

## 2. Participatory Projects with Forced Migrants

---

This book looks at four different case studies. These unique projects were organised by, or took place in, different institutions with their own infrastructures and sociopolitical contexts. The case studies represent a mere sample of the projects that have been initiated in museums in response to the refugee protection crisis. In order to study the sustainable outcomes of the great variety of projects that emerged after 2015, the case studies were selected to reflect a range in approach, goals and duration, as well as in the project's position within the institution. Rather than applying a multiple case study methodology (Stake 2005) to compare and contrast different perspectives, I introduce and analyse this variety of cases as a means of providing an insight into how the different projects were developed and experienced, and what was left of them afterwards. Looking at these projects retrospectively, I was able to reflect on the processes together with the practitioners and participants with an “interpretative distance” (Graham 2012, 568). Before going onto a further analysis of the selected cases and the different experiences of these projects, however, I first want to outline the projects and their sociopolitical contexts, the hosting museum and its organisational infrastructures, and the goals of the project and the museums more broadly. Each sub-chapter focuses on one case study, in order to provide a clear overview of the projects and their institutional and sociopolitical contexts.

My depiction of these participatory projects is based on project and institutional documents, along with quotations from interviews,<sup>1</sup> which together describe the project processes and outline the museums' structures, missions and visions. Carrying on from the framework and analytical lens

---

1 For this study, I conducted interviews in English, Dutch and German. I translated all non-English quotes referenced throughout the thesis.

proposed in the previous chapter, the following sections will describe the 'who', the 'what', the 'where', and the 'why' of each of the four selected participatory projects. Starting with a description of the project (the 'what'), I specify what was planned and communicated about the project. For each case study, I provide a thorough description of the process, the stakeholders involved, the time frame, the output(s) and the envisioned goals. As such, each first section on a project sets out to identify the 'what', the 'who' and the 'why'. Moving on to the 'where', I then address the context by discussing the museum. Museums are defined by their organisational infrastructures, their mission and vision, and the people within the institution. The political situation and relationships to funding bodies are also teased out in order to describe the project's broader context. The goals for these projects and the contexts in which they took shape form the basis for exploring the 'how' in the coming chapters.

## 2.1 *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives*

The 'presentation' *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives*<sup>2</sup> formed part of the 2016–17 programme at the MEK in Berlin. Organised by an artist and their foundation KUNSTASYL (an initiative founded in collaboration with forced migrants during their temporary stay in a refugee shelter in Berlin-Spandau), the project was framed as an artistic 'takeover' of the museum spaces. This takeover, which could be described as a collaborative process of exhibition-making, ran from 4 March until 2 July 2016, after which the exhibition opened to the public, remaining on display for a year. Though the project had started from an idea from the facilitating artist, the museum outlined its own goals to secure funding for the project, and set out a clear plan for the collaboration going forward.

The following section describes this project in more detail, outlining the process, exhibition and further elements of the project. I address the project's goals as outlined by the museum and how these were evaluated (or not). The aspects described were a product of their context within the museum and within Berlin and Germany, responding to the urgent political situation at

---

2 See: <https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/museum-europaeischer-kulturen/ausstellungen/detail/daheim-einsichten-in-fluechtige-leben/>.

the time. The following sections provide a clear overview of the project and its museological and political context.

### 2.1.1 A collaborative process of exhibition-making

The conception of, and preparation for, *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* began several months before the participants started working in the museum's exhibition spaces. The project was born out of the artist's desire to learn more about flight and what it means for the lives of the people who are forced to flee their homelands (MEK-Do3). The word *daheim* means "feeling at home" (Eckersley 2017), which points to what the facilitator and museum hoped the project might achieve. The artist initiated this project at the refugee shelter in Berlin-Spandau, after which they started conversations about moving the process to the museum. The artist, who took on the role of project facilitator, had worked with the MEK before, and now provided a direct connection between the museum and the forced migrants who had become part of KUNSTASYL. Based on this pre-existing relationship with the artist, the collaboration provided the perfect opportunity for the museum to contribute to the newly sparked political debate on forced migration (MEK-Do1). After initial sessions with museum practitioners and project participants (which took place both in the museum and in the temporary home of KUNSTASYL), the project moved to the exhibition spaces in March of 2016. With KUNSTASYL and its initiator as the project facilitator, the museum took on the role of facility manager, providing practical support and the spaces for the process, as well as the historical part of, and public 'stage' for, its output: an exhibition that presented the collaboratively articulated experiences and personal stories of forced migration through objects, artworks and installations. The works and stories were exhibited in the same spaces that the participants and facilitator had worked in for several months, in the western wing of the MEK. The exhibition opened in July of 2016 and ran for a year, accompanied by a programme of events, tours, conversations and performances, which were predominantly organised and developed by KUNSTASYL as well.

