

“World Village Leipzig”? What Museum Activities Reveal About Conflicting Identity Concepts in a Civic Society Between Global Orientation and Small-Town Values

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Abstract: Leipzig, with its famous fairs and renowned international bookprinting and music traditions, is a place which always measures itself against European and global standards but is basically a middle-sized, family-oriented and still surprisingly homogeneous town in mostly rural Saxony. In its exhibitions and outreach projects the Leipzig City Museum regularly explores the common ground and hidden treasures, as well as the rifts and repressed darker sides of Leipzig history and identity. The paper summarizes experiences especially from the groundbreaking exhibition *Kennzeichen L* from 2021 to highlight the possibility at the same time to preserve local traditions and stories, and to challenge common narratives and all too flattering self-images of Leipzig civic society as a telling example for many, if not all, European towns. Finally, the paper exploits the example of Leipzig museum projects like the Capa House or the Schiller Garden to encourage other museum teams to develop new structures

and bolster their outreach activities by crossing the border between empathetic local history and critical memorial culture.

„Globalna wioska Lipsk”? Co działalność muzealna może nam powiedzieć o sprzecznych koncepcjach tożsamości w społeczeństwie obywatelskim – między orientacją globalną a małomiasteczkowymi wartościami

Abstrakt: Lipsk – miasto słynące z jarmarków i znanych na całym świecie tradycji drukarskich oraz muzycznych. To miejsce, którego poziom zawsze oceniano na tle standardów europejskich i światowych, lecz zasadniczo jest to przecież średniej wielkości miasto wyraźnie zorientowane na potrzeby rodzin i, co zaskakujące, nadal dość homogeniczne w swej strukturze, położone na terenie Saksonii – państwa związkowego o przeważająco wiejskim charakterze. W ramach organizowanych wystaw i projektów popularyzatorskich Muzeum Miejskie w Lipsku regularnie wydobywa wspólne płaszczyzny do dialogu i ukryte skarby lokalnej historii i tożsamości, nie stroniąc od dyskusji o obecnych w nich podziałach i ich bardziej mrocznych stronach. Niniejszy artykuł podsumowuje te muzealne doświadczenia, skupiając się na przełomowej wystawie z 2021 roku zatytułowanej *Kennzeichen L*, by pokazać, że można jednocześnie zachowywać lokalne tradycje oraz opowieści i kwestionować powszechnie utrwalane narracje czy aż nazbyt pochlebne wizerunki społeczeństwa obywatelskiego Lipska, co stanowi znamieny przykład do naśladowania dla wielu (a może nawet wszystkich) europejskich miast. Wreszcie, artykuł przybliży przykłady prowadzonych w lipskim muzeum projektów, takich jak Capa-Haus czy Ogród Schillerowski, aby zachęcić inne zespoły muzealne do rozwijania nowych struktur i wzmacniania aktywności popularyzatorskiej przez przekraczanie granicy między empatyczną historią lokalną a krytyczną kulturą upamiętniania.

Keywords: Leipzig history, conflicting identity concepts, civic society, outreach, culture of remembrance, participation

Słowa kluczowe: historia Lipska, sprzeczne koncepcje tożsamości, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, działalność popularyzatorska, kultura upamiętniania, uczestnictwo

Asking the right questions¹

What is the essence and spirit of a city? What resources do its communities draw upon to live together in the future? And what insights can history offer about these contemporary challenges? Of course, there is no universal answer to these questions; each of us must find our own solutions. Some of these have already been presented at the conference *City. Museum. Change. Twenty Years in the European Union* which took place at the Museum of Kraków in May 2024,² and have been tested many times in museums across Europe. However, these questions are urgent. History museums are not only a part of city life and often connected to local administration, but they also have deep roots in their communities. This connection serves as a kind of sonar, helping to identify both the potential and the unifying values of the community, as well as its divisions and sometimes overly flattering self-images.

