

Background – House of European History

Why set up a House of European History?

The decades-long process that has created the European Union has had a profound impact on the way European countries organise and govern themselves, but until now there has been no museum which places this process within a wider historical context, bringing together and juxtaposing the contrasting experiences of different European countries and peoples.

The generation of people who experienced the tragedies of the 20th century and went on to build the European Communities is disappearing. Now is the time, therefore, to present the development of European integration in a comprehensible way for a broader public. And to explain its main historical developments, motivating forces and aims, so as to enable future generations to understand how and why today's Union developed as and when it did. In times of crisis, it is particularly important to develop and sharpen consciousness of cultural heritage and to remember that peaceful cooperation cannot be taken for granted.

The European Parliament has therefore set up the House of European History, which will give citizens an opportunity to reflect on this historical process and on what it means for the present. Parliament believes that the museum can be a place of debate and understanding about contemporary situations from the perspective of their historical roots and in the light of historical experiences.

What are the principles governing the project?

From the outset, the project has been driven by a desire to promote knowledge of Europe's history and to raise awareness of the diversity of memories within Europe in an open and inspiring fashion. The academic independence and international composition of the project team were preconditions and a team of historians and museum professionals from all over Europe were recruited specifically for the project. They have worked to develop the exhibitions, ensuring that the diversity of European history – and of its interpretations – is fairly represented.

A high-level advisory board (Academic Committee) composed of internationally-renowned historians and museologists ensures the academic accuracy and relevance of the content of the exhibitions.

Where is it?

The House of European History is located in the Eastman building in the Parc Léopold, close to the European institutions. The Eastman building was built in 1935 to house a dental clinic for disadvantaged children, financed by a donation from the US businessman George Eastman, the inventor of the Kodak camera. With a view to transforming this building into a building for exhibition purposes, an architectural competition was held, which was won by

a group composed of the architects Chaix & Morel et associés from France, JSWD Architekten from Germany, and TPF from Belgium. Their plans included the renovation of the façades – maintaining the historic aesthetic of the building – as well as adding a modern extension in the original building's courtyard and on its roof.

How did the project develop?

The project to create a House of European History was initiated by the then European Parliament President, Dr. Hans-Gert Pöttering, in his inaugural speech of 2007. The following year, a committee of distinguished historians and museum experts from various European countries drew up a first concept for the project, entitled the "Conceptual Basis for a House of European History", which envisaged the House of European History as a modern exhibition, documentation and information centre that would reflect the latest in museological thinking.

From January 2011 onwards, an Academic Project Team was recruited. This team, brought together from across Europe, then progressively defined the vision and mission of the new museum, developed the narrative for the permanent exhibition and worked on different fields such as visitor policy, temporary exhibition and collecting policies. The Academic Committee advised the team in this work and agreed on the result. Parliament's Bureau (President and 14 Vice-Presidents) approved all major decisions.

What story does the museum tell?

The permanent exhibition concentrates on the main phenomena and processes which have shaped contemporary Europe throughout history, and emphasizes the diversity of experience, awareness and interpretation related to these developments.

It does not portray the individual histories of Europe's states and regions. Instead, it focuses on European phenomena. The Academic Project Team chose three criteria: the event or idea originated in Europe, expanded across Europe and continues to be relevant today. Based on these criteria, the project team distilled six themes with a large number of topics and sub-topics. Here and there, the permanent exhibition goes beyond the outer borders of the European Union.

European history might be complex, diverse and fragmented, but it has a large number of wide-ranging commonalities and widely-shared experiences; displaying some of these is the purpose of the permanent exhibition. Beginning with the ancient myth of "Europa and the Bull" and its changing interpretations, the exhibition highlights key factors of Europe's heritage, which have shaped it deeply, with effects that are still visible today.

Does the House of European History aim to create a European identity?

The notion of identity is one of the most debated in the field of cultural studies. In association with the activities of museums, it has given rise to

a vast ensemble of literature and reflection. There is no commonly agreed definition of what a European identity could be. The term is too reductionist and too static to be used as a basis for the House of European History. If the House were to propose a pre-defined concept of European identity this would only hamper debate, rather than creating a many-voiced discussion on this highly interesting and topical question. Instead of giving fixed answers, the House of European History wants to stimulate public discussion of European memory and consciousness.

Will the House of European History replace national histories?

The House of European History will not be a simple sum of national histories, nor does it seek to replace them. The House of European History will be a reservoir of European memory, containing experiences and interpretations in all their diversity, contrasts and contradictions. Its presentation of history will be complex rather than uniform, more differentiated than homogeneous, critical rather than affirmative, but it will focus on the emergence of the European Community.

At what point does the narrative start?

The permanent exhibition in the House of European History, the centrepiece of the new museum, will focus on European history from the 19th century to the present day. In some parts, the presentation goes further back in history, reaching back to ancient times and the Middle Ages, in order to explain fundamental characteristics of European culture and civilisation, thus enabling visitors to gain a better understanding of the present.

The permanent exhibition starts with a presentation of the myth of Europa, the change of geographical concepts throughout history and a reflection on what European heritage might be. The exhibition concentrates on the European history of the 19th and 20th centuries, with a special focus on the history of European integration.

Is there a risk of overlapping with the Parlamentarium, which also shows the history of European Integration?

The Parlamentarium, or European Parliament's visitors' centre, deals with the role, functioning and the activities of the European Parliament. The House of European History, by contrast, is a museum on European history in a much wider sense. The subject matters of the two are different, defined by very different contexts, goals, missions and tools. The House of European History takes a much broader approach to history and – as a museum – places objects, as testimonies of history, at the centre of interest. The two projects are complementary.