a wider audience. Per country of origin, period and theme, people can look up information, written by historians in a popularising way. The project-part of the website has been translated into eight other languages: English, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, Arabic and West-Flemish, a Dutch dialect. Furthermore, the website does not only inform but actively engages people to contact the museum with their own ▶

Departure on Holiday to Turkey, 1970's.
Photo: Private collection – Amsab-ISG





Screenshot website, www.blijvenplakkeningent.be
Photo: Puresign

stories and send in their own materials, such as pictures, videos, letters, etc.

The project opened to the public on April 27th this year and continues until November 2nd. Although it is too early to draw any final conclusions, some provisional remarks can already be made.

Leaving the museum walls has been good for the visibility of this project. The columns and window-stickers are widely read, both in Dutch and in other languages. Most reactions are positive. We did however have some problems with vandalism, but

this seems to have been random, not aimed specifically at the project.

As to the second part of the project, the tours in the city, there is an important difference between the success of the guided tours and the much lesser interest in the audioguides. One major issue here seems to be the difficulty of communicating the distinction between the guided walks and the audiotours. We have also experienced many individual visitors coming to see 'the exhibition' in the museum, unprepared for the fact that they would have to venture outside instead. Further, for both the audioguides and the guided walks, we have noticed a lack of interest for the multiple languages in which they are offered. Apparently, this part of the project has not yet attracted the immigrant-audience it wanted to attract.

Due to the long run of the project, we still have time to address these issues and to adjust where necessary; but both the positive and the negative aspects of this new experience will prove invaluable, as the museum will certainly see a return of this kind of project in the future. Also, the impact of this project will be longer-lasting than the six months that it is out on the streets. Addressing the city's immigrant past has been an important step for the museum, and the stories and materials that have been uncovered will be integrated into its collection and permanent exhibition.

Across the city for the city: hybrid museum-like experiences beyond the museum institution

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Living in Athens, a city that has been the epicentre of the so-called Greek crisis over the last five years of recession, almost daily made me wonder: what happens when a city undergoes a crisis and a constant challenge for change; what is the role and responsibility of a city museum? what are the lessons we can learn from other civil actors who want to actively take part in the ongoing creative process of a city? Do cities need city museums after all?

The entrance of Greek society into a period of extraordinary turmoil had profound changes in the standard of living and the everyday reality of large segments of the population. This crisis has triggered, however, numerous interesting urban projects developed by diverse social groups who decided to

take action in order to protect the quality of their lives and create urban experiences that have value for them. As a leading member of one of these groups pointed out in an interview "there are so many things that happened in Greece and in Athens over the last few years that the issue of urban self-awareness has been turned wide open. Everything is fitting in and everything is on the game of this new chapter of Athenian life" (Nicholas Nikolaidis from OMADA ASTY, in the newspaper *I Kathimerini*, 23/3/13).

So I decided to look into some of the most interesting participatory projects that relate to the city of Athens but are not part of established city museum practices, in order to trace and define the core elements of these paradigms of good ▶

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