When I assumed my position as director of the Leipzig History Museum in 2019, one of my goals was to start our new exhibition programme with a project on the most obvious and the most challenging theme: our town itself, its mentality, and its special features. Not the common facts, events, or names, but something like the sheer character of our city and its inhabitants. Understanding the present and anticipating the future through the lens of history. My objective was to find out who we, as a town society, are – and where we need to go as a museum team: What are the most interesting or pressing topics and discussions in our civic society? What kinds of stories have been neglected or marginalized in the past? And what are the sometimes overlooked preferences and expressions of a typical local mentality that we must document and preserve, even in times of globalization and accelerated change?³

Before talking about the features, findings, as well as some blind spots and failures of this exhibition, I would

like to introduce a document that opens up a somewhat unexpected perspective. Figure 1 displays the graph of Leipzig's social and economic development from 1990 up to the present day (2022), based on data provided by the Leipzig Statistics Department – a document that continues to be discussed at official meetings of the town's executive personnel. At first glance, it seems like a fascinating rollercoaster ride. However, when reflecting on the experience of hundreds of thousands of residents, it reveals a real challenge for everyone living and working in Leipzig over the past decades. It can also be seen as a record of a long-lasting “stress test” for the Leipzig mentality.

Even without an English or Polish translation, some basic facts are easy to detect. First, a short upswing immediately after the “Peaceful Revolution” of 1989/1990, followed by a long and deep decline bearing heavy consequences for the people and the fortunes of Leipzig: massive unemployment, shrinking population, a reduction of public services, and so on.

Then, around 2002, another rapid change occurred, leading to 15 years of constant surge and a quickly increasing number of inhabitants, including a notably younger population.

This surge is followed by a period of consolidation and uncertainty – it was not clear (and remains an open question) where we, as a city, would go. 2019 was, in every respect, a year of superlatives, including tax revenues, tourist numbers, and also museum visitors. Leipzig truly experienced a take-off that had not been seen since the early 20th century. Back then the city flourished, becoming the fourth-largest city in Germany, and braced for up to a million inhabitants.

But, interestingly enough, many residents had a very different view of the same story. Without any prior indications, our long-standing mayor nearly failed in his re-election bid in early 2020. This unexpected development and the debates sparked during the election revealed deep divisions within the city. Clearly, many people did not see themselves as part of the winning side in Leipzig's success-driven narrative. As a museum team, we recognized this as a trigger moment and felt an urgent need to check the pulse of the city.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Leipzig right in the middle of its “take-off” and brought the city to a harsh landing. We entered a new phase of uncertainty, marked by rising

¹ Many thanks to my Leipzig colleagues Katja Etzold, Ulrike Hangk and Esther Kaack for their helpful advice in the search for illustrations and the process of revising the English version of this paper. The somewhat ironic term “Weltdorf Leipzig – World village Leipzig” was probably coined by the Leipzig comedian Gunter Böhnke but nowadays is a standard idiom frequently used to describe the city.

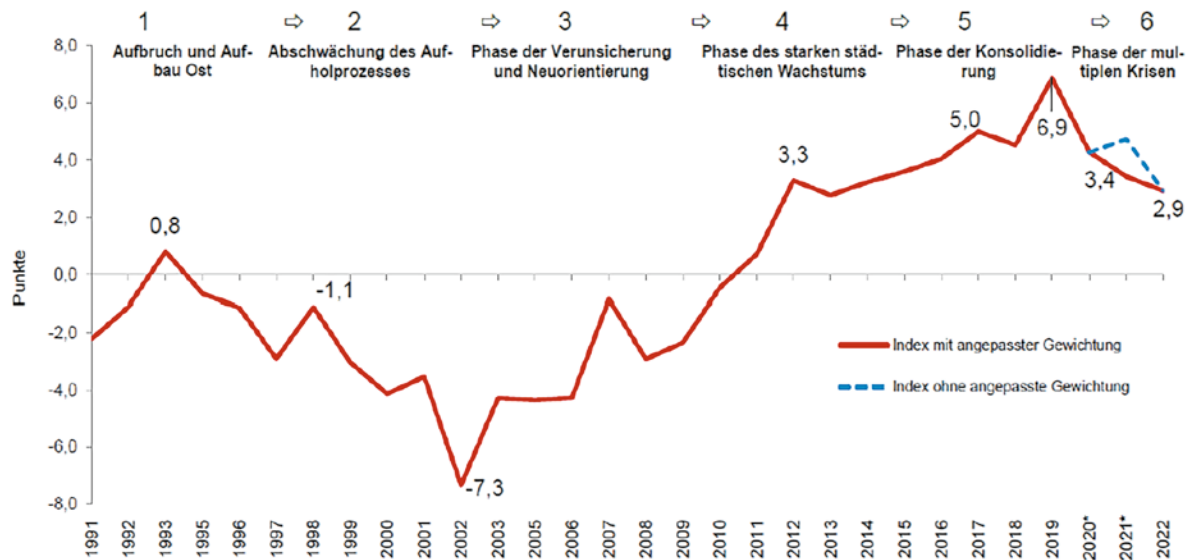
² This paper is an extended version of the work originally presented at the conference *City. Museum. Change. Twenty Years in the European Union* which took place at the Museum of Kraków on 1–2 May 2024.

