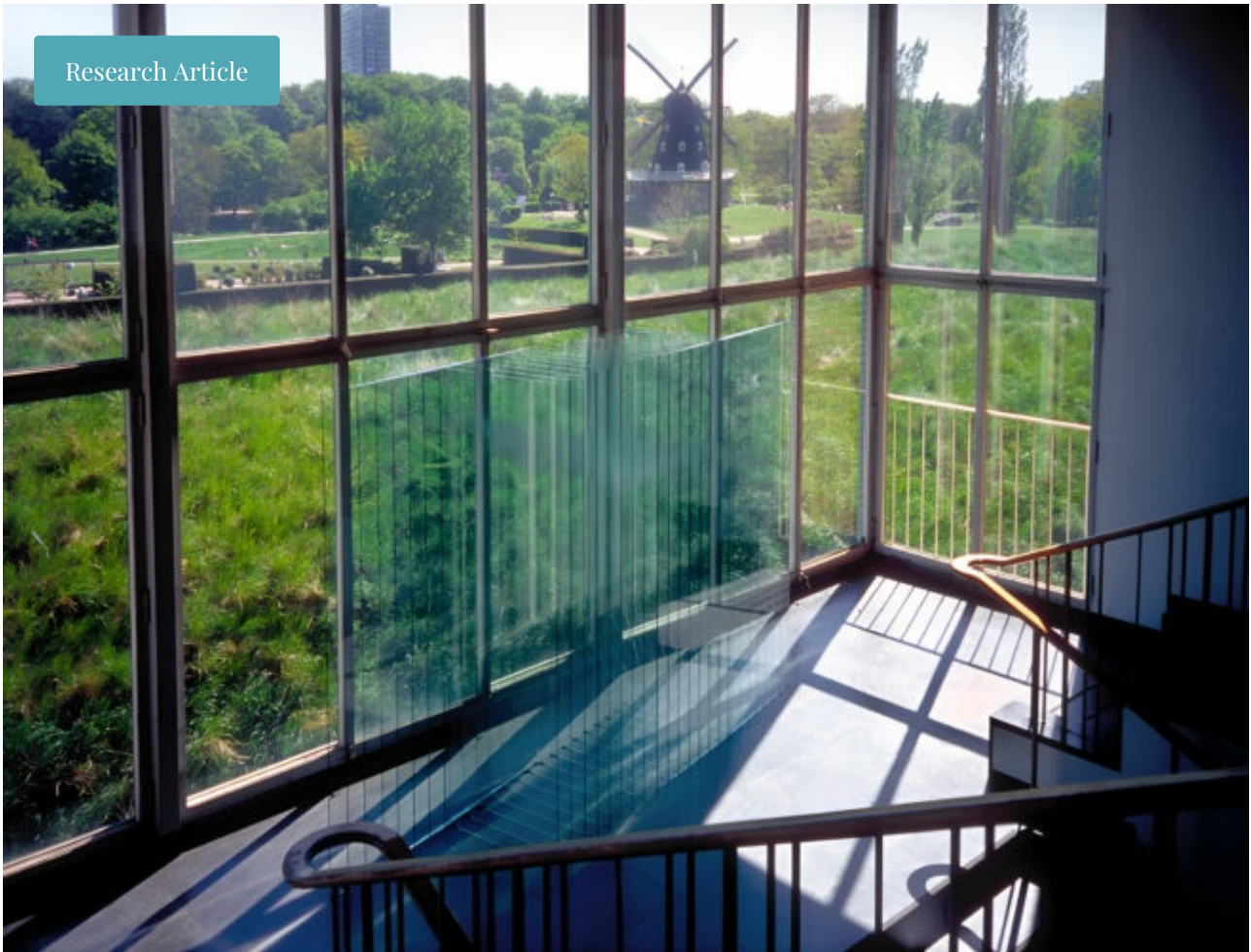


Research Article



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What defines a city museum? Three factors must be considered: the location, its connection to the urban population, and the nature of its collection. Is its identity as a city museum lost if there are issues of poor accessibility or interpretive challenges?

