

City. Museum. Emotion. Creating a New and Modern Museum in the Spirit of Europe

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Abstract: In the summer of 2017, the Cologne City Museum suffered devastating water damage that destroyed large parts of the permanent exhibition and interior furnishings. The objects had to be evacuated as a matter of urgency. In December 2018, the city council decided to temporarily house the Cologne City Museum in a vacant fashion department store. The museum opened a new permanent exhibition here in March 2024.

This article presents the new museum concept, highlights the profound transformation of the Cologne City Museum on various levels, paints a picture of the rethinking of historical narrative and presentation, and discusses the role that city museums can play in an urban society.

Miasto. Muzeum. Emocje. Tworzenie nowego i nowoczesnego muzeum w duchu europejskim

Abstrakt: Latem 2017 roku Muzeum Miejskie w Kolonii poważnie ucierpiało na skutek zalania: zniszczeniu uległa znaczna część wystawy stałej oraz wyposażenia. Ta krytyczna sytuacja wymusiła pilną ewakuację eksponatów. W grudniu 2018 roku rada miasta podjęła decyzję o tymczasowym przeniesieniu siedziby Muzeum Miejskiego w Kolonii na teren dawnego odzieżowego domu towarowego. Nową wystawę stałą udostępniono zwiedzającym w tej lokalizacji w marcu 2024 roku.

W artykule zaprezentowano nową koncepcję muzeum, skupiając się zwłaszcza na gruntownej transformacji, jaką

Muzeum Miejskie w Kolonii przeszło na różnych poziomach. Autor opisuje proces tworzenia nowej wizji narracji historycznej oraz prezentacji, a także omawia rolę, jaką muzea miejskie mogą odgrywać w społeczeństwie zurbanizowanym.

Keywords: Cologne, City Museum, transformation, rethinking museum, permanent exhibition

Słowa kluczowe: Kolonia, Muzeum Miejskie, transformacja, rekonceptualizacja muzeum, wystawa stała

Cologne is the oldest major city in Germany¹. In the year 50 AD, elevated by the Romans to the status of a colony, the city developed, due to its location on the River Rhine, into an important trading metropolis which also became a member of the Hanseatic League in the Middle Ages. For a long time, the city remained one of the most populous and influential urban centres within the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and conducted trade throughout the entire European continent. Its 2,000-year history is exceedingly eventful. Thus, from 1794 to 1815 Cologne belonged to France, and from 1815 on, within the Rhine Province, to Prussia. In the 19th century, the city, like many others, became industrialized. It was here, for example, that Nicolaus August Otto invented the Otto engine named after him. Largely destroyed during World War Two, the city underwent rapid development in the postwar period and from the 1960s to the 1980s – in direct proximity to the significantly smaller federal capital city Bonn – eventually transforming into a metropolis of art and culture. Since the 1950s, immigration (primarily labour migration) has shaped Cologne very strongly. Today, nearly 1.1 million people live here, and 42 per cent of them

¹ This contribution is based on a lecture that was delivered as part of the conference *City. Museum. Change. 20 Years in the European Union* on 1–2 May 2024 at the Museum of Kraków. It aims to briefly present the Cologne City Museum and to outline how it has evolved into a modern institution. At the same time, it is necessary to explain in a nutshell the role city museums can play in the future and the potential this type of museum possesses with regard to social, societal, and cultural responsibility.

have an immigrant background. The largest group, constituting 20 per cent, is made up of the Turkish diaspora, followed by people of Polish or Italian descent (each constituting 8 per cent), of Ukrainian origin (7 per cent), and of Bulgarian or Iraqi migration background (each group constituting 4 per cent). This history is offered a home today by the Cologne City Museum.

