The House of European History

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Abstract

At the end of 2015, the House of European History (HEH) will open its doors in Brussels. The paper describes the genesis and the development of this museum initiative launched and supported by the European Parliament. It discusses the challenges the project has to meet. How to combine sometimes diverging political, historical and museological agendas? How to face legitimate questions about the budget, the contents, the concerns about political intervention? How to involve the visitor? How to deal with complicated issues in 24 languages? How to develop a balanced and critical narrative about the history of Europe? These are the challenges the HEH has to face in order to become a place of meeting, discussion and debate around the complex but fascinating history of Europe.

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* The HEH was presented at the conference by Taja Vovk van Gaal. Her speech has been reviewed by Christine Dupont but the present text mainly reflects the rich team work accomplished since two years by the Academic Project Team helped by the Academic Committee.

Introduction

The project of the European Parliament to establish a House of European History (HEH) in Brussels is now often referred to in the debates, discussions and academic writing about history museums or the current thinking about memory around Europe (Kaiser et al. 2012; Vovk-van Gaal & Itzel 2012). Among all this research, EuNaMus is probably one of the most interesting and most deeply developed initiatives to focus on the museum as an important actor in the relationship between public authorities and the citizens in Europe. The reflections and conclusions of EuNaMus apply to national museums but could perfectly been taken as starting point for a transnational project such as the HEH. How to ensure the autonomy of the museum from political intervention? How to develop transparency towards the citizens in the context of broader audiences? How to overcome conflicts and tensions in order to become a place of debate founded on mutual understanding? How to establish 'bridge-building narratives' and act as 'forums for contested issues'? These questions (EuNaMus 2012) are part of the daily reflection of those who want to develop a history museum project in today's context of crisis.

It was therefore quite natural for the HEH team to co-organize the part of the EuNaMus conference of January 2012 dealing with the creation of new history museums in Europe. The HEH project was also one of the examples selected for the discussion. The present text is an attempt to answer the questions of the organisers. It is constructed in two parts. Firstly there is a description of the origins, the development and the current state of play in establishing a House of European History in Brussels. The second part will be dedicated to some of the main challenges of the project, according to the outlines that were proposed for the panel debate 'Entering the minefields'.

Brief history and presentation of the project

Brief history

The HEH project is not the first attempt to create a museum dedicated to the history of Europe. Already at the end of the 1970s, the European Commission had expressed a wish to install 'European rooms' in museums (Charléty 2004). Moreover and as the project is based in Brussels, the HEH has been often confused with another venture, that of the Museum of Europe or Musée de l'Europe, a private initiative launched in 1997, which was never achieved in terms of a permanent exhibition although it regularly organises exhibitions on European history which are broadly commented upon by specialists in social, political or museological studies (Mazé 2009; Exhibiting Europe). The HEH is one of the latest attempts in this series of initiatives.

The birth date of the HEH can be traced back to the inaugural speech of Hans-Gert Pöttering as President of the European Parliament, in February 2007. He presented then his intention of creating "a locus for history and for the future where the concept of the European idea can continue to grow, (...) a "House of European History"" (House of European History 2012).

From then, the process slowly developed, as an internal project of the European Parliament, led by its Bureau[1]. In December 2007, the Bureau constituted a Committee of Experts (9 historians and museum experts from different European countries), to create a concept for the future HEH. In September 2008, these experts presented a document called "a Conceptual Basis for a House of European History" which laid the foundations for the future work (Committee of

Experts 2008). In November 2008, the *Conceptual Basis* document received the approval of the Bureau, who at the same time proposed a governing structure for the HEH (Board of Trustees, Academic Committee, Bureau liaison committee (contact group) and a Building Committee).

The year 2009 was a time during which the Parliament approved a number of operational procedures relating to the project. At the same time, an international architectural competition was launched, to transform the chosen site (the former dental hospital George Eastman in Brussels) into a museum.

From January 2011 onwards, an Academic Project Team was recruited. This team, brought together from across Europe, then progressively developed the project and worked on different fields such as a visitors' policy, exhibition and collecting policies, a communication plan, and on the historical contents and narrative for the permanent exhibition.