Urban Humanities: A Framework for Inclusion

How can urban humanities enhance our understanding of how the physical placement and the architecture is impacting the relationship between Malmö Museum and its surrounding communities? Urban humanities offer a multifaceted way of interacting with urban development and understanding the complexities involved when aiming to include the diverse Malmö population that increased massively during the last couple of decades to 365,644 inhabitants (as of December 31 2024), partly due to Malmö's status as a regional hub and partly because it is the third-largest and fastest-growing city in Sweden. Malmö has a young population, wherein 47% is under 35 and people from 187 different countries live in the city ([Population – Malmö stad](#) accessed 2025-05-20).

The demographic profile of Malmö must be mirrored in the activities and events at the museum to truly welcome the inhabitants of the city and to become a museum for the local communities. A lack of porosity between the museum and the underrepresented groups in the current audience at the museum can result in a risk that the activities, events, collections, and research might not reflect the demographics of the city and, consequently, it can become difficult to create meaningful exhibitions in the future regarding current history (Mohammadi, Wolgast, and Cerri 2025). Underrepresented groups are often lacking in the official history of cities and blind spots can result in gaps in research and collections that the official records and collections cannot fill. The museum needs to find ways to meet the needs of a young population to create a desire to engage with the museum and to build a future museum visit habit and attract repeat visits. Young people of the age group 16–20 years are a target group that the museum would like to attract in the future.

We need to identify the blind spots, whether they are grounded in financial means, age, or disabilities, and find a way to foster meaningful relationships with the surrounding communities to forge a way forward to engage and participate in building the pluralistic histories that weave the fabric of Malmö and its population through considering the factors that may alienate those that may feel excluded from traditional museum spaces by the physical appearance of the museums architecture and the placement of the museum and its accessibility (Nilsson Mohammadi, Wolgast, and Cerri 2025). This is unlike libraries that, in terms of ambience, can be considered more welcoming, and which have gone through the transition from being quiet spaces of contemplation to vibrant community hubs (Quinlan-Gagnon 2016).

The Role of Museums as Repositories of Urban History

Recognizing that the histories of cities are woven from the experiences of all their inhabitants is particularly relevant in the context of museums, which often serve as custodians of cultural heritage. However, collection practices at many museums have

historically focused on narratives that reflect the perspectives of dominant groups, leaving marginalized voices unheard and invisible in the collections. It is important to actively seek to include these voices, creating a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the city's history and a thick mapping of the museum site. *Urban Humanities: New Practices for Reimagining the City* (Cuff et al. 2020) argues that thick mapping is an important methodology of experimental practices that fosters possibilities for engagement via interventions, and because of the equality in experience that is inherent in this approach to communal history making and the archiving of memories, this would offer a practice that could be applied to this specific site and unlock the thick layers of history, together with the inhabitants of the town and the museum visitors alike, to include more perspectives on history. The relevance of the collections and the way they reflect the community could be enhanced by applying thick mapping in the collections to ensure that this history is continuously explored and mined for the insights that will keep the relevance of the collections vibrant and shape the future Malmö's history through the multi-faceted prism of a communal story telling effort. The need for the museum to explore its own role in memory creation is especially important if it is to retain its authenticity as a true repository of city life objects related to all the lives lived in the city, and the collections must be mined through continuously, questioning the relevance of the collected objects in order to avoid becoming obsolete and lose its relevance for future citizens and visitors to Malmö. A museum that is integrated into the urban fabric can foster meaningful relationships with its community because of its accessibility and visibility, as remarked by Nilsson Mohammadi and Wolgast (2023), and one can argue that this is the case only if it is visited by the citizens. Thus, the placing of the museum becomes so important. It is located at the Renaissance castle, the architecture that was the base of the city's rise and flowering, a symbol of power that the city has defined itself in relation to for more than 500 years.