In the exhibition (which is documented online on *Google Arts & Culture*<sup>3</sup>), all parts of the museum spaces were used to present individual and shared stories. Drawings and paintings on the walls, a pair of shoes also attached to the walls, two large-scale portraits, and a number of artworks made out of discarded bunk beds from a refugee shelter in Berlin made up most of the exhibition. The works were accompanied by quotes about migration and experiences of flight scattered around the spaces on the floor and walls. Alongside the works created by the participants, the museum presented historical accounts of forced migration, with objects loaned from individuals and other museums as references to these stories. The museum had been reflecting on migration in its exhibitions and projects long before the sudden influx of forced migrants to Germany, so the thematisation of forced migration through this project was in keeping with the MEK's strategies and practices.

Before the project launch, the MEK defined quite a few of its goals, which are largely reflective of the goals that were investigated in this study. In a project document compiled by the curator who would be the contact person for this project, the following goals were listed: to provide the opportunity for participants to build networks and make friends; to create a space in which people feel self-assured; to empower the participants; to gain material outputs for the museum's collection; and to historicise the phenomenon of forced migration to make the current situation more understandable for the local population (MEK 2016). These goals propose what the project is envisioned to do, create and lead to, both for the museum and for the participants. The museum curator did not consult the participants before formulating these goals, yet they include ideas about what the project might mean to them. Neither the museum nor the project facilitator discussed these goals with the participants or evaluated whether or not they were reached. The museum director addressed the necessity of evaluation – despite this not having been part of the process – when they said: “You’ve just dismantled that [exhibition] and you’re already onto the next one [...] We didn’t do an evaluation for this exhibition. We didn’t sit down together again and say: ‘so, how was this exhibition?’” (MEK-Do1). The project facilitator confirmed that there was no

---

3 See: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/daheim-%E2%80%93-glances-into-fugitive-lives-museum-europaischer-kulturen-staatliche-museen-zu-berlin/2QWBbLQzCaZKA?hl=en>, accessed 28.06.2022.

evaluation of the project afterwards, mainly because “there was never a real end to KUNSTASYL” (MEK-Do3).

KUNSTASYL was founded in 2015 at the start of the project, and towards the end of the exhibition, the project facilitator invited its members and other performers to work on a performance entitled *Die Könige* (The Kings). The exhibition and project concluded with a seven-hour-long performance in July of 2017. This performance took place in the museum, but was organised and facilitated entirely by the artist and the members of KUNSTASYL, along with performers who were specifically invited for this output. While the initial project that led to the exhibition and the programme during the exhibition's runtime were funded through the museum's existing project funding and with the support of the 'Friends of the MEK', the performance was financed through external funding applied for by the project facilitator. Given that the performance marked the end of the project, there was little time left to reflect on the collaborative processes and the work completed for the exhibition beforehand (MEK-Do3). After the performance, the exhibition was de-installed and some objects were accessioned into the MEK's collection (as per the goals listed above).

## 2.1.2 Museum Europäischer Kulturen

The MEK is a museum of everyday culture which has transformed over the past century, taking on its current outlook and approach in 1999. The MEK is based in Dahlem, an area on the outskirts of the city of Berlin, where the museum and offices are housed in buildings located approximately 750 metres apart. The museum's collection dates back to 1889, when the physician and Berlin politician Rudolf Virchow opened the Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten und Erzeugnisse des Hausgewerbes (Museum of German Traditional Dress and Handicrafts) in order to document “the memory of the lifeworlds of the lower and middle classes in Germany and neighbouring European regions” (Tietmeyer 2021, 10). Over the years, the museum has changed its name multiple times, was divided during the separation of East and West Berlin, before becoming the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in 1999 through the merger of the reunited Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde (Museum of German Folklore) and the European department of the Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology). The museum opened with its first semi-permanent exhibition *Faszinationsbild* (The Fascination of Images), which addressed cultural contacts between people and societies within

Europe. The theme of 'cultural contacts' is highlighted as a main concept in the museum's profile (or mission statement) on the website, where it states:

The Museum Europäischer Kulturen is dedicated to collecting, researching, preserving, presenting, and raising awareness of artefacts of European everyday culture and human lived realities from the 18th century until today. As such, we transcend national and linguistic borders and facilitate encounters among different groups of people. Our work is characterised by the term 'cultural contact'.