In March 2011, the French architecture bureau Chaix & Morel and their international partners were designated as the winners of the competition for the transformation of the building (House of European History 2012). The building works started at the end of 2012. The opening of the HEH is foreseen for the last quarter of 2015.

Actors, figures and challenges

The first definition of the project was set out by the Committee of Experts in 2008. The aim was to develop a "modern exhibition, documentation and information centre" on European history. The permanent exhibition was seen as the central part of the activities but was to be developed alongside a programme of temporary exhibitions, on the spot and travelling, as well as events, publications and a broad online offer (Committee of Experts 2008). This reflects the traditional missions of a modern museum which uses a broad range of tools to interact with its audience.

The stakes are high. In 1997 already, the well-known museologist Kenneth Hudson declared: "A single museum to include and represent European civilisation is to be seen. It would need to be shaped by a genius, not by a committee. Large size would be the enemy. Any attempt to produce an encyclopaedia would be disastrous (...)" (quoted by Vovk-van Gaal & Itzel 2012). Even if European history is more limited than European civilisation, one can only agree with Kenneth Hudson on the enormity of the task of developing a museum about such a complex and huge topic as the history of the continent. The complexity may be more problematic than the broad scope of the history itself, because the visitor is central to the project. This visitor, as very often in new museum projects, is very broadly targeted in terms of geographical, generational and socio-cultural provenance. Furthermore we have to assume that the average visitor has no comprehensive knowledge of the topics that will be presented. She/he also has a limited amount of visiting-time available in which to grasp the main ideas and messages of the exhibitions. The choice has been made from the very beginning of the project to develop all exhibitions and programmes in the 24 official languages of the European Union (including Croatian). With this in mind, the question of how to present a complex and broad topic in an easily understandable way takes on a new level of complexity. That is one of the main challenges of the project which, in consequence, needs to be based on the broadest possible range of modern museological tools and methods, using for instance a layered presentation of contents which would allow visits on different levels and at different rhythms.

Another challenge is to start from scratch without a collection. That means that a narrative should be built up first and secondly, appropriate assets from across Europe should be found. Here questions of time as well as the availability of information on museum objects on the internet (especially those which have been kept in storage depots) are also challenging factors.

The difficulty of the task did not escape Kenneth Hudson when he referred to a 'genius' instead of a committee, in order to be equal to the task. This genius does not exist and the European Parliament could only ensure a certain level of interdisciplinarity and cultural diversity in establishing interacting groups of people to develop the project. The Academic Committee (advisory board on the contents) brings together at the same time historians working in Academia and museum professionals. Today (at the end of 2012), the Academic Project Team (executive team developing the contents and programmes of the HEH) is made of 22 persons including 15 different European nationalities widely spread from North to South and from East to West, speaking about 20 different languages and coming from very diverse disciplines from history, archaeology, art history, museology, sociology, etc. and developing skills in all the professional fields needed in museums, such as curatorship, education, collection management, communication, administration, finances, legislation, etc.

This variety of cultures, viewpoints and perspectives does not always make the task easier but certainly richer. It diverts the project from the pitfalls of a too Western (or too Northern or other) view on history. It forces the team to search for less easy solutions, to develop creative responses to challenges and is also an advantage in addressing a wide spectrum of visitors. With the best will to develop the HEH with all the requested academic accuracy and the highest standards of the museum profession, the final result will only reflect the choices made by a team, with the help of several advisory bodies, and the particular times and circumstances of its development. The museum is always a 'negotiated reality' (Cannizzo 1991) and the visitor should be aware of the relativity of the choices. Confrontation with different interpretations of history is also one of the tools that will be used to convey this multifaceted view of European history.

