

Dig This

Henning Larsen Architects designed a museum that rises from the landscape

Arthur Wortmann

Jan Madsen, director of the Moesgård Museum of archaeology and ethnography, stands in the foyer of his new building, keenly aware of the singularity of his situation. 'In Denmark, art museums have had the privilege of creating their own buildings. Museums like ours, however, are always housed in old structures. They show you an old building and tell you it has an atmosphere that suits your collection. And there you are, stuck in some inflexible monument.'

Established in 1861, the Moesgård Museum subsequently relocated to a site in central Aarhus before moving to a listed manor house just outside the city. The museum's new 16,000-m² building – a mere stone's throw away from the manor house – will open to the public on 10 October. Until then, work is being done on the exhibition design. 'You can tell visitors about cultural history in a lot of different ways, most of which are very, very boring,' says Madsen. 'When you want to tell *your* stories *your* way, you have to be able to make your own rooms.'

Accompanying Madsen is Niels Edeltoft of Henning Larsen Architects, winner of a 2005 competition for the design of the museum; others on the prestigious list of invitees were Tadao Ando, Keith Williams, Tod Williams Billie Tsien, Snøhetta, Kim Utzon and Cubo. 'What we did was very simple,' says Edeltoft. 'We cut three slices into the hill and then raised the roof. That's actually the whole idea.'

It's not surprising that the architects wanted a building with close ties to the landscape. The location could hardly be more beautiful. 'It is an unusually well-preserved cultural landscape with numerous prehistoric monuments still visible,' says Madsen, 'including burial sites from different periods of antiquity and field systems dating back to the Iron Age and the Middle Ages.'

'A lot of people come here to picnic and ride their mountain bikes,' says Edeltoft, adding that the new museum is meant to further stimulate the use of the landscape for leisure activities. 'The rectangular roof plane seems to grow out of the landscape. During the summer it will form an area for picnics, barbeques, lectures and traditional Midsummer's Eve bonfires. And if Jan allows it' – he glances hopefully at the museum director – 'people can hop on their mountain bikes, ride up the roof, go down the slide or pass through the slit in the upper part of the building, which connects to the landscape on the north.'

Both director and architect emphasize the project's 'democratic' spirit. Not only is the green roof accessible and inviting; other parts of the building itself are also open to the public. 'Everybody can enter the foyer, pass through the building, use the toilets or get a drink,' says Madsen. 'It's not until you go into the exhibition areas that you have to pay.' The publicly accessible foyer is to be the living heart of the museum. A wide staircase doubles as terraced seating, from which you can see other parts of the museum, including the green roof. On the level above are galleries for the display of ethnographic artefacts and a space for the museum's special exhibitions. The floor below holds the institution's permanent prehistoric collection.

'The interior of the building is designed like a varying terraced landscape. We drew inspiration from archaeological excavations, where layers of history are gradually unearthed and lost cities exposed,' says Edeltoft. 'We envisioned visitors moving through a vivid sequence of exhibits and scientific experiments like a traveller in time and space.' After exploring the galleries, visitors can stop to rest their eyes on the rolling landscape. Although the exhibition spaces themselves are theatrically illuminated, without daylight, they lead into what might be called 'antechambers', which do offer a view of the surroundings. There are four of these rooms, one on each side of the

building.

The masterpiece of the permanent collection is the Grauballe Man. A body dating from the third century BC, he was found in a peat bog near the village of Grauballe, some 30 km west of Aarhus, in 1952. Madsen's plans for the special exhibition programme are based on drawing visitors to the museum with an annual blockbuster. The opening show is to be 'The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army'. It will feature over 100 artefacts from a mausoleum discovered in 1974 in the Chinese province of Shaanxi. The figures found in the tomb date to 210-209 BC. Madsen looks forward to using the type of facilities he's never had before: 'I don't think there's a better space for special exhibitions in all of Europe. You can drive in here with a lorry, the security is great, the temperature is ideal, and everything is completely up to date. When you build a new house and get all the logistics right – that's just fantastic.'

Our tour through the vacant rooms of the museum ends, as expected, at the highest point of the building, on the roof, where a panoramic view of the surroundings stretches all the way to Aarhus Bay. Maybe this is what makes the museum feel so friendly and welcoming: it's merged with the landscape. More than a potentially iconic building and a destination for the more culturally inclined, it's a publicly accessible spot that wasn't here before. 'Residential development in the southern part of the municipality of Aarhus is progressing at such a rate,' says Madsen, 'that within the foreseeable future, Moesgård will no longer be situated outside the city. Instead, it will provide a breathing space in the midst of the urban sprawl.'

His words express a need for the roof to be appropriated by the public, in much the same way that Godsbanen has been. Another exciting new spot in Aarhus, Godsbanen is a cultural hub realized in 2012 by 3XN on the site of a former freight yard. Besides a diversity of indoor facilities, Godsbanen has the added value of an enormous folded-concrete roof where daredevil skateboarders can demonstrate madcap moves to their hearts' content. With the same sort of flare, the roof of the Moesgård Museum promises to become an equally popular urban attraction.

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