The Cologne City Museum – a history of a Cologne institution

The history of the Cologne City Museum as an institution mirrors the diverse and eventful history of the city itself. This goes back to the founding of the Historical Museum of the City of Cologne in 1888 and encompasses several predecessor institutions and, thereby, also their highly heterogeneous collections. This timing was not accidental as it coincided directly with the emergence of other historical city museums in many cities across Europe – for example, in Vienna and in Munich. The desire, indeed the demand, to create places which would boost historical self-assurance arose especially in civic circles – Cologne being no exception. On the municipal level, the founding of the museum was closely connected with the demolition of a 12th-century city wall which began in 1880. At that time, it was the largest defensive structure situated north of the Alps. Over the course of the 19th century, as the city experienced enormous influx and growth, this defensive structure was increasingly perceived as an obstacle to the necessary expansion and was quickly torn down. The demolition of the wall facilitated the incorporation of numerous suburbs.

For centuries the city walls had provided clear orientation for the inhabitants of the city and defined who belonged to the city and who did not, but this was now no longer present. Furthermore, the people of Cologne would soon realize the value of the historical loss. This promoted the desire for a city history museum as a place of self-assurance. Not coincidentally, the newly founded Historical Museum of the City of Cologne then also moved into the Hahnentorburg, one of the preserved historical city gates – a relic of the demolished city wall in the western part of the city (Fig. 1). From 1902 onwards, with the Eigelsteintorburg in the northern part of the city, another mediaeval city gate was converted into an additional exhibition venue. This institution was intended to preserve and exhibit Cologne's historical heritage. Objects transferred from the City Archive and from the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (established in 1861) initially formed the core of the collections.

In the 1920s, under the aegis of Cologne's Lord Mayor Konrad Adenauer, the future first Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, the idea of a comprehensive Rhenish Museum was born. It was intended to



Fig. 1. A view of Hahnentorburg which was home to the Cologne City Museum from 1888 onwards, courtesy of the City Museum of Cologne

present the history and culture of the entire Rhineland and materialized in a former Prussian cuirassier barracks. The museum concept finally culminated in the “House of the Rhenish Homeland”, opened in 1936 during the National Socialist period. The museum was ideologically instrumentalized in the National Socialist era and was heavily damaged during World War Two.

After the war, a new beginning took place with the founding of the Cologne City Museum in 1958. The museum found a new home in the building of the early modern Armoury of the City of Cologne. Under the umbrella brand “Cologne City Museum”, the collections of the Historical Museum of the City of Cologne and of the Rhenish Museum (aka the House of the Rhenish Homeland) were merged.

In the entirety of its collection and educational work, ever since its establishment the Cologne City Museum has reflected the city's history in all of its aspects, be it social, economic, societal, cultural, or political. Thus, it serves as a central museum institution responsible for the preservation and communication of the history of Cologne. It documents the development of the city from around 800 AD² up to present times, making it accessible to the general public. The museum collections are continually being expanded and today comprise around 480,000 objects related to the history of Cologne and the Rhineland region, including paintings, photographs and prints, militaria, furniture, clothing, coins, everyday objects, as well as historically significant municipal documents.

² Around 800 AD, the Archbishopric of Cologne was founded, and the city became the seat of the archbishop.

The “new” museum

In the long history of the Cologne City Museum and its predecessor institutions, the night of 25 June 2017 occupies a prominent, albeit sad, place. It was on that night that a defective water tap on the first floor of the permanent exhibition in the historical Armoury caused devastating water damage that destroyed large parts of the exhibition furnishings. Although all of the exhibits (approximately 5,000 items) survived intact, they nevertheless had to be evacuated immediately and rushed to emergency storage facilities. Since that unfortunate event, only the exhibition spaces in the nearby Alte Wache, a former Prussian guard building, could be used for museum operations. Up until the summer of 2021, several special exhibitions were still shown here – even if these could only be seen temporarily, considering the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A thorough examination of the building structure of the historical Armoury brought about the realization that the re-installation of a permanent exhibition in that venue would only be possible with considerable renovation measures, since the structural survey revealed the presence of asbestos in the building fabric. Consequently, alternative scenarios for dealing with this situation were developed. This was closely connected with the so-called “Historic Centre Cologne”, a cultural construction project at Roncalliplatz in direct proximity to the Cologne Cathedral.³ Historic Centre Cologne was intended to spatially bring together the existing Romano-Germanic Museum, the Cologne City Museum, and the Cologne Cathedral. In the consolidated building complex, the administrative offices of the High Cathedral Church of Cologne, including the Cathedral Building Archive, as well as the administrative offices of the Romano-Germanic Museum of the City of Cologne and of the Cologne City Museum, were to be housed. The plan included a vast exhibition area (approximately 4,000 sq m) for the Cologne City Museum. The project was scheduled for completion in 2030. However, in February 2024 the High Cathedral Church withdrew from the venture as a project partner due to rising costs, which currently renders the project completion extremely unlikely.

