

ACCESSIBILITY IN HISTORICAL CITY CENTRES – NEW WAYS TO THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF VIBORG

Architectural competition, first round: the jury's report (*short summary*)

Behind the Danish contribution to the League of Accessible Historical Cities stands a partnership between the municipality of Viborg and four Danish foundations: Realdania, the Bevica Foundation, The Labour Market Holiday Fund and the Danish Disability Foundation. The objective of the project is to improve accessibility for all to the cultural heritage in the historical city centre of Viborg in a way that preserves its historical authenticity.

An architectural competition in two rounds

The project in Viborg focuses on increasing accessibility through physical improvements and innovations in communication. The first phase of the project consists of an architectural competition in two rounds. The first round ended in the middle of November 2011. Here five prequalified, cross-disciplinary teams developed, described and illustrated their ideas and suggestions for making the historical city centre more accessible. Two of the five teams have been chosen to advance to the second round of the competition, which will conclude with the announcement of the final winner in the spring of 2012.

The task of the five teams

The project "Accessibility in historical city centres – new ways to the cultural heritage of Viborg" seeks to demonstrate how accessibility in a historical, Danish city centre can be improved for the enjoyment of tourists and residents alike, so that the cultural heritage of Viborg can be experienced by everyone, regardless of their physical abilities.

The first round of the competition consisted of four subtasks:

1. Overview / masterplan

The participants had to suggest how to strengthen the experience of the city centre by integrating selected locations holistically to guide residents and tourists through streets, urban spaces, and tourist attractions, bringing together the historical and commercial aspects.

2. Sections

In addition to the larger, coherent overview, the participants had to choose two smaller sections of the city centre, to showcase in greater detail how the team meant to create accessibility, both physically and in terms of communication.

3. Process description

Each team had to develop a plan for implementing the project, including descriptions of project organisation and involvement of residents, users and stakeholders.

4. Economy

Each team must account for the disposition of the entire sum allocated, including a percentage-wise distribution of principal items.



SCT. MOGENS GADE

LL. SCT. HANS GADE

ST. SCT. HANS GADE

GRÅBRØDRE
KLOSTER

AMTMANDS-
KARRÉEN

STÆNDER
PLADSEN

NYTORV

DOMKIRKEPLADSEN

SKØVGARDS-
MUSEET

LATINER-
HAVEN

HJULTORVET

ST. SCT. MIKKELS GADE

SCT. MATHIAS GADE

SORTEBRØDRE
KIRKE

ST. SCT. PEDER STRÆDE



Tegnforklaring
..... Konkurrenceområde

THE WINNING PROPOSALS

Two winners

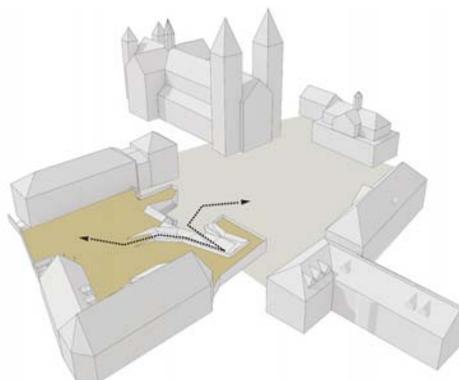
In spite of the interesting ideas and visionary presentations, the jury found that none of the five proposals fully solved the challenge of showing new ways to accessibility in the historical city centre of Viborg. Thus the first round concluded with the selection of not one but two winners. The two winners advance to a second round of competition, where they must further develop and refine their proposals on the basis of the comments of the jury.

Winner A: Viborg: Our History, Our Life

This proposal takes its point of departure in the city's potential for expanding urban life through the staging of its cultural history. The central structure is a sculptured ramp in a contemporary design, just next to Viborg Cathedral. The ramp improves accessibility in the historical city centre by transcending the change in level and connecting two of the city's central spaces. At the same time, the ramp itself has the potential to become a new attraction in the city centre of Viborg.

The core concept draws on two different ways of mapping the city, inspired partly by the Italian urban planner Noli, who mapped the public spaces and "voids" to make the spatial con-

nections comprehensible, partly by the maps used at ski resorts that guide skiers down the mountain according to their individual ability. Thus city routes are suggested in different levels of accessibility.



Winner A: The sculptural ramp connecting the two urban spaces

In addition to being well documented and well presented, the jury found the idea of the sculptured ramp very interesting in the way a new (public) layer is added to the urban space and to history. They critique, though, that the emphasis on the staging of history through new sensory experiences and narrative layers,

which neglects the direct encounter with the historical milieu. The communication initiatives overshadow the excellent idea of connecting historical urban spaces with a new architectural layer.