We continually seek to forge connections between our historical collection and current issues. An important aspect of this work is a close cooperation with respective interest groups, as well as facilitating an exchange with our visitors. The museum is also actively involved in international cultural projects and museum networks.<sup>4</sup>

Guided by this concept and its mission to find connections across its practices, participatory approaches have increasingly become part of the exhibitions and the collection of the museum. The focus on encounters and collaborations with interest groups has pushed the development of, and investment in, participatory processes and the possibility for these processes to provide insight into alternative perspectives which can (and should) inform the museum.

Since the conception of *daHEIM*, the museum has developed several exhibitions and created additional elements for the permanent exhibition in collaboration with different groups, people and organisations. These projects were never as radical in their form and approach as the idea and process of a takeover of the museum spaces by KUNSTASYL. However, the museum has been structurally adapting to different approaches and perspectives; it has been writing its collection strategy, reviewing its vision and mission, and it has hired curatorial staff interested in, and focused on, contemporary topics such as gender and sexuality, waste and climate change. The museum is slowly moving away from its original focal areas and structure; it is no longer specifically dedicated to the lifeworlds of lower- and middle-class citizens in Germany like its predecessor the Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde, nor is it dictated by the original geographical approach of (the European department

---

4 See: <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-europaeischer-kulturen/about-us/profile/>, accessed 16.04.2021.

of) the Museum für Völkerkunde. These structural changes are reflected in the museum's collection strategy document, which outlines the thematic development of the collection according to three thematic focal points, namely: processes of identity formation; Europe within a global context; and sustainability and the new understanding of the correlation between culture and nature (MEK Sammlungskonzept, January 2022).<sup>5</sup>

Alongside this internal shift at the MEK, the museum is faced with a restructuring of the larger organisational network of which it is a part. The functionality of the umbrella organisation of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) was called into question by the German Scientific Committee in 2020 (Wissenschaftsrat 2020),<sup>6</sup> which has led to a process of internal restructuring that includes the re-evaluation of the various departments, museums and other institutions. To date, the museum remains part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin network, which in turn is part of the foundation Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, but its internal organisation might begin to look different in the following years. Plans for a revision of the hierarchical structures and of the role of the SPK for the museums continue to be negotiated in a slow and difficult process. The SPK is partially funded by the federal government and gains a small amount of its funding from the State of Berlin (Wissenschaftsrat 2020). The MEK, in turn, applies for funding from the SPK for its exhibitions and other projects. Rather than being directly affected by local or national politics, the museum and its practices are facilitated by (and perhaps slightly tailored to) the institutional politics of the umbrella organisation. However, as part of this enormous state-funded organisation that has over 2,000 employees based in Berlin, the MEK is defined by its role within structure of the SPK and within Germany (and within Europe, as one of the few Europe-focused museums), but also within Berlin and within Dahlem more locally.

When then-Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel decided to temporarily open the border to forced migrants in 2015 (Bock and Macdonald 2019; Vollmer and Karakayali 2018), many cities faced the implications of the arrival of large numbers of people in a country that was unprepared for these events (Bock and Macdonald 2019). The country's position towards migration has shifted in recent years, but Germany is still considered one of the more hospitable

5 The MEK's collection strategy document is available on the museum website.

6 For the full report (in German): <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2020/8520-20.html>, accessed 29.06.2022.

countries in Europe in terms of policy, though this does not necessarily reflect public opinion on migrants and migration in Germany. The Cologne attacks that took place on New Year's Eve of 2015–16 were widely reported on in the media and led to discursive shifts that framed migrants as 'evil-doers' (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018, 130–31). This did not only lead to more apprehension from inhabitants of Germany, but was also taken up by the German political parties that supported "the idea that refugees are to be seen as a potentially dangerous group of people" (Vollmer & Karakayali 2018, 131). This message, amplified by the press, transformed the discourse and general understanding of forced migrants from victims to dangerous individuals. This process provided the opportunity for right-wing parties across Europe adopt this discourse and attitude towards migrants and use it to their advantage (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018, 137). Under these circumstances, museums in Germany decided to respond to the refugee protection crisis, with to the intention of presenting different narratives to the prevailing discourse at the time. Navigating this predominantly negative discourse, museums provided forced migrants with a difficult context in which they had to 'prove otherwise'. This discursive context in which *daHEIM* was developed ultimately defined aspects of the process, the communication and the project outcomes. Since the project took place, this context has become increasingly urgent, as political opinions diverged and Russia's invasion of Ukraine under Putin led to large numbers of forced migrants arriving in Germany once more.