³ The purpose of that project and the exhibition it resulted in was definitely not to reengage in all too known scholarly debates on collective identity and “third place” experiences but to start some kind of basic “field research” into different aspects of Leipzig history and mentality detectable in objects, documents, biographical memories and present day experiences. We tried to talk *with*, and not *about* Leipzig citizens from different milieus and epochs. Consequently, this paper does not aim to develop an exhaustive theoretical background but focuses on retelling and exploiting the findings of the exhibition – which, by the way, have been proven right and very helpful in the course of later projects and museum activities.

Entwicklungen in Leipzig

Abbildung 1-21:

Index zur wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Lage der Stadtbevölkerung im Zeitvergleich



*Aufgrund der besonderen Effekte der Corona-Pandemie sowohl auf dem Arbeitsmarkt als auch dem veränderte Mobilitätsverhalten insbesondere der Studierenden, wurde die Berechnung des Index für die Jahre 2020 und 2021 angepasst. Die Arbeitslosenquote und der Indikator Erwerbsbeteiligung und Ausbildung gingen jeweils mit einem Gewicht von 0,5 statt wie bisher 1 ein.

Lesehinweis: Der additive Index veranschaulicht in der Zusammenschau positive und negative Tendenzen der Stadtentwicklung. Ein Rückgang bedeutet, dass in Relation der betrachteten Periode (1991 bis 2022) eine Verschlechterung des Durchschnitts der Einzelindikatoren stattgefunden hat. Für eine Interpretation und Begründung von Anstiegen oder Rückgängen ist eine Betrachtung der Einzelindikatoren erforderlich (siehe textliche Ausführungen).

Amt für Statistik und Wahlen Leipzig, Kommunale Bürgerumfragen 1991 bis 2022

Fig. 1. A graph representing Leipzig’s social and economic development from 1990 to 2022, source: Municipal Citizen Survey, Office for Statistics City of Leipzig, 2023

prices and rents, increasing public debt, and a sudden drop in birth rates. People are still drawn to the city’s unique atmosphere and vibrant cultural life, but many, especially the younger residents, are increasingly seeking more affordable living conditions in the surrounding countryside.

Leipzig’s future development is once again at a crossroads. With growing political polarization in the town council and civil society, the need for community is more pressing than ever. This has important implications for our museum agenda. Of course, it remains essential to stand with marginalized communities and to highlight forgotten stories from Leipzig’s past and present. It is still our responsibility to ask critical questions. But we believe it is no longer sufficient to simply challenge existing identity concepts. Instead, we must actively seek common ground – helping our citizens to find a new, and perhaps historically grounded, path forward.

Connecting aspects of Leipzig mentality

Back to the aforementioned exhibition: What did we learn about the Leipzig mentality by studying historical sources and speaking with both experts and local residents? Can anything meaningful be said about the preferences and challenges faced by Leipzig’s inhabitants from the Middle Ages up to the present day?

Figure 2 illustrates a core principle we aimed to highlight in our exhibition, conveyed notably through scenography. We decided to divide the visitor experience into two parts. First, we presented a set of shared values and enduring expressions of the Leipzig mentality – a kind of *longue durée*. This calmer “blue part” of the exhibition was arranged like a stable frame along the outer walls of the room. Additionally, we identified a series of so-called “conflict zones” and placed them at the centre of the exhibition space. This visibly intense “orange part” was designed as an interactive area, inviting visitors – citizens – to step out of their comfort zones and enter a space for open discussion.

Now, a brief overview of some of the “blue topics”. We were, of course, aware that these findings were not the result of decades of research, but rather provisional theses – meant to spark discussion and encourage further reflection.

