

# Bringing the people back in

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Most of us probably know the feeling: we are standing in some abandoned industrial building. The building itself might be technically or aesthetically spectacular. It might have been the framework for a production of technological or economic importance. But now it's empty. No sound of machines. No talking, shouting or laughter from workers and supervisors. And most importantly: nobody there to tell us, what was actually going on. And we think to ourselves: if only these walls could talk...

## A museum of industrial culture

In May 2009, a new museum was opened to the public in a former textile mill at Brede, north of Copenhagen, Denmark. The museum, which is part of the Danish National Museum, is called "Brede Works – museum of industrial culture".

The aim of the museum is, broadly speaking, to give the audience an understanding of how industrialization have radically changed the way we live, work, think and interact with each other during the last 150 years or so. That is why we have deliberately chosen to call it a museum of industrial culture, not an industrial museum.

The museum, which covers more than 2000 m<sup>2</sup> of exhibitions, is divided into a number of themes. One of them is industrial work life. This part is named "The factory", and it is situated in the former washing and dying department of the mill, which is a simple but beautiful hall made of reinforced concrete, erected in 1936.

Unfortunately, when the original mill was closed down in 1956, all the machines and most other equipment were sold off. Consequently, a year or so before the opening of the exhibition, the hall looked like this:

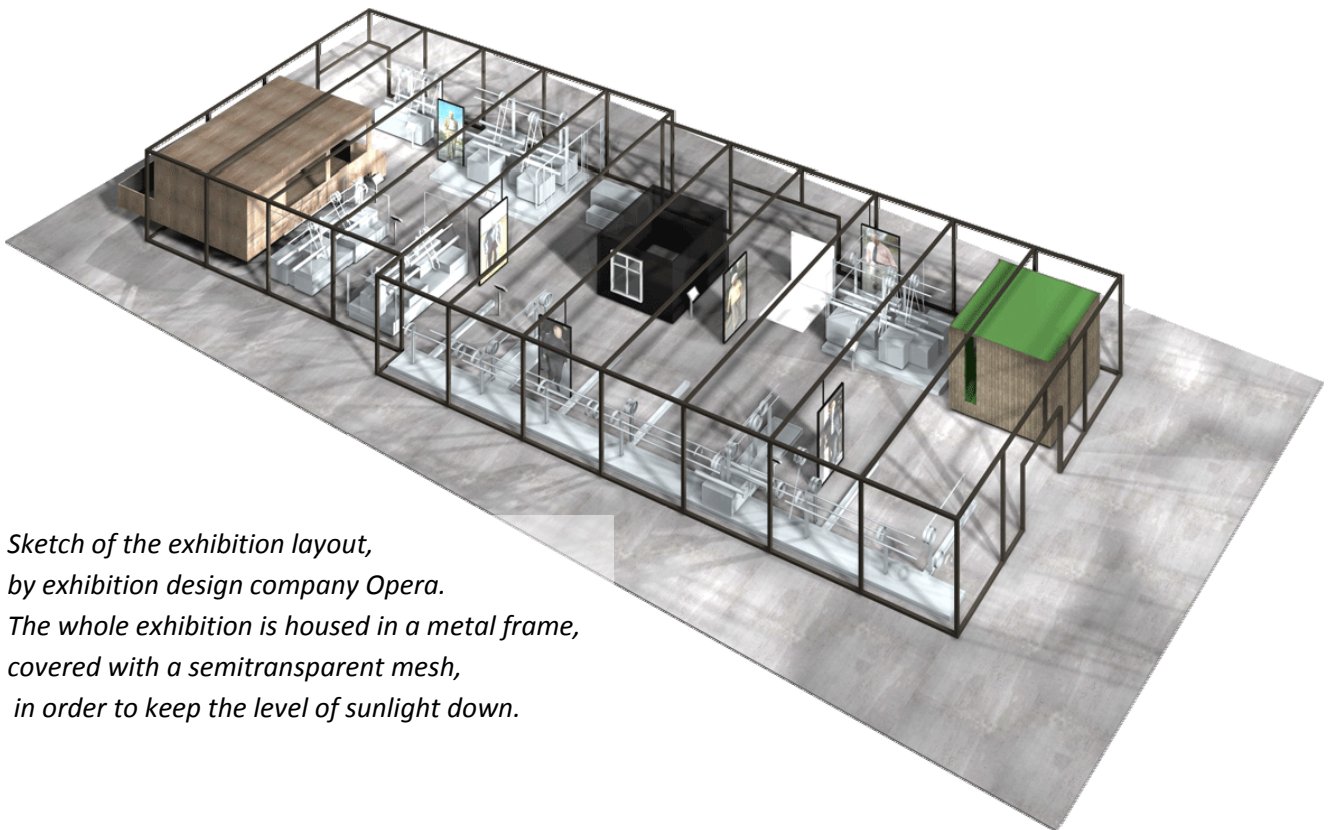


Today, after the opening, it looks like this:



If not the walls, then at least the exhibition is now speaking to the audience. And what it is talking about is partly dependent on choices made by the audience itself.

There are of course a number of objects in the exhibition. You will notice some of the large textile machines in the photos. Despite the fact, that no machinery was left from the original mill, the National Museum had, during a longer period, been able to collect a number of machines from other sources, and even to acquire a few, such as a large selfactor (spinning machine) just before the exhibition. Thus, we were able to present some of the key elements of cloth production – carding, spinning, weaving, napping, etc. - through objects.



*Sketch of the exhibition layout,  
by exhibition design company Opera.  
The whole exhibition is housed in a metal frame,  
covered with a semitransparent mesh,  
in order to keep the level of sunlight down.*

Apart from the machines, smaller objects such as hand-tools, textile-samples, books and furniture existed. They have been used to recreate a meeting-room for the board, a supervisor's office and a small canteen.