The jury commends this proposal because:

- The approach to accessibility is extremely well documented, both in terms of analysis, descriptions and illustrations.
- The idea of the city routes of various levels of difficulty demonstrates that the team has a constructive and inclusive approach to working with accessibility.
- The ramp integrates the terrain into the solution and the placement is well chosen.

Winner B: The Treasures of Viborg

This proposal shows great empathy and insight into the history of the city and represents this as a coherent experience of royal and ecclesiastical power. The architectural solutions are discreet – almost invisible – and show great sensitivity to the present historical environment, for example using different types of paving in the streets and squares as natural guidelines as a help for people with visual impairments.

The jury finds it interesting that this proposal seeks to show the greatest possible respect for the historical surroundings while integrating accessibility seamlessly into the cityscape. This understated approach and respect for cultural heritage has challenged the other proposals, where the solutions are dominated by the communication effects. Nonetheless, the solutions in this proposal appear unclear and less engaging in those places where the minimal treatment of the terrain is insufficient.

The jury commends this proposal because:

- It creates functional physical accessibility facilities, which entail minimal visibility in and changes to the historical cityscape.
- The proposal to establish physical accessibility is architecturally convincing on a general level and is respectful of the historical architecture.
- It succeeds in representing the cultural heritage very directly to the visitor's intellect and senses with minimal use of digitalisation.



Winner B: *Creating accessibility to the Skovgaard Museum by improving a side entrance. The solution does not disturb the impressive looks of the main entrance.*



Winner A: Siteplan - the urban spaces at the cathedral



Winner A: Accessibility now and after implementation of the improvements. Black = most difficult, red = some difficulties, green = accessible to all.



Winner B: Section - the small, steep street Nytorgvgyde



Winner B: Nytorg, one of the central urban spaces in the city centre, and view through Nytorgvgyde

THE JURY'S GENERAL REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Accessibility for all

The five proposals from the first round of the competition choose different ways to create an accessible city centre, and feature various conceptualisations of accessibility, disability and user inclusion. These differences manifest themselves partly in the design of the actual initiatives, partly in the way the teams describe their visions and solutions. In this context the jury does not wish to indicate a "right" or correct solution but to highlight for the participants a decisive factor: the need to focus on the user when working with accessibility.

Gaining access to ...

Good accessibility is achieved through a holistic strategy which takes its point of departure in the user. Several of the proposals seem to conceptualise accessibility to cultural heritage as "access to knowledge", in the sense that the public can read or hear about the history of Viborg, e.g., in a folder or audio guide. These solutions appear disconnected from the project's vision of improving access to the direct, physical and sensory encounter with the historical environment in such a way that persons with limited hearing, vision or mobility are also included.

Equal access

Accessibility can be measured by counting the number of barriers that must be surmounted in order for an individual to use the facilities and content. The experience of equal access often depends on whether the users are able to go together with and be accompanied by e.g., family or friends. The proposals respond to this theme in different ways, and the jury believes that the solutions that provide equal access for all user groups are the most successful.

Focus on the user

Certain proposals represent accessibility as something that is implemented out of consideration for persons with disabilities; an approach which already at the outset differentiates between individuals and confers upon persons with disabilities an undesirable special status – no matter how well intentioned. Demands for accessibility in the physical environment are not based on consideration but on legislation, conventions and guidelines, whose goal it is to create equal opportunities for all.

Accessibility is a potential

Only few of the proposals employ an approach that conceptualises improved acces-

sibility as a potential for strengthening settlement, tourism and commerce, especially when accessibility is incorporated in architecture, landscape, products and services. It would be advantageous to integrate this perspective on accessibility more actively in project development, also in the long term.

Equality - also in speaking

Words contribute to shaping reality. When certain proposals refer to "the disabled person", this contributes to maintain a distinction between "us" and "them", as well as an (outdated) understanding of disability that places the individuals in question in a special group, i.e., outside the general community. Therefore it is very important to focus linguistically on the person before the disability, thereby on the similarity between persons.

Thorough analysis makes for quality

The proposals deal with physical accessibility, topography, the history of Viborg, traffic conditions and municipal plans for the development of the city centre, and generally the analyses are thorough and well crafted. The jury's review of the five proposals shows that a broad and thorough preliminary analysis leads to a good final product.

Overview / Masterplan

While some proposals create accessibility through discreet solutions and point out that full accessibility for everyone cannot be achieved everywhere, others focus on the senses and draw on visual and sound effects to bring history to life.

Focus on the terrain

The overarching goal of the architectural competition has been to seek innovative solutions for guiding all individuals – in an equal manner – through a city centre with a rich and well-preserved building culture. Reviewing the proposals has made clear how important

a part the terrain itself and the landscape plays for the identity of Viborg, and also how solutions must take their point of departure in this fact.