(1) People in Leipzig today almost unanimously describe their city as “cosmopolitan” – a label that often carries political implications, deliberately positioning “our liberal Leipzig” in contrast to the more “conservative” countryside, or even the so-called “xenophobic” rest of Saxony. However, there is a problem with this self-image: compared to cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, or Stuttgart, Leipzig is still significantly less diverse and multicultural. And the people of Leipzig in general opt vehemently against the city becoming too large and fragmented by its own migrant communities whom they consider to



Fig. 2. Impression from the 2021 *Kennzeichen L* exhibition: Contrasting design for “Conflict zones” and traditional narratives, photo by Markus Scholz, 2021, © Leipzig City History Museum

be too “vocal” sometimes. Typical “Leipzigers” like to have international “guests” but prefer to stay in control of a family-friendly and mostly homogeneous “city of short distances”. They believe that there should be at least some – partly unwritten and invisible, but nevertheless strict – rules to be observed by “newcomers” of all kinds. This attitude has deep historical roots: during the Leipzig fairs, thousands of European guests came to Leipzig three times a year. It was an economic tradition that opened its doors to other nations and cultures for centuries. This was especially important during the GDR times, when East Germany was mainly closed off towards the Western world. But the hidden precondition of this “welcoming attitude” has always been for the visitors to leave at the end of the fair – yet, hopefully, promising to come back next time. Today the Leipzig fairs still exist and flourish, but their central intercultural role has mainly been replaced by international culture festivals: Bach Festival, Wave-Gothic Festival, international football events, and many others. Even the traditional Leipzig Book Fair is more a literature festival than an economic factor nowadays. So, our conclusion was: contrary to its popular self-conception, Leipzig is not a cosmopolitan city, but rather a host city.

(2) Leipzig was never an independent political body like Frankfurt or Salzburg, nor was it the capital of a state like Saxony. But it constantly flirts with the idea of not only being the “number two city” in Saxony, or formerly in the GDR, but of being a kind of “secret capital”. This results in a widespread attitude of being the place where the “real” business is done, where culture and the arts are “genuinely” appreciated, or simply where the true heart of the region beats. You can quote Mendelssohn’s letters from the 1840s as well as current-day small talk to find a common meaning like: “Let the Dresden or Berlin courtiers do their boring administration stuff or celebrate their empty ceremonial culture” – but the true music lovers, economic entrepreneurs, and so on are to be found here.

This reflects a kind of historical compromise, quietly established deep in the Middle Ages, between the Saxon dynasty and their most important town. Leipzig focused mainly on trade and cultural development, while political matters – including the city’s protection and the safeguarding of the trade fair – were left to the Meissen or Dresden court. Today the people of Leipzig still do not like to wait for the next government orders. Instead, they tend to take their fate into their own hands – a slogan which can be read on one of the most impressive 1989 demonstration banners in our collection.⁴

This self-conscious attitude brings a lot of energy and innovation into a town, but can lead to a special *faible* for self-overestimation, which Leipzig is also notorious for. In fact, we are merely a midsize town with commercial revenue still smaller than many comparable West German cities, but

⁴ The banner (V2016/58) bears the slogan “Um uns selber müssen wir uns selber kümmern” (“We have to take care of ourselves”) – a meaningful quotation from a Bertold Brecht propaganda anthem from 1948 reclaimed by the demonstrators against the paternalism of the GDR government.



Fig. 3. Impression from the 2021 *Kennzeichen L* exhibition: The bourgeois nature of Leipzig culture traditions and institutions, photo by Markus Scholz, 2021, © Leipzig City History Museum

want to host the Olympic Games, want to construct the highest building in Saxony, and are planning surprisingly many museum and culture projects at the same time. We called this part of our exhibition “The City That Never Gives Up”, suggesting a latent megalomania which is a resource but also a risk that can bring us to the brink of ruin – as it happened already in 1623, when Leipzig went bankrupt.

(3) Another feature – and a truly unexpected finding – emerged from exploring our extensive collections on the history and production of Leipzig’s art institutions. Of course, Leipzig presents and promotes itself as a city of culture. But what kind of culture is it, exactly? Since Leipzig was never a royal seat, it does not inherit the king’s collections or grand theatre buildings, as is the case with much of Dresden’s cultural heritage. Everything of rank in the Leipzig culture has been founded and financed by wealthy merchants, merciful widows, or commercial entrepreneurs – the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra, the Thomannenchor (St. Thomas Boys’ Choir), all of our museums, the conservatory, the town’s library, the opera house, and so on. Now that these rich and culture-loving founding elites have dissolved through inflation, World War Two, and the Soviet occupation after 1945, all these tasks have to be financed mainly by the town and its taxpayers. Leipzig affords itself a cultural landscape befitting a capital city, yet the fate of its local cultural institutions remains tightly intertwined with the town’s economic fortunes. So, when the tram drivers’ union decides to go on strike on the opening day of our annual book fair, they receive an angry letter from me. With all due respect for the needs of the working class, such an

action is a self-defeating blow to the very backbone of Leipzig’s culture and economy!