The third challenge is more visible. Launched in 2007 'in tempore non suspecto' the HEH is developing today in the context of an economic crisis that affects Europe in a particular way, with a fall of confidence in the Euro and in the European project in general. The cost of the project is not negligible in these times of overall cuts in cultural projects. It has also been strongly disputed within the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets. It is the responsibility of the political initiators to justify these costs towards the citizens and tax payers who raise legitimate questions about the relevance of the projects. That is what Hans Gert Pöttering did during the press conference hold in Brussels on the 25th January 2012 (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2012).

But it is also the conviction of the Academic Project Team that the museum can be a place of debate and understanding about the current situation, including the crisis itself, from the perspective of its historical roots. The widespread use of the past in all political and media discourse about the present situation, means that such places of reflection become interesting tools to analyse our current world, our current Europe, in the light of history.

The HEH will cost money. 4 000 m^2 of permanent exhibition, 800 m^2 of temporary exhibitions, educational programmes, events, publications, online projects, etc., all this can not be developed without a minimal financial investment. Nevertheless, compared with some similar

projects, the costs of the HEH are quite moderate. For the extension and the renovation of the building the foreseen budget amounts to 31 millions €. The permanent exhibition's costs have been agreed at 2 200 € per m^2 which is rather average for current museum standards. The launch costs for the exhibitions taken together are estimated at 21,4 millions €, including a high budget for multilingualism. Further 3,75 millions € are foreseen for the collection (for the acquisition of objects but even more for insurance cover, travel, restoration and costs of short and long-term loans). These 56,15 millions € are the sum necessary to launch the project. This building and preparatory phase is financed by the European Parliament alone, but after the opening, it is expected that the running costs will be supported by other institutions and sponsors as well.

Spending public money in times of crisis is never easily accepted. The debate about the aptness and timing of such a financial outlay is democratically legitimate. Inside the European Parliament, the debate on the project actually began in the Budgets Committee when the costs of the HEH were on the discussion table. This is only natural. However, the debate goes well beyond the financial issue.

Entering the minefields?

A political initiative

As with many museums – and furthermore as with all of the more or less recent (national) history museum projects – the HEH is a political initiative. The political 'colour' of the initiators has been discussed elsewhere (Kaiser et al. 2012) but the fact that the idea was launched inside the European Parliament gives a certain plurality to it. In fact the HEH is supported by the main political groups of the Parliament. The largest of these groups are represented at the head of the HEH in the person of Hans Gert Pöttering (European People's Party) and Miguel Angel Martinez Martinez (Socialists and Democrats), respectively presidents of the Board of Trustees and of the Bureau Contact Group, both acting as political 'godfathers' to the project.

In connection with this first observation, it is even more important to stress that the contents of the project are developing independently from the political authorities. This independence has been underlined from the beginning of the venture (Committee of Experts 2008). It was emphasised again by the new president of the European Parliament (Martin Schulz, Socialists and Democrats) when he met the Academic Committee on the 24th September 2012. Beyond these statements of principle it can be said that the autonomy of the Academic Project Team in its daily work is effective. Historians and museologists have a different logic to that of politicians. This is not the place here to discuss the controversial meeting-point between history and politics. But, as Peter Aronsson has pointed out in his concluding speech at the Brussels conference, if historians step back from the public debate about the past, politicians will occupy the terrain. The solution lies not so much in a complete (and utopian) autonomy of both fields but rather in mutual respect.

The necessary debate surrounding such a project begins inside the project itself. The constant discussion among the members of the Academic Project Team provides a first layer of fruitful exchanges on the contents of the HEH, enriched by the different backgrounds and experiences but sometimes also by conflicting ideas. The debate is further progressed in the Academic Committee meetings, which offer a useful ground for further deepening of the contents. The

outcome of such discussion about the permanent exhibition is not a mere compromise - which could only lead to an impoverished narrative. On the contrary it reflects the wish to express different interpretations of historical processes.

The question of public debate with the citizens is perhaps the most important issue. There is no ideal recipe for how to deal with public concerns when such a large-scale project is launched. Insofar as the appropriateness and timing of this initiative is concerned, recent failures (Dutch National History Museum, Maison de l'Histoire de France) invite caution. In each of these latter cases the initiative was abandoned after endless public debates about the political nature of the project and the legitimacy of spending public funds for that purpose (as reflected elsewhere in this publication). But in other instances, it was shown that the discussions ceased as soon as the museum was opened - as in the case of German institutions that experienced then a huge public success (see the article of R. Beier-de Haan in this publication).