The essay will focus on the following points: How can Urban Humanities help us understand what the physical placement of the museum in its surroundings means for the creation of meaningful lasting relationships with the citizens of Malmö and, in particular, the groups that are not currently represented among the museum visitors? And why are libraries considered more easily accessible than museums, even though museums are focused on visuals and libraries have an added barrier of reading, thus in theory, museums ought to be more easily accessible?

Physical Placement and Impact on Community Engagement

The physical placement of the museum significantly impacts its relationship with the surrounding community. Malmö Museum is situated in Slottsparken, which may create a sense of seclusion from the urban environment, as one must pass through the park area to gain access to the museum. A museum that is physically disconnected from the city through a park may be seen as an exclusive space, reinforcing access barriers and contributing to a secluded presence.

Malmö Museum's exhibition space consists of two buildings: the Renaissance castle surrounded by a moat, and a modern brick building inaugurated in 1978 that houses the

technical and nautical exhibitions. The buildings are both located in Slottsparken about 350 meters from each other. The modern part of the museum will not be discussed here. Previously in the period 1901–1937, the museum was housed in the “red castle” building on the outskirts of the area and was moved to its current placement in 1937 after the castle was restored and furnished as an exhibition space and supplemented by modern museum buildings as wings adhering to the Renaissance castle surrounding a central courtyard, thus recreating the original outlay of a four winged castle and creating the effect that the Renaissance castle is almost overshadowed by the modern additions on three sides of it if approached from the walkways of the park.

In centuries bygone, the castle was one of the landmarks of the city and was in fact on the outskirts of the city itself. The city grew around the area, beginning with Kungsparken, that opened for the public in 1872, followed by the neighborhood Ribersborg from the late 1910s, and predominantly in the Art Deco style from 1936 forward, the neighborhood Kronprinsen with the highest house in Malmö (1964) until the introduction of the Turning Torso building (2005), and at the time of writing this essay, the last remaining building plot in the Västra Hamnen development along the Citadell road is under construction. Thus, the castle is now surrounded by neighborhoods on all sides. This is an opportunity to foster a different dynamic with the citizens of Malmö. The road Malmöhusvägen that passes the museum has become a thoroughfare between different neighborhoods in the area. The museum is now at a point where access from the city to the museum area matters more, as the museum wants to interact with its surrounding communities, attract more visitors, and appear more welcoming.

The journey to the museum housed in the castle involves crossing a bridge over the moat towards the austere-looking castle. The castle is set back from the road and divided from it by the moat. The stern façade and the fact that the windows are situated quite high on the building towards the road makes the building seem unwelcoming. This evokes a complex interplay of psychological and cultural factors (Quinlan-Gagnon 2016).

The castle, a relic of a bygone era, stands as a stark contrast to the surrounding urban landscape, embodying both historical significance and a sense of alienation. As one approaches this imposing yet stern structure by Malmöhusvägen, the mental difficulties encountered are not merely a personal experience but can be deeply intertwined with the collective memory of the site as both a historical former seat of power and a prison, a site of executions, with historical power dynamics that have defined this space architecturally and the identity of the city itself.

The moat as a physical barrier represents the psychological distance between the past and the present. For many, the castle represents a site of conflict—both literal and metaphorical—where the weight of history collides with contemporary urban life. This tension can manifest as anxiety, as individuals grapple with the implications of entering a space that has witnessed centuries of human experience, triumph, and tragedy.

As one stands at the edge of the moat, the mental barriers begin to rise. The austere architecture of the castle can evoke feelings of inadequacy or fear of the unknown, just as the body language of the visitors can change to a more hunched position as one crosses

the moat and enters through the gatehouse into the courtyard. The visitor, accustomed to the liveliness of modern life, may find themselves overwhelmed by the silence that envelops the castle, a stark contrast to the cacophony of the city. This silence can amplify feelings of isolation, as the individual confronts not only the physical structure but also their own place within the urban narrative. Life in the museum is undulating between silence and sound. In order to pass through the gatehouse into the courtyard, one passes an outside showcase placed on the outer wall of the castle with one of the white buses, previously used to fetch survivors from the concentration camps after the Second World War, and a loud recording of the story told by one of the participants, which creates a very asynchronous effect along with the modern wings of the building that almost drown the Renaissance castle. In contrast, on weekends and holidays the area resonates with life, as visitors partake in the activities offered in the courtyard and there is a constant flow of people crossing the bridge to the museum.