(4) Rooted in bourgeois rather than courtly tradition, Leipzig’s culture favours practical, marketable art over avant-garde experimentation. This explains why Leipzig is less a city of avant-garde than one of applied art. Leipzig tends to view art not as an inexplicable outburst of brilliant minds, but as a teachable craft that produces useful “products”. To support this idea, I could cite many examples, but I will highlight just three:

(a) Deeply rooted in the Bach and Mendelssohn tradition of “learned music”, Leipzig in the 19th century became the main creator of the classical musical canon. This centred around the Gewandhaus Orchestra and the famous conservatory, promoting a musical approach based on counterpoint, regular harmonic progression, and form – something Richard Wagner, despite being born in Leipzig, never provided.

(b) The name of the Leipzig art college is difficult to translate but very revealing in its special purpose. It is not called a “college of painting or fine arts”, but (literally) a “college of graphic design and book art”: Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) – highlighting the two aspects of art directly linked to book illustration and typography as necessary components of printing, one of Leipzig’s former main industrial sectors. Under these unique circumstances, the painters at HGB Leipzig created a distinct realistic style. Contrary to popular artistic styles of the past forty years, the now world-famous Leipzig School of Painting favours a definite “objective” approach to painting. It

is deeply rooted in the traditions of the Renaissance and 19th-century painting while embracing some principles of Socialist Realism.

(c) Last but not least: Leipzig is one of the rare places in Germany (and, indeed, in Europe) where you can study creative writing on an academic level. This special “Literature College” was founded in the 1950s and has since nurtured generations upon generations of famous and prize-winning German authors up to the present day. Certainly, there is no way to “learn” inspiration itself, but the rules of different literary genres are teachable and the experiences of generations of successful authors can be shared.

So the grand narrative of “Bürgerstadt Leipzig” might be a myth after all, but the bourgeois nature of the city’s elites has shaped a predominantly “handcrafted” understanding of art. This adds a distinct and, in the best sense of the word, conservative tone to the culture of a city that otherwise prides itself on being a future-forward hotspot. A productive tension emerges, connecting progressive political ideals with a rich classical tradition from Bach and Beethoven to book illustration and portrait painting. Something like the *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster and the *documenta* in Kassel – widely perceived as models of progressive, or even provocative art in the public space – may work there because the citizens of both of these former royal and episcopal seats are accustomed to accepting every monument their archbishop or grand duke granted them in the public space. But it might not work in Leipzig because people here would be too critical, given the obvious lack of quality and craftsmanship behind many of these modern artworks (Fig. 3).

(5) One last example from our “blue list”: Leipzig is now rightfully branded as the town of the Peaceful Revolution. However, history shows us that this inspiring legacy from 1989 is, in part, a remarkable coincidence. It does not fully reflect the city’s long history of severe social conflicts and violent class struggles, especially during the 20th century. To prevent these tensions from turning into social division again, especially in times of gentrification and polycrisis, we can hopefully rely on another tradition: Leipzig as the founding city of social movements. Both the national workers’ movement and women’s movement in Germany were born in Leipzig in the 1860s. The city has also seen a very successful Jewish emancipation before 1933, and the rise of National Socialism. Major nationwide sports organisations, including the German Football Association (1901), originate in Leipzig or had their seat in the city, like the German Workers’ Sport and Gymnastic Association (ATSB) before 1933. These various and differing movements have one thing in common: They have been successful by focusing on education and participation in a way of democratizing elite culture, instead of using violence. That narrative leads to a specific democratic and anti-elitist consensus in Leipzig cultural debates – something that can still be activated in public discussions and town council sessions.

Under the banner of “broad participation” one can successfully advocate for museum demands – not as an elite luxury, but only by supporting fringe cultural initiatives, maintaining low ticket prices, and similar measures. It is,

therefore, no coincidence that Leipzig was the first city in Saxony to open its permanent exhibitions free of charge to everyone. This move sparked fierce debate within the regional museum community but it aligns perfectly with Leipzig’s unique approach to culture and public participation.