A calculation that compared the cost estimate of a complete renovation of the Armoury which would entail a temporary move-out from the building to the cost estimate of a relocation into an interim venue until the completion of the “Historic Centre Cologne” at Roncalliplatz led to the decision in favour of the interim solution. Thus, on 18 December 2018, the Cologne City Council finally resolved to relocate the museum to the former Franz Sauer fashion department store on Minoriten Str, situated right in the city centre. With the Museum of Applied Arts Cologne (MAKK), the KOLUMBA Art Museum of the Archdiocese of Cologne, and the Schauspielhaus (Theatre and Opera House) in direct proximity, the City Museum is now surrounded by significant Cologne cultural institutions.

The relocation and the opening of the new permanent exhibition in March 2024 marked the end of an era: thus, the history of the City Museum in the historical Armoury on Zeughaus Str (spanning over sixty years) came to



Fig. 2. Since 2024, the former Franz Sauer Fashion House has been the temporary home of the Cologne City Museum, courtesy of the City Museum of Cologne / C. Ehrchen



Fig. 3. In the so-called introductory room, visitors can view a large historical scale model of the city and learn about the timeline of Cologne’s history by examining selected key objects from the museum’s collection, courtesy of the City Museum of Cologne / C. Ehrchen

a close.⁴ At the new location, the City Museum now occupied a building which had been constructed in 1986 as a contemporary site of the Cologne family business Franz Sauer, founded in 1842 (Fig. 2). Until the closure of the business, the renowned clothing store offered high-end women’s and men’s fashion here on five floors. Not only was the range of goods characterized by luxury and elegance, but also the architecture and interior design with its high-quality materials made the fashion house an important example of the opulent charm of the 1980s postmodernism. The building complex consists of a total of three individual buildings connected with each other.

³ See also the project homepage of the Berlin architectural office Staab Architekten. *Historische Mitte Köln* [online]. © Staab Architekten GmbH, 2025 [accessed on 2 December 2025]. Available online: <https://www.staab-architekten.com/de/projects/1872-historische-mitte-koln?a98670ebee7e9b6111eb444da13ba=43a4da40fcd0d02c2dbfce82b6f1d3c5>

⁴ Kramp Mario (ed.): *125 Jahre Kölnisches Stadtmuseum. 125 mal gekauft – geschenkt – gestiftet*. Köln 2013.

After the City Council's resolution of December 2018, the planning and implementation followed to adapt the original department store architecture to the requirements of a museum. The goal was to be able to represent all functionalities of everyday museum operations here. Thus, the exhibition was to be located in the former sales areas of the two front building sections. Restoration workshops and the museum office rooms were to be located on the higher storeys, while the basement floors – the former storage rooms – offered space for the museum library.

Rethinking the museum

Regardless of the fact how devastating the water damage in 2017 was, the fact also remained that with the reconception of the permanent exhibition the Cologne City Museum was given the opportunity to fundamentally change and rethink the museum as a whole – on every level. The museum suddenly found itself in the midst of a fundamental transformation. A far-reaching remodelling process began: a new mission statement was created and a new brand and communication strategy was developed, from which the motto “City. History. Differently” evolved. Furthermore, a new collection concept was drawn up, together with a brand new structure and strategy. And, last but not least, over this period of transition a new permanent exhibition concept emerged, which was intended to take the motto “City. History. Differently” literally. The ultimate goal of this process was to develop an innovative, inclusive, and modern museum that should narrate history and present topics in a relevant and contemporary way (Fig. 3).