In this context the two winning proposals have drawn the particular attention of the panel of jury: Winner A adds a new level to the terrain which both increases accessibility in the present urban space and adds new functions. Winner B is commended by the jury because the challenges posed by the terrain are discreetly solved in ways that blend into the historical city space. Both proposals demonstrate how it is possible to make an area accessible to everyone while ensuring that accessibility is not subsequently experienced as a special theme.

No wheelchair lifts nor temporary ramps

Two of the proposals suggest transcending differences of level using external wheelchair lifts and mobile ramps. The jury does not believe that these kinds of temporary, mobile solutions are an expression of equal accessibility; on the contrary, they expose the user in an inappropriate manner and prevent larger groups from being together.

The importance of an integrated approach

The task of creating a “route of accessibility” in the historical city centre - a coherent route that can strengthen the overall experience - has inspired the participants to consider whether it would be a good idea to establish a pre-planned route or whether to choose another strategy. As an alternative to a precisely delineated route, several teams propose creating a network connecting the urban space of the city centre with various points, so it is possible to choose what to experience and in which order.

However, they tackle the challenge differently: one of the proposals seeks to create a “web of cultural heritage” building on the principle that the visitor must not be constrained by his or her previous choice while moving about the historical city centre. Another proposal uses “points of interest”, and a third is sketched as a combination of a set route with a well-marked trail across the city and a so-called “cultural heritage cloud”.

Minimalism or distinctive solutions?

Two of the proposals have sought to combine accessibility and presentation through a unified design concept, which uses a recognizable material to mark the new instalments and

guide the visitor through the city. One proposal uses Corten steel to demarcate a trail in the pavement that wends its way through the city and expands when passing through certain urban spaces, like squares and plazas. The jury does not view these proposals favourably, as they focus primarily on urban design and not on accessibility. Moreover the trail in the pavement is very marked and visible, and the jury finds that it will be too controlling and will dominate the visitor's experience of the historical city centre.

The limitations of reversibility

Two of the proposals also draw on "points of impact", where new instalments are both recognizable and adjusted to the individual locations. Moreover, these instalments are designed to neither physically change nor damage what is already there, so that they can be removed without leaving traces or imprints. The jury agrees that as a design principle, reversibility is valuable. The majority of the jury believe, however, that reversibility should not be given special weight in the assessment of the proposals, since a rule of full reversibility would limit the options.

Sections

The five proposals prioritize differently their choices of sections to exemplify their general ideas, although all of them do include the connection between the cathedral and the main shopping streets.

The jury takes special notice of the solutions of the two winning proposals. Winner A lets a sculptural ramp connect the two central urban spaces around the cathedral, while B suggests a promenade to connect the various spaces and levels of the historical city centre.

Communication

All the proposals link together architectural and communications initiatives, and in all five proposals the communications initiatives focus specifically on digital solutions such as websites, wi-fi hotspots and apps for smartphones. Three proposals include a website, where information can be retrieved about physical accessibility, what to see and do, and the history of the city. This opportunity for advance planning is an important prerequisite, especially for people with disabilities.

Digital solutions: not always the answer

In general, the jury is critical of the fact that several of the digital solutions do not take into consideration the technical abilities of the user - in this case a target group that includes younger and older people, families with children and people with disabilities. Moreover, several of the proposals do not elucidate specifically how the digital solutions contribute to making the historical city more accessible.

Presentation in terms of the place itself

The jury is also critical of the balance between the presentation of history and the experience of being actually and physically present in the historical city. Solutions that take their point of departure in the terms of the location and do not exaggerate this presentation, have appealed particularly to the jury, but none of the five proposals achieve a fully satisfactory balance.

THE PROJECT IN FACTS

Phases of the project

- **Phase 1 (June - October 2010):** In the introductory phase the partners initiated an analysis of three cities and estimated their potential for being the “city of accessibility”. The Municipality of Viborg was chosen and entered the partnership.
- **Phase 2 (October 2010 - April 2012):** This phase comprised start-up, programming and competition. In Viborg the new “itinerary of accessibility” is being identified, along with historical “hot spots”. A cross-disciplinary competition is staged with a view towards selecting a coordinating contractor.
- **Phase 3 (April 2012 - Fall 2012):** Beginning in the spring of 2012, the coordinating contractor will develop a project proposal to be carried out in collaboration with the steering committee, a consulting knowledge-panel, and a local working group.
- **Phase 4 (From fall 2012):** In the final phase the project will be implemented and the results publicized both in Denmark and internationally. Publication will take place in collaboration with the other countries and cities of the League of Accessible Historical Cities under the aegis of the European Foundation Centre.

Project partners

- Realdania – www.realdania.dk
- The Bevica Foundation – www.bevica.dk
- The Labour Market Holiday Fund – www.aff.dk
- The Danish Disability Foundation – www.vanfoerefonden.dk
- The Municipality of Viborg – www.viborg.dk