Exposing rifts and “conflict zones” in a civic society

A city constantly reinventing itself naturally has its conflict zones – something we highlighted in the “orange areas” of our exhibition. The first of these zones raised a simple yet fundamental question: Where is Leipzig, specifically? What geographic area does it cover? Which area is considered Leipzig? While most Leipzig residents primarily head to the city centre, they also identify strongly with their own neighbourhoods. Some of these former villages were reluctantly incorporated into Leipzig as late as the 1990s, sparking significant resistance and disputes. Many residents in these areas feel overlooked by political and cultural institutions, even though a large share of the city’s revenue comes from the car factories located in Leipzig’s “far north”. Self-critically, it has to be said that our museum strategies and exhibition topics have been, and still are, focusing heavily on the historic city centre. This makes the ambitious Nowa Huta project carried out by the Museum of Kraków particularly intriguing and relevant to our own situation in Leipzig (Fig. 4).

The lack of affordable housing is a grave social question in Germany nowadays, considering that the majority of Germans do not buy but rent their flats. Even though the rent level in Leipzig is generally lower than in other major cities, such as Hamburg or Munich, the debate is heated in our town. The explanation for this oddity can, once again, be found in our city’s not so distant past, namely the post-GDR period known as the Transformation. Of course, you can still find something affordable in the suburban concrete blocks, but the Leipzigers have become accustomed to the extraordinary situation of being able to rent beautiful properties at affordable prices over the past thirty years. Due to the shrinking population of Leipzig (and eastern Germany in general) in the 1990s, the property market was flooded with countless masterfully renovated and spacious *fin de siècle* apartments. It made Leipzig especially attractive to students and young creative people from all over Germany. However, this oversupply is long gone, and people are now mourning the “free spaces” of the 1990s. So, the feeling of a significant “loss” is predominant and poses a real threat to any just and common development of a city as cohesion-oriented as Leipzig.

Despite the powerful success narrative of the past two decades and the genuine achievement of rescuing a heritage of buildings on the brink of collapse in 1990, deep divisions still persist within Leipzig’s society – something we sought to highlight in our exhibition. It was not long ago that Leipzig was known as the “poverty capital of Germany”. When we invited a group of young artists to contribute to



Fig. 4. Impression from the 2021 *Kennzeichen L* exhibition: One Town, but different quarters with contrasting values, photo by Markus Scholz, 2021, © Leipzig City History Museum



Fig. 5. Impression from the 2021 *Kennzeichen L* exhibition: Exposing rifts in Leipzig civic society, photo by Markus Scholz, 2021, © Leipzig City History Museum

the exhibition, it was no surprise that one of them created an installation resembling a “give-away corner”, a familiar sight for many struggling Leipzig families. This work urged visitors to look beyond the city’s shining facades and remember where Leipzig has come from – and, in many ways, still remains. This, our museum team believes, is one of our fundamental responsibilities (Fig. 5).

Sources of a city’s collective power

A few words should also be said about the prologue and epilogue to our exhibition, both of which aimed to address the audience more on an emotional level than an intellectual one, while at the same time presenting some new insights into the collective mentality of Leipzig. The prologue featured a dozen exemplary biographies spanning from the Middle Ages to the present day, each told through travel bags containing personal accessories that narrated their stories of arriving in Leipzig. During our research, we gained the strong impression that Leipzig’s current self-image as a city with a special “welcome culture” is rooted in a long-standing tradition. As early as the 16th century, newcomers to Leipzig were able to reach top positions in politics, the economy, and culture – even within the first generation, provided that they brought special skills, entrepreneurial spirit, or simply enough money, and were willing to actively contribute to the city’s development. The resulting atmosphere of Leipzig as a “city of arrivals” – both encouraging and demanding – continues to shape the city’s atmosphere and remains a valuable resource for the future (Fig. 6).

These sources of collective power have been the topic of the epilogue. What was originally planned as a purely entertaining final chapter of the exhibition gained much greater urgency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when discussions about the “survival” of our society took on a more literal meaning. In the end, we listed four characteristics of Leipzig mentality, which in our perception helped master crises in the past and might also encourage people to write contemporary and future chapters of our collective history. These character traits are difficult to translate because they are very much embedded in local idioms of language.

First, we started by understanding creativity as a necessary precondition for a clear will to survive. This also means having a constant willingness to adapt traditions and formats to drastically changed circumstances. When church concerts became nearly impossible due to COVID-19 regulations, the Leipzig Bach Festival managed to stage a version of Bach’s *St. John Passion* with only three musicians instead of several dozen. They invited a worldwide community to join by singing the choral pieces online. It was simply unthinkable for me personally not to have a live Bach *Passion* in our city at Easter, considering this tradition has continued for the past 200 years. What began as a way to avoid fully surrendering to the pandemic turned into the largest Bach performance ever, connecting and comforting a worldwide online community. Deeply moved by the performance, I later asked the live artists for some of their percussion instruments. It was a great moment for our collection when, a few months later, they were able to bring them to our museum in person.