It quickly became clear to the conceptual team that, considering the complex existing architecture of the department store with its 750 square meters, the city's history could not be told chronologically within that space. They, therefore, needed to find a different approach in order to retell history in a contemporary way, taking into account the changing reception habits and competences. Overall, this goal was to be reached by asking emotion-based questions, and a total of eight such questions were formulated, namely: “What do we desire?”, “What makes us angry?”, “What do we believe in?”, “What makes us afraid?”, “What do we hope for?”, “What do we love?”, “What moves us?”, “What connects us?”. These questions were intended to build bridges reaching from the present day of the exhibition into the past, but also into our future.

But why should we use emotions as a narrative and an ordering system of a permanent exhibition?

Emotions enable us to address the visitors and form a direct identification with them. Everyone has a concept of, and also an answer to the respective questions. In the light of individual biographies and experiences, however, these can turn out to be completely different, and can also change over the course of a lifetime, or even between two

museum visits. At the same time, this approach also offered, on the curatorial level, the possibility to question, to assess, to view, and to contextualize objects anew. In this way new connections could be formed and the objects reassigned. And, finally, it allowed us – again, adapting our strategy to the complicated architecture of the building – to resort to episodic narratives, which also legitimized some omissions and shortenings. From the very beginning, we put a lot of effort into creating a museum which could act as a “Museum for All” and as simply a “Good Place” within the urban society.

But a “Museum for All” – how should we understand such a notion, and how is it supposed to work?

In order to answer these questions, we need to briefly address the exhibition and its mode of operation. From the spacious foyer, which functions as an event venue and a meeting place for the local community, one enters the four floors of the exhibition via an open spiral staircase which forms the architectural and spatial centre of the building. Visitors are led onto the individual floors into what is called “reflection areas” (Fig. 4). There they are confronted with several questions and can engage with them, but also with themselves. Basically, the museum visit starts with the visitors engaging with themselves and with the present. Here they will also find individual objects that are the result of a participatory project. In this area, the urban society was actively involved in the curatorial work.

In the course of various workshops, the aforementioned exhibition questions were discussed by a very diverse group of local women and men. In the next step, the participants were asked to bring along objects from their private possessions that provided answers to the specific questions. The participants were then interviewed and asked to talk about the respective objects. These objects, as well as the interview recordings associated with them, can be viewed and listened to by the visitors in the reflection areas.

The legal text provided by a participant with a migration background, for example, offers an answer to the question “What do we believe in?” by saying “I believe in myself.” When, after finishing secondary school, she declared she wanted to read law, family and friends advised her against it, since in their view she would not manage it. Undeterred, she took up her law studies. The result: today she is a qualified lawyer. These and many other stories, histories, and biographical sketches are presented to the visitors in the reflection areas. These are the stories of “ordinary Cologne residents” which exist to be told and discovered thousands of times in this city – but also in any other.

At the same time, in this area visitors will find various invitations to take action. In connection to the respective questions, visitors can become active here and help to shape the exhibition through their contributions. From a conceptual perspective, it was important to the curatorial team to release visitors from the role of consumers and to incorporate them into an active, shaping, and meaningful experience. At this point, the museum should also be a place of entertainment and pleasure, and be perceived as such.



Fig. 4. A view of one of the reflection rooms which marks the beginning of each exhibition floor and is intended to give visitors the opportunity to engage with the questions themselves or to view the objects created by the persons who took part in the participatory project, photo by R. Spekking

Thus, in the area labelled “What makes us angry?” one can scratch off an anger picture. With the question “What moves us?” a small questionnaire which revolves around the topic of visitors’ mobility habits can be filled in by means of thread (Fig. 5). Or in the area labelled “What do we desire?” where one of the topics is the history of play in Cologne, one can play a game on the wall. It is only after these areas have been passed through that the thematic, episodic narrative involving the holdings of the museum can begin.