## 2.2 *Museum Takeover*

A very different project can be found in *Museum Takeover*, a re-labelling project in the permanent exhibition of Leicester Museum & Art Gallery that was led by an external curator. The project worked with forced migrants who were taking part in a creative writing workshop at the time, inviting the participants to write a museum label for one (or several) of the objects or artworks on display. The project facilitator joined the ongoing workshops hosted by Writing East Midlands<sup>7</sup> and facilitated the process with the assistance of the museum's community engagement officer and the facilitator of the writing workshop. The project led to two interventions, both of which took place during the summer of 2018.

---

7 See: <https://writingeastmidlands.co.uk/>, accessed 29.06.2022.

The participatory project was developed for the participants of the creative writing workshop outside of the museum, but its outputs were displayed alongside the labels written by the museum practitioners. The process was determined by the format of the workshop and by the possibilities of engaging with the museum and in the museum spaces in collaboration with the different stakeholders. Further development or integration of the project outcomes relied on the museum's infrastructures and strategy, as well as the political context in Leicester. These aspects are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

### 2.2.1 Written contributions within the permanent exhibition

*Museum Takeover* was a participatory project during which forced migrants wrote new (or rather, additional) labels for objects on display at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery. The project took place at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery, which was made possible by the collaboration between the project facilitator and the museum's outreach officer. Both practitioners had attended several of the creative writing workshops, which were led by a facilitator who was not involved in museum work otherwise. The project facilitator organised two re-labelling projects, both of which were low-budget museum interventions. The first project was part of Refugee Week, a yearly, nationwide week of events that celebrates the cultures of forced migrants in the UK. The Leicester Museum & Art Gallery has been taking part on a regular basis with a varied programme that often remained disconnected from the exhibitions on display in the museum. The second edition of the project was part of the Journeys Festival International, an annual festival that takes place in Leicester, Manchester and Portsmouth and is initiated by ArtReach in August. For this edition, a slightly larger budget was available, allowing for designed and professionally printed labels.

For the project, the participants were asked to choose a work or object in the museum to write about, with no particular objective in mind other than adding their perspectives or stories to what was exhibited in the museum. Most participants were interested in the works and objects in the World Arts Gallery, and chose to write a label in response to something they saw there. The participating forced migrants created 23 new labels for this gallery, providing new insights into, and interpretations of, the objects. The labels were stuck to the museum walls next to the original museum labels for just one month, after which they were removed from the walls before the start

of the next iteration of the project. The second set of labels was kept up for longer, but was ultimately taken down in preparation for the renovations of the museum's galleries.

A catalogue created by the project facilitator<sup>8</sup> still contains the labels with images of the objects or works to which they correspond. Apart from this catalogue produced and published online by the project facilitator, only limited information about this project can be found online and in the museum. The museum did not set particular goals for the project, but the project facilitator did outline the importance of taking into account the goals and ambitions of the participants. They pointed out that this is often missing from the agenda, suggesting: “you need your aim to be about the people and the trust and . . . I think that's something that a lot of museums are missing. There's a lot of: ‘if we do a project with refugees it will look good’” (LM-MT01).<sup>9</sup> Rather than serving the museum with this project, the main idea was to contribute to the lives of the participants. The museum, as the host of the project, was only involved to a limited extent. To fully grasp the institutional context of the project, though, requires a look at the museum as well as the writing workshop developed by Writing East Midlands, and the roles of the individuals responsible for organising *Museum Takeover*.

## 2.2.2 Leicester Museum & Art Gallery

Leicester Museum & Art Gallery is a city museum with wide-ranging collections, including natural, historical and cultural objects, as well as artworks produced in the past 200 years. The museum hosts permanent and temporary exhibitions related to the city of Leicester and to the UK more broadly. Formerly known as New Walk Museum & Art Gallery (until 2020), the museum is situated on New Walk, a promenade that traverses the city of Leicester, running from the University of Leicester to the city centre. The museum is part of the Leicester Museums and Galleries group, which is made up of six different museums and historical buildings. The museum group

---

8 See: [https://issuu.com/angelastienne/docs/museum\\_takeover\\_2018](https://issuu.com/angelastienne/docs/museum_takeover_2018), accessed 29.06.2022.