The second attribute was something we labelled as “civic spirit”. A special way to support each other



Fig. 6. Impression from the 2021 *Kennzeichen L* exhibition: Travel bags containing stories of people arriving to develop Leipzig – the example of Hinrich Lehmann-Grube, Leipzig’s first democratic Mayor after 1989, photo & © Leipzig City History Museum, 2021



Fig. 7. Transport one of the iconic “Leipzig Lions” into the *Kenzeichen L* exhibition, photo & © Leipzig City History Museum 2021

in difficult circumstances, followed by the Saxon word *Fichelanz* – a unique state of mind combining cleverness with boldness. Last but not least, we tried to identify a special Leipzig preference for “self-irony” as a remedy for megalomania and a rare capability to solve problems in a humorous manner. For example, presenting a large sculpture of the lion rampant from the Leipzig coat of arms, wielding a broom – a gift from the municipal cleaning department – as an invitation for people to take care of public spaces (Fig. 7). Consequently, the last item of the exhibition was another travel bag. Upon opening the bag, every visitor saw nothing but a mirror – to show that the most powerful resource is the people themselves.

Recommendations for further museum activities in Leipzig and abroad

What have we learnt from all these findings and what tasks can our museum team take on to preserve valuable local traditions and support cohesion and development in our town’s community? The following bullet points are of course my personal reflections but may at least draft some starting lines for further research and projects.

a) Doing more outreach work to bring the whole city into focus.

Our museum always tried to get into dialogue with communities in all parts of Leipzig, yet during the COVID-19 pandemic this part of our work became even more important. We organised more guided tours and bicycle tours outside the museum. As a result, in 2023, we began counting all participants engaged in our outdoor projects, as well as those attending lectures and workshops outside of the museum, as a separate category within our visitor statistics. This made outreach clearly visible as our “tenth branch”, equal to all the other units of the museum. Outreach might include changing roles. Figure 8 shows a scene from our *Museum on Tour* project, which brings museum objects to suburban festivals. We partly use live speakers to collect memories and objects and to present museum topics in an engaging way,



Fig. 8. Impression from the *Museum on Tour* outreach project 2019/2020, photo & © Leipzig City History Museum, 2021

involving people from migrant communities as experts on Leipzig’s history.

Overall, we should find as many ways as possible to bring museum topics back to the streets. Figure 9 shows an example from the so-called “Revolutionary City Walk” which reenacts the events of the 1848 revolution. By the way, this also makes sense from a historical perspective. Why bring every topic into the museum – usually a building that has little connection to the actual events – when you can simply go to the streets and places where they really happened?

Another consequence of the upgraded status of outreach activities in our internal museum ranking was replacing the position of my personal assistant with that of a curator for outreach and museum development. This post is filled by Tim Rood whom some people in Kraków already know well. A shift in priorities without reallocation of human resources would be half-hearted and unprofessional. Even under the strict constraints of a town’s budget and with a limited staff, it is important to invest as much as possible in the wider museum network and its relationship with civil society.

b) Connecting “global narratives” with local “third place” experiences.

Whatever we do, we should keep both purposes of exhibitions and other projects in mind. They must serve our official “museum” and sometimes “global” narratives that focus on all kinds of visitors, including tourists, while also offering easily accessible “third place” experiences on a local level.

First, let me introduce our museum branch called the Schillerhaus. On the one hand, it is a memorial site of German literary history, being the place where Friedrich Schiller stayed in 1785 and worked on his famous “Ode to Joy” – now the European anthem. Figure 10 shows a sound station where you can listen to different compositions of the Ode’s famous words next to Schiller’s small bedchamber. The building also stands as a testimony to Schiller’s reception in the 19th century, when his writings were used to promote ideas of freedom and democracy. For this reason, the Schillerhaus is also a place of remembrance for Robert Blum and the heroes of the 1848 revolution.



Fig. 9. Impression from an outreach project bringing to life the 1848 revolutionary events, photo & © Leipzig City History Museum, 2023

At the same time, the museum – a charming and tiny 18th-century building – is a meeting place for the local neighbourhood in the Gohlis suburb, hosting amateur theatre performances and wine tastings in its lovely garden. We do not have to choose between children playing in the sandbox and international literary experts tracing Schiller’s footsteps – we can welcome both and offer different experiences to meet very different “local” and “global” needs.

c) Bridging the gap between history and culture of remembrance.