The austere architecture of the castle can seem uninviting to a visitor and can challenge the individual to confront their own assumptions about history, power, and belonging. We want it to invite reflection on the ways in which urban spaces are shaped by the past, by whom, and how those histories continue to influence contemporary life. This introspection can be daunting, as it requires a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about societal structures, belonging, and personal identity. Drawing on my own first experience of the castle, I was struck by the separation of the castle from the city and the austerity of the building, just as the placement of the white bus struck me as odd. I would like the museum experience and storytelling to begin from the moment I lay my eyes on the castle to become more inviting.

The moat also represents the barriers that exist within urban environments, social, economic, and cultural divides that can feel insurmountable, and that might hold back a potential visitor who is not used to visiting museums. It requires determination to cross the bridge and approach the austere exterior of the castle. This can leave people unfamiliar with a museum experience uncertain if they are willing to commit themselves to navigating this unfamiliar space between the castle and the city and unsure of what is expected of them in relation to how to navigate a museum visit.

Visiting museums presents a unique set of challenges that intertwine personal experience with broader cultural dynamics, as understanding the unspoken codes of conduct in a museum and not feeling out of place, which can enhance feelings of loneliness. As cultural institutions, museums are often seen as gateways to knowledge and history. However, the act of engaging with these spaces can be fraught with complexities that leave a new museum visitor unsure of what is expected of them, and this can reflect on the preparedness of the visitor to engage with the museum (Lynch 2013).

The sheer scale and diversity of exhibitions in the museum can be daunting. With vast galleries filled with objects and historical narratives, visitors may feel a sense of pressure to absorb as much information as possible. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy or overwhelm, particularly for those who may not have a background in history. The fear of missing out on important details or failing to appreciate the significance of an object can

create a barrier to genuine engagement, transforming what should be an enriching experience into a source of anxiety. Another problem is the lack of direction in the building. A visitor will quite soon find themselves disoriented in the myriad rooms without an intuitive path through the exhibitions and lacking an overall clear story of what the museum is trying to communicate through its exhibitions.

Finally, the act of visiting a museum can also evoke a sense of temporal dislocation. Stepping into a museum can feel like a journey through time. This can be both exhilarating and disconcerting, as visitors either feel at home in the setting, secure in the knowledge that they understand the cultural codes and have the background knowledge to understand the stories presented in the museum, or are left with a sense of exclusion by not being able to participate and mirror their own experiences in the exhibitions. Additionally, the curation of exhibits presents challenges related to representation and inclusivity. Museums grapple with the task of telling complex histories that encompass multiple perspectives (Zabalueva2019). Visitors may encounter exhibitions that reflect dominant narratives, while marginalizing or omitting the voices of underrepresented communities. The encyclopedic exhibitions of the castle encompass an aquarium, exhibitions on natural history, prehistory, the Swedish–Danish wars and more recent history, and are very much the product of an approach to exhibitions borne of a traditional one-way didactic perspective, which might be a constraint to being a museum *for* the city, as representation is a key factor in relatability. The structural legacy of the collections and their histories can lead to feelings of disconnection or frustration, as individuals fail to see their own experiences and histories reflected in the stories being told. The challenge lies in navigating these narratives and finding personal relevance in the broader context of urban history and culture. A modern audience also expects to participate in the exhibitions and create memories of the experience to take home. It is important to recognize that a museum visit is an experience on par with all other leisure experiences, and in competition with other experiences, and that one motive of visiting museums is also to create memories.