9 In the interviews and other references that I cite throughout this book, I make use of suspension points ( . . . ) to indicate pauses in speech. Omissions are indicated by ellipses in square brackets: [...].

shares a website on which the vision – rather than the mission, which varies between the locations – is listed as consisting of three main points:

Creating experiences to make Leicester special by involving and inspiring residents and visitors and sharing the city's significant collections. Celebrating the stories of Leicester's diverse communities and the unique places, art and heritage which shape the city's identity and showcasing these to the world. Engaging with every primary schoolchild in Leicester.<sup>10</sup>

Situated in a city with a university that has a specialised museum studies department, the museum has close ties to the university and is often the focus of criticism and proposals for novel approaches. Despite its connection with the School of Museum Studies, the museum perpetuates curatorial and collecting practices that could be considered rather traditional or formal. In the themes it addresses, however, the museum has continued to explore subjects that tie in with the city of Leicester, such as its exhibition *Fearless Foxes*,<sup>11</sup> which focused on Leicester City's Football Club after their victory in the 2016 Champions League. The city of Leicester is renowned for its increasingly diverse population, especially due to its large percentage of people with Indian heritage. This context has been central to the museum's projects for a long time, engaging artists and local groups in developing new exhibitions in different spaces of the museum.

The museum was involved in the first and second iteration of the project, the latter of which took place during the Journeys Festival International. *Museum Takeover* was not only shaped by the context of the museum but also by the institutional contexts of the organisations that supported or facilitated the project, such as ArtReach and Writing East Midlands. The creative writing workshops were part of the *Sanctuary* project initiated by Writing East Midlands, which led to a practical guide about working with forced migrants in creative writing sessions.<sup>12</sup> Both of these organisations focus on engaging with forced migrants, on a national and local level respectively, and therefore are guided by different ambitions and objectives, which have (or should have) the interests of their focus group in mind at all times. *Museum Takeover* is not

---

10 See: <https://www.leicestermuseums.org/about/>, accessed 29.06.2022.

11 The exhibition was announced on the football club's website: <https://www.lfc.com/news/433386>, accessed 29.06.2022.

12 See: <https://writingeastmidlands.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Refugee-toolkit-HR.pdf>, accessed 03.07.2022.

the only artistic project they (co-)facilitated, but was the only collaboration between Leicester Museum & Art Gallery and these two organisations.

As aforementioned, the city of Leicester is characterised by a highly diverse population. This was reflected in the city's vote to remain in the EU during the Brexit referendum of June 2016; a referendum that has been described as being fuelled by rhetoric around immigration (Knell 2021) which promoted anti-immigrant sentiments (Vlachou 2017, 8). This political sentiment has, according to Vlachou, reminded us "how quickly nationalism (as opposed to patriotism) can become a dominant ideology, bringing about a radically negative transformation of the society – of certain citizens" (2017, 8). The public perspective on migration has since shifted even further towards hatred and exclusion, leading to the election of a Conservative government with policies that reflect the widespread populist, anti-immigrant mood (Knell 2021) (such as the government's recent plans to deport newly arrived migrants to Rwanda [Barry 2022]). After successfully separating from the EU, the government now has free rein when it comes to deciding on such policies and to closing its borders to limit immigration rates.

The ongoing debate is intensifying a process of polarisation when it comes to migration (Knell 2021). Within this political climate, the UK organisation City of Sanctuary, founded in Sheffield in 2007, has become increasingly important and encouraged organisations such as universities and museums to partake in processes of integration and welcoming migrants locally. The local organisation Leicester City of Sanctuary describes its mission as: "to welcome asylum seekers and refugees in and around Leicester, and support them to rebuild their lives, develop their skills and feel part of the community".<sup>13</sup> As the project emerged from the writing workshop that was part of the City of Sanctuary programme, it immediately formed part of this social effort and supported its political position about the benefits that are generated by migration. Additionally, *Museum Takeover* was one of the museum's initial attempts at engaging forced migrants and becoming a Museum of Sanctuary. Since then, the museum has increased its efforts to develop different projects and ongoing activities that would provide them this status. The shift in political position is by no means new but has been amplified in recent years; projects such as *Museum Takeover* that seek to raise awareness of migrants' stories and the empowerment of people who have

---

13 See: <https://www.leicestermuseums.org/news/museumofsanctuary/>, accessed 29.06.2022.

recently arrived in the country seemed necessary at the time, and continue to do so today.

### 2.3 *So sehe ich das...*

Initiated and hosted by Museum Friedland, *So sehe ich das...* (That's how I see it...)<sup>14</sup> was described as the museum's first participatory project. Museum Friedland was founded in 2016 to provide a historical overview of Friedland (a town near Göttingen in Germany) as a point of transit; a role that it still holds for the many forced migrants temporarily staying at this location. This history has informed the museum's main focus: the topic of migration and its function in shaping the town in which it is based. For this project, the museum educator and project curator invited participants to capture their experiences and impressions of Friedland. The two-day photography workshop was a first attempt to work with people staying in Friedland at the time.

