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FEATURE

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vol. 5 issue 1 | spring 2011

Public-private partnership to open historical city centre to all

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The accessibility of historical buildings and city spaces must be improved, not only for people with disabilities, but for everyone. This is the focus of the joint European initiative, the League of Historical Accessible Cities, under the aegis of the EFC. To date, nine foundations and six cities from five countries are participating in the project. The Danish contribution is backed by a partnership of four Danish foundations and a municipality who have joined forces to open the centre of the historic city of Viborg, and to show how an active and accessible cultural heritage can create growth and increase tourism in historic cities.



The working group visits Viborg's Latinerhaven, one of the historical parks in the city centre.

Uneven cobblestones, stairways, and narrow sidewalks and doors constitute some of the physical challenges to be met when people want to visit a historical city centre, a church, or a museum in an old building.

Such cultural and historical resources ought to be available to us all. However, to the elderly or to those with walking impairments or disabilities, physical barriers and inadequate set-ups can prevent them from even visiting the landmark at all.

So how is it possible to make historical city centres and buildings more accessible without compromising our cultural heritage? How do we turn our cultural heritage into an active resource from which we can all benefit? These are the issues the project aims to tackle.

A strong public-private partnership

The Danish contribution consists of a public-private partnership among four foundations and one municipality, who have come together with a shared vision – opening the centre of the historic city of Viborg and using this project to create new standards and methods for working with accessibility, both through physical initiatives and communication.

The project is backed by Realdania, The Labour Market Holiday Fund, the Bevica Foundation, The Danish Disability Foundation and the Municipality of Viborg. The four foundations met in 2010 and committed financially to realising this shared vision, and the partners hope that the results will be applied to other cities, both in Denmark and the rest of Europe. This

is why inspiration, communication and discussion of accessibility are also integral parts of the project, which, like other contributions to the League of Historical Accessible Cities, is to be widely publicised through a shared European website, among other channels.

The foundations invited three Danish cities to participate in a competition to become “the accessibility city”. The cities were asked to agree to co-finance the project, and the city centres were analysed in terms of their urban spaces, stakeholders and local accessibility policy.

Setting a good example

All three cities showed great interest, but eventually Viborg was chosen. One of Denmark's oldest cities, Viborg is enthroned on the top of a ridge and enjoys a magnificent and varied view of nature and a ribbon of lakes. In several of the city centre streets the cobblestones have been



The two steeples of the town's cathedral tower above the many well-preserved buildings in the city centre.

preserved and the old buildings are maintained with great care.

The city features both beauty, authenticity and a unique history, but at the same time, urban life resembles that of many other Danish cities. Notable historical buildings rub shoulders with the everyday life of the pedestrian zones – the potential of this encounter, however, is not allowed to blossom fully, and tourists do not enjoy multiple and various interlinked experiences. Finally, narrow sidewalks, cobblestones and stairways conspire to make it difficult for those with walking impairments and the elderly to make their way around. Thus Viborg is at once both quite special and completely normal, which is why deploying the project in this city will set a great example. The final phase of implementation of the project in Viborg is set to begin in spring 2012.

Accessible cities – A benefit to all

Specifically the project will encompass both physical improvements and exploration of the ways in which the history of

the city is told. A new “itinerary of accessibility” will lead residents and tourists through streets, urban spaces, and tourist attractions and into Viborg’s beautiful verdant backyards. Thus the history and commercial life of the city are woven together, bringing Viborg’s many forgotten stories to light and making them accessible, benefitting residents as well as tourists, whether or not they experience impairments. Improving pavements and establishing curb ramps can facilitate mobility, while sound, light and digital solutions can communicate the history of the city in new ways.

This holistic solution makes a lot of sense. First of all, an active and accessible cultural heritage makes the historical city more dynamic, rendering it more attractive to residents, tourists and businesses. Even more important, however, the increased accessibility means that cultural heritage does not just remain a resource for some. Finally it can be a resource for all.



Viborg's location on a steep incline is a tangible and exciting challenge to accessibility.

Project partners: Realdania, www.realdania.dk; The Bevica Foundation, www.bevica.dk; The Labour Market Holiday Fund (Arbejdsmarkedets Feriefond), www.aff.dk; The Danish Disability Foundation, www.vanfoerefonden.dk; and The Municipality of Viborg, www.viborg.dk

About the EFC League of Historical Accessible Cities

Aims of the project

The EFC League of Historical Accessible Cities project, an initiative of the Centre's Disability Interest Group, aims to improve the accessibility of historical towns and promote sustainable tourism development, bringing added value from the foundation sector. Our aim is to find innovative ways to reconcile cultural heritage protection and accessibility. Our goal is not only to improve accessibility of historical towns for people with disabilities so that they and their families can enjoy a full day of leisure, but also to raise awareness and develop projects that can serve as inspiration for other foundations and local authorities.

Foundations and cities involved

The project will be simultaneously implemented by a group of foundations in countries across Europe, each of them in partnership with the local authorities of the historical town of their choice. So far, Fondazione Banca Monte di Lucca will work with Lucca, Italy; Fondazione CRT with Ancona, Italy; Fondation Réunica with Mulhouse, France; and Fundación ONCE with Avila, Spain, which was the first-ever winner of the European Commission Award for Accessible Cities.

How it works

A concrete pilot project will be developed in each member town, consisting of an accessible tourist route of approximately one kilometre, which is feasible for people with reduced mobility, in the historical city centre. This route will include some interesting buildings, museums, parks, restaurants, shops, hotels and city tourism information centres, all in an effort to stimulate tourism among the 80 million people with disabilities living in Europe.

The project will apply for the European Commission Award for a European Accessibility Initiative and produce a best practice guide showcasing each individual project. A common methodology has been agreed, but the way in which each individual country is implementing and participating in the project varies enormously, bringing richness and depth to the initiative. The project is at an initial stage and is looking to increase the number of participants to be as geographically representative as possible.

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