



MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS IN DIALOGUE IV : STAM – GHENT CITY MUSEUM GHENT, APRIL 24, 2009

On Friday, April 24, 2009, the International Association of History Museums organised a visit for museum professionals to the *STAM – Ghent City Museum* in Belgium.

Participants to the Museum Professionals in Dialogue workshop were able to visit a still incomplete building site and museum project, scheduled for inauguration in 2010, with the aim of displaying the history of the city, its highlights, and also its perspectives. The discussion aimed not only at providing knowledge of this important project and at an enriching exchange of experiences, but also at providing feedback to the authors of the project itself.

All participants were impressed by the scale of the project, together with the tight schedule for its completion. The STAM is housed in the old convent and monastery of the bijloke, within an extensive historical site today housing many other cultural and educational facilities. While the construction of a new entrance building is well under way, and a number of infrastructure and basic restoration works have been finished, the interior restoration – refurbishment – museum installation works are only now beginning, with the aim of presenting the completed project to the public within one year.

This permanent exhibition of the museum, designed essentially as an introduction to the visit of the city itself, being outside the historic centre of Gent, will be joined by a riverboat shuttle service to the main tourist office of Gent, also under construction. Attention is given to the short-stay visitors, who form the major part of Gent's tourism today. On the other hand, the temporary exhibitions will be essentially designed for the local inhabitants, with a view to strengthening their bond to local history and identity, and creating a fidelity relationship with the museum itself.

The choice has been made to present within the permanent exhibition the evolution of architectural landscapes and of the uses of space as well as the general historic trends; not to focus on individual stories or personalities. Research of public opinion in potential visitors groups in Gent has shown this to be more attractive, and the museum curators are particularly attentive not to mistakenly present Gent as a metropolis antagonizing the big urban centres of the continent, while in reality it is a medium size city, albeit with rich historical background.

The museum circuit, being designed for the casual visitor and due to the building's own structure (a series of rooms surrounding a cloister) will offer a specific visiting path, with subject matters organised in a simple chronological way. Advanced technology is used, but in a way that it does not become predominant, and without it being essential to the visit. Even if disconnected, all multimedia and interactive devices will not be missed by the visitor, even though their effect while working must be impressive.

Although the content and orientation of the project was deemed more "traditional" than "innovative" by most participants of the workshop, it has the important advantage of being based on sound analysis, of offering an important scope of potential activity – for example the old refectory hall, part of the permanent visit circuit, can easily be transformed into a concert hall with admirable acoustics, without input or output of equipment – and of being well thought of as an institution inserted within the city functions and needs.

The IAMH and all the workshop participants express their gratitude to the STAM curators and organisers of the event, Mrs Christine De Weerd and Mr Hendrik Defoort, and congratulate them for their tireless motivation. The participants were splendidly received and catered for. Particular mention has to be made of the reception offered by the Mayor of the City of Gent – directing authority of the City Museum – on the evening following the event, right after an exciting boat ride to the city centre and a detailed presentation to the Mystic Lamb painting by Van Eyck, which is the "jewel of the crown" of Gent's historic identity.

May I also take this opportunity to welcome Mrs Christine De Weerd as a new member of the administration council of the IAMH.

Philippos Mazarakis-Ainian
IAHM president