The project was organised by two employees of the museum, but it sits within the much larger framework of the museum's planned extension and the history and contemporary relevance of its location. Before addressing this larger context, though, I will first describe the project in a little more detail, along with the various stakeholders and the project outputs, both as they were initially planned and ultimately delivered. By outlining these aspects, the next two sections should provide a clear overview of the project and its (potential) role within the institution.

#### 2.3.1 Documenting the place of arrival

The project *So sehe ich das...* invited participants to take pictures of Friedland to capture how they experience the place, through which they could show what this historic site means to them today. The project consisted of two workshops hosted by the museum educator and project curator: one two-day workshop on 3 and 4 September 2016, and another one on 1 and 2 October of the same year. The project was initially intended as a way to collect pictures taken by recent migrants who were based in Friedland at the time, in order to feature them in the new museum catalogue for the permanent exhibition. During

---

14 See: <https://www.museum-friedland.de/>, accessed 29.06.2022.

the conception of the project, the project team additionally decided to create a temporary exhibition as a project output.

The workshop was roughly planned to include a section on photography and a section in which the participants contextualised their pictures through interviews. The first day started with instructions on using the cameras available for the workshop. After this formal part, the participants would take the cameras and start taking pictures in the town and their temporary home. On the second day, the curator, museum educator and an interpreter spoke with the participants individually about which photographs they would like to present in the exhibition. The rest of the day was reserved for individually editing the selected photographs on the computer, with a break during which the participants joined a tour of the museum. The temporary exhibition was made up of separate boards presenting each participant's photographs and their explanations. These texts, printed on the board alongside five pictures, drew on quotes from the conversations of day two. Though the project was conceived with the aim of obtaining images for the catalogue and in the hope that an exhibition could be developed from them afterwards, there were no expectations about what might be captured by the participants, or what the quality of the images might be. As the project was still inviting participants until the very morning of the first day of the workshop, there were many aspects that could not be planned in advance. As suggested by the project curator, "you simply did not know what might come out of it" (MF-S01).

In the process of developing such a project, museum practitioners or project organisers contemplate the potential outcomes or value for the envisioned participants; after all, they have to offer something that will be of interest to them. For Museum Friedland, this meant thinking about the role the museum could play for people within their first days and weeks after arriving in Germany. The project curator recognised the difficulties, and acknowledged that the museum might not be the first thing on people's minds:

So, the situation of the people is simply – and I think it's really important to recognise this – so far removed from dealing with a museum in this way. They would have to gain a residence status, they would have to sort out where they can live, they would have to do language courses and qualification assessments and find work. (MF-S01)

These concerns are real and urgent for forced migrants after they have arrived in a new country, and a collaborative project with a museum simply cannot take priority.

The workshop facilitator from Museum Friedland spoke about the impact of the project and noted that the participants “worked on this individually and [then] they moved. They haven’t seen the exhibition, they haven’t read the book, they have no clue about what happened [with their contribution]” (MF-SO2). The material outputs of the project were not for them, but the exhibition was envisioned as a tool that could be used to invite future inhabitants of the transit camp to come and see that they share some of their experiences with people who stayed in Friedland before them.

The boards were exhibited in the ‘Nissenhütte’,<sup>15</sup> which has since become the space for participatory activities, workshops and conversations with the people staying in the camp. Due to its location outside of the museum, the threshold to enter the space is reduced, and different types of relationships are created; the Nissenhütte as such provides a space in which people can come together to create, to dance and to get to know each other. The recognisable stories presented in the native languages of the participants were a starting point for conversations with people who had just stumbled upon this museum space.

### 2.3.2 Museum Friedland

Museum Friedland is located in the building of the former Friedland train station, with the Nissenhütte as a separate space dedicated to community engagement work. A planned extension to the museum is scheduled to open in 2023. The existing building will continue to present historical narratives on migration and Friedland as a point of transit, as in its current exhibition *Friedland – Perspectives of Migration: The Transit Camp from 1945 until Today*. The new building will present a contemporary history of migration through Friedland into Germany since 2015. This part of the museum is intended as a space for addressing “the continuously changing present and stimulating

---

15 The Nissenhütte is an outreach space which is separate to the museum itself. A less intimidating space, it is situated in the direct vicinity of the people the museum hopes to engage. Located within the transit camp, the green shed is used as a space for community engagement.