Accessibility: Libraries vs. Museums

Despite the visual nature of museums, libraries are often considered more accessible to the public. This perception may stem from several factors, including the open and inviting nature of libraries, the role that libraries play as culture houses in their local neighborhoods, the absence of admission fees, and that it is socially acceptable to visit alone. Museums traditionally focus on learning through visual experiences, whereas libraries have a long history of providing communal space for reading, learning, and community engagement.

Accessibility is a critical factor faced by many visitors to both kinds of cultural institutions, and not all individuals have equal access to these cultural spaces. Factors such as socioeconomic status, physical ability, and cultural background can influence the experience. For instance, admission fees, limited public transportation options, or a lack of multilingual resources can alienate certain groups and reinforce existing inequalities.

This disparity raises important questions about who gets to engage with cultural heritage and whose narratives are prioritized within the museum. Another point is the social nature of the museum visit. Quite often a visit to a museum is a planned outing for a group of friends or a family, as it is related to joint memory creation and can provide a common reference point in future discussions. One is more likely to stand out as a single visitor in comparison to the group visitors and this can enhance feelings of loneliness and might reduce the desire to visit the museum for fear of standing out, just as this is a barrier in theaters.

One of the challenges for both museums and libraries is the sensory experience that these cultural institutions can present. In bustling urban environments, where noise and activity are constant, stepping into a museum can feel like entering a different world. The stark contrast between the city noise and the often hushed, contemplative atmosphere of a museum or a library can be disorienting. Visitors may find themselves grappling with the need to adjust their mental state, shifting to a slower, more reflective pace that these environments present. This transition can be mentally taxing, as individuals navigate the expectations of being present and engaged in a space that encourages deep reflection.

To bridge the accessibility gap between museums and libraries, it is essential to consider how museums can create a welcoming, engaging environment for all visitors, just as libraries do. This may involve a shift in visitor policy towards a rethinking of how the museum might mitigate obstacles to a visit, such as ensuring accessibility for all and developing programs and events that cater to diverse audiences and dare to direct more resources towards activities for specific target groups. This integration can be achieved through thoughtful architectural design (Steinfeld and Maisel 2012), programming that reflects community interests, and outreach initiatives that actively involve the local communities, and by becoming aware of the blind spots in our understanding of the museum's narrative. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, the museum can work towards porosity between the museum and the city in a more inclusive narrative that reflects the diverse experiences of all citizens. This can be achieved through outreach programs, community events, and partnerships with local organizations. By actively engaging with citizens, museums can better understand their needs and interests, allowing the museum to tailor its programming accordingly. To bridge the difficulties mentioned above to become a museum for all of Malmö and truly reflect the cosmopolitan outlook of the city, the museum needs to reinvent itself as a space with a future-focused, international outlook, where the exhibitions and activities are challenging perceptions of how to live life, understand history and the future, and become a space for participation.

How to Achieve Connectedness?

The thick cultural history of the castle can either enhance or inhibit communication with the surrounding community, depending on the willingness of the museum to facilitate a warm welcome to the space. By presenting more perspectives in the stories in the exhibitions, the museum can create a narrative that resonates with the community and encourages engagement.

However, if the museum's exhibitions are perceived as being disconnected from the experiences of the residents in Malmö, it may lose its appeal towards potential visitors. To counter this, the museum must actively work to create connections between the collections and the lives of the people in the community and develop meaningful programs, events, and exhibitions to develop a lasting bond with the surrounding communities.

Visiting the museum is a complex experience that encompasses a range of sensory and accessibility issues. But the museum has the potential to become a vital space for community and exploration, offering opportunities for reflection, connectedness, participation, and knowledge.

The layout and design of the museum play a significant role in facilitating connectedness with the surrounding city. A museum that is designed with open spaces, accessibility, and inviting public areas can encourage visitors to explore and engage with the exhibits, to express themselves, and create community. That is essentially the key to becoming a museum for the city and not a city museum, but a truly inclusive space. Additionally, incorporating outdoor spaces and community gathering areas can create opportunities for social interaction and that all-important participation.

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