The motto “Museum for All,” however, is also an imperative urging us to shape the museum into a place that is truly experienceable, usable and accessible to all people. Thus, we have placed great value on barrier-free wayfinding and communication, thereby enabling cultural participation. In many places we offer our blind and visually impaired visitors, but also the sighted ones, of course, the possibility to touch, to grasp, and thus to better understand objects or reproductions in the exhibition. These are complemented by texts written in Braille and in the raised relief (pyramid) tactile script. In addition, a dedicated multimedia guide supports communication by providing audiodescriptions of objects and conveying content. For deaf people, exhibition content is also made accessible through sign language videos. In this way, the museum is to become a democratic place for all people where everyone is approached at eye level and feels welcome to participate and to co-shape reality (Fig. 6).

Participation is also to be implemented in smaller exhibition projects in the future (due to space limitations, large

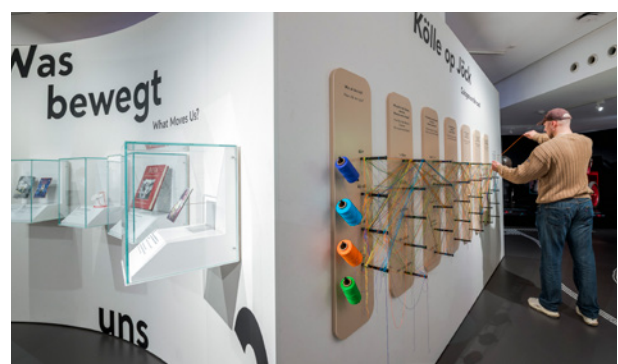


Fig. 5. A view of one of the interactive walls which are designed to encourage visitors to actively participate in shaping the museum, here in the “What moves us?” section. Courtesy of the City Museum of Cologne / C. Ehrchen

exhibitions cannot be organised at this venue). Together with actors of the urban society – such as associations, artists, or institutions – exhibition formats are to offer the possibility to co-design. We want to jointly devote ourselves here to relevant topics that concern our urban society and the public discourse in the city. Events accompany the exhibition theme.

And thus, we consider the Cologne City Museum to be the city’s lounge, a forum in which, in connection to the exhibition, these topics can be talked about, discussed, and – yes – perhaps also argued over. In this way, the Cologne City Museum becomes a “Museum for All”.



Fig. 6. A view of one of the rooms displaying museum objects, here the room labelled “What do we love?” which focuses on brands, such as Cologne Cathedral and the famous Eau de Cologne, photo by R. Spekking

The future of (city) museums

Museums – and especially city museums – have an enormous potential, one that is partly not yet exhausted, or even not yet discovered at all, to form significant counterweights to the disruptive forces in our societies, by once again becoming relevant places of (urban) society.

The museum as an institution can be an open place where people can exchange thoughts with one another and engage in conversation. Especially in light of the loneliness epidemic and social isolation and the shifting of discussion, communication, and engagement into the sphere of digital networks, which entails the coarsening of language and communication, museums can become the marketplaces of the 21st century, representing centres of human encounter and communication in an urban society.

Herein lies the future of museums, and specifically the future and the potential of the city museum. Museums must transform into collaborative places which address topical issues in dialogue with society, in order to allow new perspectives to permeate into their own work, to impact their character and their collections. Cooperations with diverse institutions outside the cultural sector can offer us the chance to broaden our perspective. The diversification of the public, of standpoints and insights will be the consequence. For this to happen, however, it is necessary that museums reach out to the urban society and the communities, approaching them openly and at eye level.

Furthermore, it will be important to transform museums much more strongly into meeting points and arenas of intercultural exchange and, thereby, of mutual understanding. City museums are particularly predestined to become such places. The city museum of the future is no longer only a “house of city history” in which the silverware of the city is presented out of a self-referential reflex, but a “house of the urban society” in which there is lively talk, discussion, and argument about the city of the present.

In order to lead the city museums into this future, it will be important that individual institutions move closer together, enter into dialogue, form networks, and learn from one another. In this way museums in general, and city museums in particular, will become places of the European spirit and of democracy.

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