But there is another debate to be had, and that is about the contents of the museum. This one is as legitimate as the first but much more complex. How and with whom could a discussion be launched about what should be presented in a museum of European history? How to avoid endless and contradictory discussions? It is impossible to please everybody. A politically correct vision of European history would not only be difficult to develop but it would be even more inclined to create a depleted narrative - and a very boring museum. Some issues can be added here to the debate.

Which European history?

A large part of the debates surrounding new museums of national history arose because of the presumed or asserted purpose of instrumentalising these institutions in order to promote national identity. The main criticisms against the Maison de l'Histoire de France were related to the controversy around the 'identité nationale' (Babelon et al. 2011). The idea of supporting something such as a European identity is not totally absent in the political justifications expressed at the launch of the HEH[2]. Such claims are not illogical in the framework of the European Union and it is interesting to note that, over time, the discourse of the Belgian private initiative of the Musée de l'Europe imperceptibly slipped from an explicit claim to create a European identity towards less engaged justifications (Mazé 2009).

The notion of identity is one of the most debated in the field of cultural studies. In association with the activities of museums, it has given rise to a vast ensemble of literature and reflections (Korff & Roth 1990). Confronting this issue was to a certain extent unavoidable at the beginning of the process to develop the fundamentals of the HEH. Starting from the observation that there is no commonly agreed definition of what a European identity could be, the reflections of the Academic Project Team arrived at the conclusion that the notion of identity is too reductionist and too static to be used as a basis for the HEH. If the HEH were to propose its own definition of a European identity, in a top-down movement towards the museum's visitors, this could only block any discussion instead of creating debate - which has to be central in a museum.

That is the reason for the choice of the more fluid notion of collective memory as a tool to support the narrative of the permanent exhibition and the various programmes. Memory is at the same time what divides and what unites Europe. This notion has a strong critical potential, which can be used to promote a dynamic dialogue with the visitors. The choice of focusing on the 20th

century is of course the perfect terrain for this kind of debate, even if memory-conflicts about this century are among the hottest topics in history as well as in politics. Building the HEH as a reservoir of European memory offers the possibility to reflect on different perceptions of the past and different interpretations of history (Mork 2012). The Academic Project Team is aware of the difficulty of this mission. But the HEH is neither the first nor the latest museum meant as a 'forum for contested issues'.

The dual objectives of developing a coherent and layered narrative understandable by the visitor on one hand, and the promotion of a multi-perspective view on history on the other could appear contradictory. It should be said, however, that this dichotomy is at the basis of many museums and also creates an opportunity to avoid the dangers of being static, so as to develop instead a moving and evolving approach to the history of Europe.

Europe, in the understanding of the HEH, is not restricted to the European Union. The whole continent is taken into consideration with its changing geographical borders and evolving definition through time. In the concept of the HEH, such evolutions are more important than the fixed realities.

The choice of a European perspective is of course restrictive. As it appeared in the first internal discussions on the contents of the House, it would have been interesting to see Europe from other (non European) perspectives, which is always possible and will certainly be explored in temporary exhibitions. But inside a political project founded and funded by the European Parliament, and firstly "aimed at Europeans" (Committee of Experts 2008), it made little sense to digress from this restriction. This choice means a focus on historical processes and events which have originated in Europe, which expanded across Europe, and which are relevant up to nowadays. These criteria allow the HEH to take into account large periods of history without losing a more analytical focus.

This European perspective is reinforced by the choice taken to underline with greater emphasis the European Integration process. This can be seen here as an example which underlines the way of developing the content work.

According to the first outline, confirmed by the further developments of the project, the permanent exhibition focuses on the European history of the 20th century, with a particular attention to the process of European Integration from 1945.