Thus, what we were able to produce through objects and staging was parts of an imaginary textile mill, from the period around 1920 to -50.

### **A story about people**

However, objects do not speak for themselves. And the story we wanted to tell the audience was in fact not as much about the machines themselves, as it was about all that what had been going on around the machines – between the people working there.

When we started planning an exhibition on industrial work, we had the following key concepts in mind:

### Complexity of the industrial work life

In present day political and theoretical discussions about the so-called “post-industrial” society, the industrial society is often depicted in a very negative and simplistic way. It’s a general aim of the whole museum, to give a more multifaceted, complex and thus also more realistic picture of industrial society. This, of course, also goes for the industrial work life.

An example: while we today may see traditional industrial labour as hard and tedious, it could, from the point of view of an un-educated, underprivileged young girl in the 1920’s, represent the possibility of becoming economically self-sustained and live more freely.

### People at work are subjects

In continuation of the above, we wanted to depict industrial labourers not just as objects of some abstract technical and economic structure, but as subjects in their own history: as persons, with individual thoughts and attitudes, from which they act and interact.

This is also a reflection of a general tendency in labour history of the last 10-20 years, which has moved away from primarily structural explanations towards approaches that emphasize culture and subjectivity.

### Conflict and cooperation

The previous points are not meant to conceal the fact, that industrial work is taking place in a certain framework of power. Basically, labour and capital has opposite interests, which sometimes erupt into open conflict.

On a day-to-day basis, however, both parts need to find a *modus operandi* that will allow the workers to earn their pay and the company to make a profit. So, even though contradictions exist, they might be expressed only indirectly and in subtle ways.

An approach, known from a number of open-air museums, would be re-enactment: Having people dressed up in original clothes and acting like industrial workers, tending the machines. However, it would be economically or practically very difficult for us to bring the machines into working-condition and to train and maintain a staff to run them.

But more importantly: We were not convinced, that this would be the best approach, in terms of storytelling. At least from my experience, re-enactment can deepen the visitors understanding of what was going on. But giving the visitors an understanding of why it was going on, and what people actually felt about what was going on, requires more than that.