discussions about the future”.<sup>16</sup> The museum’s website provides an overview of the museum’s structure, mission and vision. This is divided in sections on who they are, what they do, what they represent and what they hope to do in the future, describing its current role based on its exhibitions, collection and education or engagement programme:

In its permanent exhibition *Fluchtpunkt Friedland*, the museum tells the story of the transit camp from 1945 to the present day from different perspectives, tracing life stories from many parts of the world. Multimedia installations, documents, photographs and a wide variety of objects, including numerous personal mementos from contemporary witnesses convey multi-layered and exciting stories that inspire reflection and discussion. Temporary exhibitions in the “Nissenhütte” on the premises of the transit camp complement the exhibition programme.

In addition, Museum Friedland collects and preserves artefacts from the past and present of the transit camp. The collection is being continually expanded and investigated. Objects from the collection are used for exhibitions, the educational programme and research purposes, and can also be made available to other museums on loan.

With its educational programmes, Museum Friedland encourages a broad public to engage with the history and present of the transit camp as well as with overarching sociopolitical issues. The guiding principles of the target-group-specific formats are visitor orientation, sustainability and participation.<sup>17</sup>

The project *So sehe ich das...* was one of the museum’s initial steps toward integrating more recent memories of migration into the overall museum discourse. The recent founding of the museum is evidence of the increased need to address the history and relevance of the town, which serves as a temporary home for many incoming migrants. Acknowledging its historical and contemporary importance, the museum has been attempting to address more recent histories through its participatory work. Its position near a transit camp brings a number of challenges that are very particular to this

---

16 See: <https://www.museum-friedland.de/erweiterung/museumskonzept/>, accessed 29.06.2022.

17 See: <https://www.museum-friedland.de/ueber-uns/leitbild/>, accessed 03.07.2022.

museum. Despite the town being home to many forced migrants who have recently arrived to Germany, the camp is never a home to anyone for a very long time. The project curator described the short duration of their stay as one of the main barriers to developing a participatory project and to sparking interest in working with the museum.

The challenge in Friedland, still today, is this very short stay. It means that you can't work with people over a longer period of time, but have to say ad hoc: 'Who is here today?' And then something is done for the people who feel like it in that moment. There is hardly a chance to plan it in advance, or to connect people to a project, because their stay may be five days or two weeks, and then in some individual cases, there are people who stay about two months. (F01 Interview)

The invitation process, the ideal of building a local network and the scale of the possible projects developed at Museum Friedland are heavily affected by these parameters.

Though quite remote, located in a small town south of Göttingen in the heart of Germany, the political landscape largely reflects the one described in the section on *daHEIM*. However, the previous section highlights that the historical context of the town presents a complex political history which is interwoven with its role within Germany today. This historical and contemporary role is addressed in the museum, but its focus on the current situation requires the museum to engage in participatory work. In the catalogue that was published to mark the opening of the permanent exhibition, the curators refer to the social discourse that perpetuates a 'fear of others', in reference to the aforementioned refugee protection crisis of 2015. They argue that ideally, the museum will help to counter this 'panic-mongering' with a "critical and nuanced view of the history and present of migration in the Federal Republic of Germany, based on the history of the Friedland border transit camp" (Baur and Bluche 2017, 17). This objective for the museum's current and future work highlights the complexity of the surrounding public and political discourse, which is characterised by the conflicting perceptions of migrants present within local populations. Through the museum's exhibitions and programme, they hope to challenge this discourse and to influence its development.

## 2.4 Aleppo

A more recent project was *Aleppo*,<sup>18</sup> an exhibition that was on display at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam from 20 April 2017 to 4 March 2018, and was accompanied by a weekly tour hosted by a small group of people originating from the Syrian metropolis. The exhibition focused on the city of Aleppo, which was home to many people who fled to the Netherlands in and after 2015. Not initially planned as a participatory project, the museum hired an external curator to put together a photography exhibition to accompany two objects that were (until then) housed in the museum. It was not until a later stage, when the education team became involved in the project, that the project gained a participatory element. The museum educator invited former inhabitants of Aleppo to join, and managed to put together a team of tour guides that would end up working at the museum for the duration of the exhibition.

This project, like the other case studies, was the result of a unique process and institutional context. After the late involvement of participants, the framework for the participatory process and its outputs were clearly delineated. Within the Tropenmuseum, which is part of a larger umbrella institution, the project was seen as a necessary response to the negative discourse in the media, but the participatory aspect was a result of input from individual stakeholders. The process and the different stakeholders are outlined in the next section. The project took shape as a contribution to the ongoing political debate, which will be described in what follows. As such, this sub-chapter provides the basis for the analysis of this case study in the following chapters of this book.