In itself, this does not determine the way of developing this story within a museum narrative. Is the European Integration process the result of a longer history? It was certainly the idea of the Musée de l'Europe when they launched their project in 1997, stating that "the Union is the culmination of a millenary process" (quoted by Cadot 2010). Reading the *Conceptual Basis* of the HEH, a teleological vision is not so clearly expressed, even if expressions like "the commonality of roots" (Committee of Experts 2008) could allow it to be thought that the Union had roots in the past.

The Academic Project Team tries to reject any teleological view. At the same time, how to avoid the danger of a narrative presenting the European Integration as a success story? Presenting the European process as an achievement that begins when the chaos of WWII ends is a classical approach (Kaiser et al. 2012). History is often seen, especially in its political use, as a one-directional success process, as stressed for instance by one of the 'godfathers' of the HEH: "the HEH should reveal (...) the process that (...) has transformed a continent that was for

centuries characterized by war, authoritarianism and intolerance, so that it has become a universal reference for integration, democracy, freedom, respect for human rights, social progress, prosperity and peace" (Martinez 2011). These words are almost the same as those expressed by the Nobel Committee recently, in awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union (Press Release Nobel 2012). This 'peace narrative' can only be strengthened by the recent decision to donate the medal and the certificate of the Nobel Peace Prize to the HEH as the first items of its permanent collection (Press Release E.U. 2012). This will of course be part of what will be on display for the visitor but, precisely in order to avoid a one-directional perspective, it will be presented in the broader context of the debate and the challenging and opposing voices that arose in relation to the choice of awarding the Prize to the European Union. Travelling to Oslo with the official delegation in December 2012, two colleagues of the Academic Project Team were able also to collect material about the counter-demonstrations as well as eurosceptic items. This is an example of how the European project can be situated in the light of a debate - instead of being presented as an untouchable positive achievement.

It is not easy however to find a way, torn between political aspirations and professional will, to engage the visitor in a debate on the achievements but also on the failures of the European process. The orientation points chosen by the Academic Project Team do not tell a success story but rather, try to make understandable the difficulties of a continent in surviving the loss of its hegemony. The European Integration process is a child of the Cold War, it is not a smooth easy path to success but rather a succession of steps forward and backwards. It has produced as many losers as winners, it has completely transformed European capital cities such as Brussels for the better and for the worse. And the list of examples could go on.

This contrasting look at history is a tool for the other parts of the permanent exhibition as well and will remain the method used throughout all the programmes of the HEH.

Between the house and the museum

The historical content of the HEH is, furthermore, dictated by its form. History is here communicated through a museum and this has important implications.

The term 'house' used instead of 'museum' has often been discussed. Some have stressed that the name 'Maison' was chosen to express the intention that the 'Maison de l'Histoire de France' was to be a place of collective history rather than official history (see the text of E. François in this publication). In the case of the HEH the reference point was the House of German History (Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) in Bonn (Kaiser et al. 2012). In this case the name 'house' was preferred to the term museum in order to avoid any misunderstandings about an institution supported by federal institutions that have no authority on museums in the German organisation of cultural policy.

Beyond the issue of the model, it is clear that political initiators had developed a fear of the term 'museum'. This derived mainly from a lack of awareness of what a modern museum is. The definition of the museum is still a matter of numerous debates among specialists (Davis et al. 2010). Without adding a new definition here, it is timely to stress two aspects of what makes the specificity of the museum medium.

The exhibition is one of the main tools of communication for the HEH. The exhibition narrative is central to this process of communicating history. But a historical narrative is of

course not specific to a museum. What makes the originality of the museum is that this narrative is conveyed through objects and atmospheres with which the visitor is deeply involved.

The first aspect is the collection. In Kenneth Hudson's above-quoted speech "a Museum of Europe (...) must be centred on objects, not on photographs and texts". A museum has to use all possible mediators to convey messages, ideas and feelings about the past. For the HEH objects are taken to mean real three-dimensional objects as well as documents, and archival materials as tangible heritage, to be completed by records of intangible heritage. The collection management policy foresees collecting in two phases: until the opening of the House, end 2015, and on the long-term after the opening. Collections will be on loan basically for the permanent exhibition. The first purchase offers are currently being considered, thus starting the specific documentation process of the history of European unification. As already mentioned, a special collecting project was undertaken in relation the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2012.

