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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: "The dream of The Old Town – Memories and reflections from a lifetime as museum director by Thomas Bloch Ravn" by Helle Ingerslev Kristensen

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After 28 years in the director's chair, Bloch Ravn tells vividly and in detail about the many years of work in running and developing the museum Den Gamle By (or in English: The Old Town) towards becoming the great flagship for culture and tourism in East Jutland, Denmark.



The museum's important international positioning is treated in detail in the book, and the description of the great benefit of seeking inspiration from other types of places to visit - and even amusements - is thought-provoking.

The many years of work to convey complex material culture, in an easily accessible form can be felt in a positive way in the book, and the many political, economic, administrative, and not least strategic considerations and battles from 1669 until today are interesting reading. In the book, a multitude of names are mentioned of the zealots among foundations, in the museum world and in the political layer, who in their own way participated in The Old Town's journey towards being the top international attraction that it is today. In the book, luminaries such as the former chairman of the board Peter Jensen, who largely helped to push the development of Den Gamle By, as well as other important East Jutland museums, get their well-deserved place.

It is to the book's advantage that Bloch Ravn has chosen to spend time delving into first, the work as a handyman in the management chair at Struer Museum, and then the difficult start with a conservative board and opposing management colleagues. It gives a broader understanding of the long tough streak and the many small defeats and victories that Bloch Ravn has experienced throughout his career.

The buildings, the craftsmanship, and the half-timbering are solidly placed as the basis for the work with the development of The Old Town, and here first stands the Coin Master's Mansion (Møntmestergården), followed later by the reimaging of the museum with the 1900s department stand as accomplishments that have been greatly helped along the way by Bloch Raven's political flair. The work on establishing the Danish Poster Museum and the Art Room (Kunstammeret) shows that Den Gamle By, under Bloch Ravn's leadership, managed to embrace a very broad thematic scope.

All the way through the book you can feel the clear strategy behind Den Gamle By's great success - namely that museums must be for people and with people, and here Thomas does not hesitate to name knowledge sharing as the most important museum task. On that front, the work with its dramatised museum knowledge sharing and living museum interpretation is perhaps the initiative at Den Gamle By that has created the biggest impression on the tradition of knowledge sharing in the Danish museum community. Reenactors in correct historical costumes who meaningfully involve the audience in cooking, needlework, crafts or other meaningful activities in the historic houses has been successful in museums all over the country - often with The Old Town as a model.

The museum's important international positioning is treated in detail in the book, and the description of the great benefit of seeking inspiration from other types of places to visit - and even amusements - is thought-provoking. Today people talk about the audience journey at


museums as a matter of course, but years ago catering, wayfinding, and toilet facilities were perhaps not as high on the agenda for some museum managers.

Also, of interest is the historical review of the concept of research in the Danish museum world, as well as the description and handling the need to research in The Old Town over the past 28 years. In this context, a fruitful collaboration with Aarhus University is worth highlighting as one of Bloch Ravn's strong cards. That research must never be amputated from a museum's other work within dissemination, collection and building maintenance, which may seem obvious, but it is nevertheless worth noting for today's museum managers, who are subject to a new museum act and thus a new reality.

At this time, when the East Jutland museums - and not least The Old Town - are winning their way when it comes to visitor numbers, it is perhaps worth sending a kind thought to the strong men and women on whose shoulders today's muses stand. Here, "The Dream of The Old Town" is the story of a vision that became a plan and then a reality, which without the tireless work of Bloch Ravn might have simply remained a dream.

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