Figure 11 shows the first workshop organised by the town administration to create Leipzig’s new concept for the culture of remembrance, held at our museum branch, the Alte Börse. It was an effort to unite a diverse range of people interested in historical activities and topics – from reenactment groups focused on the 1813 Battle of the Nations and collectors of historical water pump artifacts, to representatives of World War Two forced labour memorials, postcolonial activists, to history teachers from Leipzig schools. While our hope to foster dialogue among these diverse initiatives may have seemed ambitious or even naive, it rests on a profound reality: society – and our history museums – often reflect two distinctly separate “worlds”:

- The traditional “history” and its topics and protagonists
- The “new” and very often openly activist initiatives dealing mostly with the darker sides of modern history – from colonial exhibitions and fascist repression to victims of state security in the GDR.

These groups very often have no connections with each other, leading to constant competition for public attention

and shrinking resources. Yet, there is only one city and one, albeit multifaceted, history. I have been (and, indeed, still am) on a personal mission to bridge the gap between these two worlds – not only through dialogue but also through the new Leipzig concept of the culture of remembrance. This concept embraces established themes like music and literary history, while also emphasizing the need for critical approaches and new topics that give voice to long-marginalized groups, including women’s history, Jewish history, queer history, and colonial issues. Of course, it makes no sense – especially for the sake of historical accuracy – to erase figures like Bach, Mendelssohn, Napoleon, or the controversial Wagner from Leipzig’s memory. However, if we are to engage seriously with these figures, we must also include discussions about women composers and musicians such as Clara Schumann, Livia Frege, and Ethel Smyth. Similarly, when highlighting the importance and achievements of Leipzig’s industrial history, we need to acknowledge colonial exhibitions and forced labour, including the often harsh experiences of Cuban and Mozambican workers in Leipzig factories during the GDR era.

There is no purely “nice” local history in opposition to an “activist” culture of remembrance. What we truly need is an open-minded, critical, and empathetic approach to the full, multi-faceted history of our city.

It has been my goal to place our museum at the heart of this process of change – not only out of conviction, but also to secure funding from remembrance culture programmes. This was already the case with the *Kennzeichen L* exhibition which was funded by the city and served as the starting point



Fig. 10. Inside the new permanent exhibition of the Schiller-Haus museum branch, photo by Kai Bergmann, © Leipzig City History Museum, 2023



Fig. 11. Inside the meeting zone of the Capa-Haus museum branch, photo & © Capa Culture GmbH, 2024

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of the conceptual process. It was followed by the rental of an additional museum branch, also financed through a new funding line by the town council, to accommodate remembrance culture.

I am referring to the so-called Capahaus – the site of a famous series of photographs taken by Robert Capa in 1945, which was saved from oblivion and destruction just ten years ago by a group of civil society activists. After the venue, with its small memorial room, had mainly been managed by a café operator who went bankrupt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to take action again in 2022. As a museum team, we assumed direct responsibility and fully committed to it. We were able to convince the town council to provide just enough funding to rent the space. However, for all further development, we had to seek new solid partners. Eventually, we partnered with a Leipzig publishing house specializing in Jewish history as a subtenant. Together, we now operate the venue through a nonprofit company as a museum branch and meeting point – where visitors can still enjoy very good coffee.

The unimposing Capahaus embodies all the findings and future plans I have outlined in this paper. This historic building in the western quarter of Leipzig is inextricably

intertwined with world history through the tragic events of April 1945. The energy of local Leipzig residents, combined with the professional expertise and network of our museum, has attracted worldwide attention. When Leipzig citizens last gathered to commemorate the victims of World War Two and the city's liberation in front of the Capahaus, the event held special significance. In April 2025, the ceremony was attended by high-ranking dignitaries, including the Prime Minister of Saxony and the Mayor of Leipzig. Adding to the occasion's importance was the presence of the acting American Ambassador to Germany and Duke Albert of Monaco who serves as president of an association supporting traumatized war victims. By remembering not only Robert Capa and the fallen American GI Robert J. Bowman, but also Capa's partner Gerda Taro – herself a legendary photographer with Leipzig ties and a victim of the Spanish Civil War – we fulfilled our promise to present a more diverse local history. This approach allowed us to bring global topics and perspectives into sharper focus, enriching the narrative beyond the local context.

I firmly believe that embracing this challenging aspect of our work is essential – not only for our success but also for the very survival of our institution in the difficult years to come.