Nevertheless, the museum experience can not be restricted to a narrative supported by a collection. The experience is, in the first instance, an experience for the visitor. In this respect the main statement of purpose of the HEH is certainly to make the visitor central in the project.

If this visitor's centrality is obvious in the process of developing a museum, to achieve this wish through daily work is not necessarily an easy task. Firstly, because of the huge diversity of potential visitors[3] with a wide range of expectations. The first surveys conducted with focus groups have shown that visitor wishes could indeed be quite diverse according to the geographical provenance of the visitors or to their generation, to mention just two variables (House of European History, Aggregate report 2012). How to connect visitors with European history? The personal (or family, school, etc.) relationship with the past varies largely according to these differences. The choice of focusing on the 20th century means that for many events and processes, "the circle of active memory is about to be closed", as Jorge Semprun pointed out in 2005[4]. But for others the memory is still active with different levels of sensitivity, according to the generations to which they belong. The necessary distance taken by historians in the academic field has to be understood differently in a museum environment. In the modern way to consider a museum, the visitor is not the passive recipient of a message, she/he interacts with the contents.

There are different ways of fostering the necessary dialogue with the visitor. Practical tools can be used in the exhibitions to engage this participation, such as connecting concepts. In the HEH recurring motives create relationships between different parts of the narrative. One example is the idea of centre and periphery. This enduring topic in European history remains central, even today, to the debate about the development of the European Union. Over time, different areas of Europe have occupied the role of the centre or of the periphery, spatially and psychologically. It could be said that Europe has developed mainly through these processes of shifting borders, centres and powers. For every European individual, the sense of belonging or of marginalisation is important, for instance in relation to the development of the European Union. This idea can act as an interesting conceptual tool to stimulate reflection by the visitor about a sense of belonging or, on the contrary, of exclusion.

Another tool, widely used in museums dealing with contemporary issues, is the participation of the visitor in the collecting process of stories, memories and even objects (some examples in Svanberg 2010). Beyond practical difficulties in developing this kind of action on some well

framed topics (for instance the fall of the Iron Curtain), at the European level this can be an action with high potential and fill this 'reservoir of collective memory' that the HEH is expected to become.

Once again it is important to make very clear to the visitor that the contents of the museum are only the product of the choices made by a team at a certain moment. The interaction with the visitor can and has to make the contents evolutionary. At the same time modesty is a key attitude in the difficult mission of building the HEH. This institution does not possess a truth on European history. There are as many histories as historians and the options taken in the HEH will only be new ones, inspired by and added to others. They will evolve with time and with the participation of the visitors. Despites all efforts to remain as open as possible the HEH will be received by some as a kind of truth on European history imposed top-down on the public. The project is already presented in this way, even in academic research (Kaiser et al. 2012). Although the team is aware of the complexity of doing so, it remains hopeful that it will be able to break this authoritative role of the museum. As recalled by the EuNaMus researchers, the latter role does not correspond any more to the missions of a museum of the 21st century.

For this reason this presentation could not be much more than the expression of wishes and ideas and certainly not the definitive portrayal of what the HEH will be. The answer to that question will only be possible when the House will be open, with the visitors as the main actors of its development.

Notes

1   Composed by the president and 14 vice-presidents, "the Bureau is the body that lays down rules for Parliament. It draws up Parliament's preliminary draft budget and decides all administrative, staff and organisational matters". HTTP: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/00766d87cc/Political-bodies.html

2   In his inaugural speech of February 2007, Hans Gert Pöttering had spoken of "a locus for the European identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union" (Committee of Experts 2008).

3   By visitor we mean here the people who will visit the museum in Brussels as well as all the participants in the HEH programmes disseminated across Europe mainly via Internet.

4   On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Buchenwald camp's liberation.

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