### **Movies as integral part of the exhibition**

For these reasons, we decided instead to use movies as the primary means of communication in the exhibition. Our basic concept was the following:

- The movies should consist of scenes played by professional actors, based on workers memoirs but in a dramatized form



- They should reflect and illustrate the key points, outlined above
- The complete installation should contain some form of interactivity, requiring the public to reflect and make choices

Based on this, we asked three different multimedia-companies to make a basic proposal for the final installation, and based on this we decided to work together with the company Oncotype. Oncotype already had experience with interactive film production, and proved to be both sensitive to our ideas as well as proactive in developing them further.

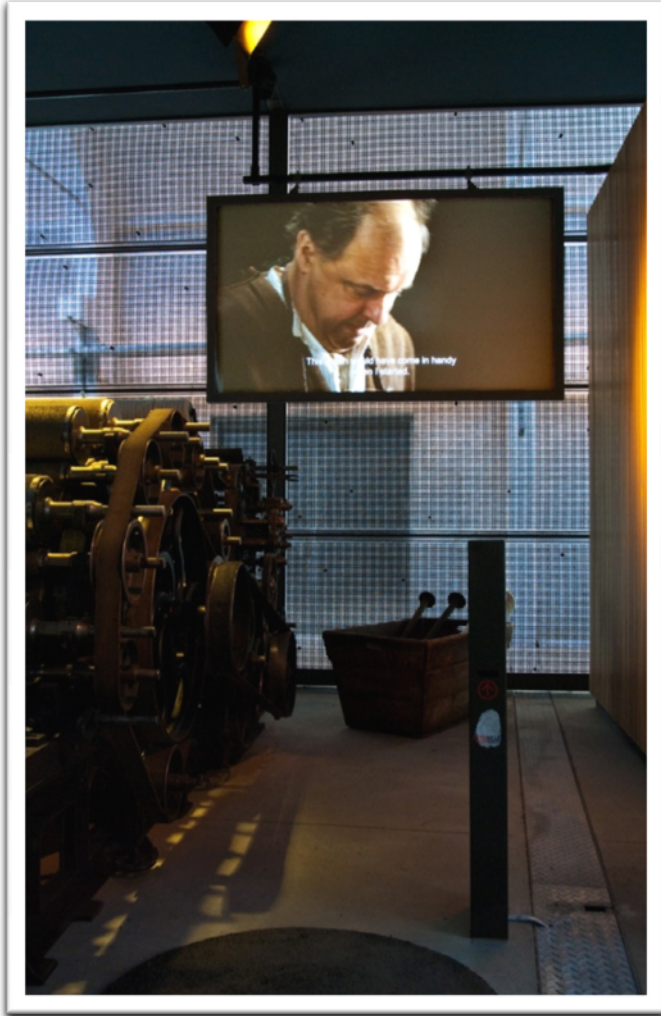
Through an exchange of ideas, we ended up with a decision to use six different characters. The characters are fictional, but based on elements found in memoirs and other source material. They represent six different functions in the mill – but just as importantly: they represent six different personalities:

- Mr. Larsen – supervisor: A fan of time-discipline, rationalization and new technology.
- Marie Lund – mill girl: young, outspoken and unfamiliar with the informal rules of the factory.
- Niels Rasmussen – napper: an elderly man, who is no big fan of change.
- Poul Simonsen – weaver: ambitious and self-confident. Shop steward.
- Inge Pedersen – burler: A lone mother, who takes pride in being self-sustained.
- The Director: wants to run a steady business, while he reluctantly accepts the demands of a changing world....

Before entering the exhibition, visitors are handed a ticket with a barcode. At the entrance, they are asked to choose who they want to see as the main character in the exhibition. The characters are presented as life-size photos on the wall, with their name, function and a characteristic quote. The choice is made by activating a touch screen with the ticket and simply pointing to the right character.



*Entrance, with presentation of characters and screens for selection.*















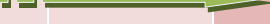

*Some examples of screens in the exhibition*

This adds up to a total of 36 scenes, as shown in the matrix below. Including also loop- and bonus-scenes (will be explained later) there is a total of 48 scenes. The duration of each scene is approximately 1 – 1½ minute.

There are eight large screens in the exhibition. Six of these are used for the interactive films, while the last two are continuously showing original films of different work-processes.

When a visitor stands in front of one of the screens, he or she activates a film with the ticket. The system recognises the visitor's choice of main character, and shows the corresponding scene on the screen. Thus, each character can appear on each screen.



Character: Place (Screen):	DIRECTOR	SUPERVISOR	SPINNER	WEAVER	NAPPER	BURLER
DIRECTORS OFFICE	Sc. 1 Presentation					
SUPERVISORS OFFICE	Sc. 2 Dialogue					
SPINNING MACHINE	Sc. 3 Dialogue					
LOOMS	Etc.					
NAPPING MACHINE						
BURLING TABLE						
Bonus						
Loop						

Each character has a “home”: the weaver at the power looms, the supervisor at his office, etc. If a character is activated on the screen at his or her “home”, he or she will be the only person on the screen. The scene will be a presentation of this character, both as a person as well as his or her job.

But when a character appears on any other screen, he or she will enter into a dialog with the character that “lives” on that screen. A visitor might have chosen the Director as his main character. He now activates the film by the spinning machine. Both the Director as well as Marie, the spinner, will appear on the screen, interacting in the same scene.

Let’s take a closer look at this particular scene as an example:

On his daily round through the mill, the Director stops by Marie, a young girl working at the spinning machine. He picks up a bobbin, lying at the floor.

The Director, handing Marie the bobbin: *You must be new here?*

Marie: *Oh, I’m so sorry*

The Director: *Be careful, we can’t have this kind of mess – I didn’t catch you name, miss?*

Marie tells her name. The director makes a note in his notebook, as he repeats: *Marie Lund?*

Marie, eagerly: *Yes, Supervisor Larsen is my uncle. He got me this job. But what I really want to is become a weaver, and that’s why I would like to...*

The Director, interrupting her: *You talk too much, young lady. Try getting some work done!*

The Director moves on, shaking his head. He doesn’t notice that his fountain pen drops to the floor....

In some scenes there may be hints or references to other scenes, belonging to same main character or even to one of the other characters. E.g. in another scene, we see Marie, the girl at the spinning machine, go to the director's office to give him back the pen that he dropped there. That is of course a reference to the previous scene.

While she's there she takes the courage to ask the director, why there is not equal pay for men and women at the mill. This is a question, that she is also discussion with Inge, the burler, in another scene.

But in the same time, each scene is also a small story in its own. As a visitor, you are free to see the scenes in any order you like. This is illustrated by the arrows in the matrix above: the blue arrow exemplifies a visitor who takes a linear approach, while the green arrow is a visitor who jumps between scenes – and even switches main character.

The installation is designed so as to provide an interesting experience, even though you see only a few scenes. But also to tempt you to explore more, by giving you a feeling, that there is always something more going on.

The bonus-scenes are a sort of reward for the meticulous visitor: it pops up, when he or she has watched all 6 scenes belonging to a given main character, and gives a last, often humorous twist to the character.

Finally, there are the loop scenes: these are simply small scenes, designed to run continuously as long as a screen is not activated.

There are two sources of sound for each screen: a directional loudspeaker for the dialog and an ambient for the background sound. Each scene starts with a small music theme, unique for each character.

## Writing for the screen

As a museum curator, one is used to work with word and text. A dialogue in a film, however, is of course another type of text than the text you write about the objects in an exhibition. First and foremost it has to be functional from the point of view of drama and performance. It has to convey feelings and even conflicts in a personalized and subjective form, which is strange to the objective form we normally strive for in museum texts.

But this is precisely the strength of the film-media, and as a curator, you should embrace that fact – or find yourself another medium.

During the process of producing our installation, I found it invaluable to work together with experienced people from the world of movies and multimedia. Thus, the final manuscript was written by Morten Schjødt of Oncotype – but of course based on our initial ideas and inputs and in a close dialogue. A few times I, as the curator, had to ask for changes, if I felt a certain scene would not be plausible or miss the point from a historian's point of view. But finding a balance, that was true to the media as well as to the facts we wanted to communicate proved to be neither impossible nor especially difficult.





*Director Morten Schjødt discussing a scene with actor Michael Hasselflug.  
All scenes were filmed in front of a projection of original film or photos.*

One of the decisions we had to make at an early stage was about the main characters. Who should they be and what should they represent?

We wanted different types that would appeal to different visitors. We also soon realized that in order to grab attention, the characters had to be clearly typified. In fact: our overall goal of painting a varied and complex picture of the cultural and social realities of industrial work, required characters, that would stand out in relation to each other.

It's not as paradoxical, as it might sound: sometimes you have to resort to simplicity in part, to clarify the complexity of the whole.

A couple of visitors have remarked that social conflicts are painted too clearly for their taste. It doesn't worry me as much, though, as the opposite complaint would have done.

Apart from the content that is in the form of dialogue, film as a media also request that you think in the form of pictures, costumes and staging.

All scenes a shot with one or – mostly – two actors, dressed in original costumes. Only a limited numbers of props have been used, mostly such that signifies the character – such as a shuttle for the weaver. The actors are filmed in a “black box” setup, in front of a projection of original films or still photos from textile mills. The actors are in colour, but the background is monochrome. Our aim has been to create a visual connotation to the phrase “coming to us out of history”.



*Example of scene with original photo as background.*

Furthermore, the original background footage of the scenes creates a visual coherence with the two screens reserved exclusively for original film – and together, they give the visitors an impression of machines running and halls filled with busy people.

### **Reaction and future plans**

The reactions from visitors so far have been very positive. The public feel immersed in the installation, much more than in a traditional exhibition. We also observe that it tends to promote discussion and interaction between visitors. Teachers from both Primary- and secondary-schools reports that the exhibition resonate well with their pupils.

There have been some criticisms however, from a smaller number of visitors, who wants to know more about the specific objects and machines at display. We have deliberately refrained from having any text or other explanations of the objects in this part of the exhibitions, as we feel this would work contrary to the overall atmosphere we want to create. One visitor remarked, that we had “sacrificed” the objects for the experience.

I don’t think this is right – you could just as well claim that we create an experience, which makes strange and incomprehensible objects interesting to the ordinary visitor. But on the other hand: it is understandable if those with a special interest in textile producing technology or those who just seek a more “classical” museum experience feel a little under-nourished. So we have decided that we will use the wall around, but outside the installation for a thematic presentation of the Danish textile industry in text and photos. We will also install a touch-screen, which will offer detailed technical explanation of each of the machines displayed – but again: placed at the perimeter of the installation.

As this is written, the new museum has been open to the public for just about a month. During this month, we have had more than 10.000 visitors. We expect the numbers of visitors to drop a bit, though, as the novelty wears off. On the other hand, we are already planning new ideas for the next season....

## References

Brede Works – museum of industrial culture: [bredevaerk.natmus.dk](http://bredevaerk.natmus.dk)

Oncotype – the multimedia company that produced the films: [www.oncotype.dk](http://www.oncotype.dk)

Die Asta – general multimedia consultant for the new museum: [www.dieasta.dk](http://www.dieasta.dk)

Opera – exhibition designers: [www.opera-amsterdam.nl](http://www.opera-amsterdam.nl)

## About the author

Lars K. Christensen (b. 1962) made his PhD in history at the University of Copenhagen, on the subject of technological change and labour culture in Danish textile industry. Since 2000 he has been a curator and senior researcher at the Danish National Museum, dept. of Danish Modern History.

He is former chairman of the Society for Labour History (SFAH) and was heading the steering committee for the national Year of Industrial Culture 2007.

He has published a number of articles on labour history, industrial culture and museology, co-authored “Arbejdernes historie i Danmark” (History of Danish Labour) (2007) and contributed to “The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers” (Forthcoming).

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