### 2.4.1 Personal accounts of life in Aleppo

The initial idea for the focus on Aleppo arose from de-installing the area-based displays that made up the permanent exhibition. For the reconfiguration of these spaces and objects, an object from the museum's collection (a scale model of the city of Aleppo) needed to be removed. This object was provided as the starting point for the external curator, who was invited to develop a photography exhibition within a short space of time. In collaboration with

---

18 See: <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/aleppo>, accessed 29.06.2022.

a specific team put together for the additional (internal) work, the external curator developed an exhibition including photographs, mainly showing the war and the related destruction of the city and museum artefacts.

The exhibition itself was not created using a participatory format, but the museum instead invited Syrian people to become tour guides in the exhibition, in order to make room for personal stories of flight and home. The project initiator – one of the museum educators – confirmed this, and referred to initial conversations within the project team, recounting: “I was the first one to say that it is a bit strange that we are doing this and we are not asking people who now live in Amsterdam to be part of it” (T-A01). The inclusion of the former inhabitants of Aleppo was introduced by the museum’s education and outreach team, which meant that their stories were not immediately integrated into the exhibition itself but rather developed as a separate element or layer to the exhibition. This extra layer created by the involvement of the participants was, according to the exhibitions manager, a necessary part of the project that added an emotional, personal aspect to the exhibition. “Without it, it would have been much more superficial”, they said (T-A06).

The participatory process started with the invitation of the participants via the museum’s social media channels and with the help of Refugee Start Force, an organisation the museum collaborated with for this project. The participants were invited to contribute a personal story or passion in any creative way; based on the great variety of people’s contributions, the tours constituted a series of several stations where visitors would learn about, or hear from, one of the participants. To prepare for the tours, the museum educator arranged three preparatory sessions: the first one to introduce the different (potential) contributions, a second one to practice and discuss potential problems during the tours, and a third one to introduce the themes of the exhibition. During these preparatory sessions, however, the museum educator learned about the many objects that people had brought over from Aleppo and saw the opportunity to include personal objects and stories in the exhibition display as well. The objects brought in by participants were featured in a separate display case in the room adjacent to the exhibition spaces. Their objects became a focal point of press and visitor responses, despite them being later contributions to the narrative developed by the museum and external curator.

In accordance with the exhibition’s title, the project did not solely revolve around the refugee protection crisis but responded to the transformations

that the city and its inhabitants had been experiencing. In doing so, the museum contributed to a discourse that possibly moved away from centralising the experience of migration (see Chapter 6). Despite the goals for the project not being fully defined due to the quick preparation and development time, the participatory aspect of *Aleppo* focused on human stories, and highlighted the human experience of a city and its destruction.

## 2.4.2 The Tropenmuseum

Organised at the Tropenmuseum, an institution with an outstanding reputation when it comes to considering the representation of cultural ‘others’, this project is of particular interest due to its specific focus and the feedback it gathered from participants and visitors over the full year it was running. Known for its novel formats in engaging with ‘other’ cultures, the project fits well within the museum’s broader approach. The hosting institution was founded in 1864 in Haarlem, the Netherlands. The Tropenmuseum – then still the Koloniaal Museum (Colonial Museum) – moved to its current location in Amsterdam in 1926. Due to cuts in state funding, the Tropenmuseum merged with other ethnographic museums to become the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures, NMW). Since 2014, its mission and collections have been shared with Museum Volkenkunde (Ethnographic Museum) in Leiden and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal; and in 2017, they were joined by the Museum van Wereldculturen (Museum of World Cultures) in Rotterdam. Their joint mission statement<sup>19</sup> reads:

People all over the world face the same questions about life. The answers they give to these questions differ, and are often culturally determined. What unites us are universal human emotions. The objects in our collection are an outstanding testimony to that. They each tell a human story. Stories about loving, mourning, celebrating, decorating or fighting. They spark curiosity about the enormous cultural diversity in the world. These authentic narrations open up a world in which everyone is connected to each other. By actively involving our audience and stakeholders in the collecting, interpreting and sharing of these testimonies, we increase the awareness

---

19 See: <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/over-het-tropenmuseum/missie>, accessed 01.07.2022.

of this interconnectedness. In this way, we inspire an open-minded view of the world. And we foster global citizenship. That is our mission. At the Tropenmuseum, you will discover that, apart from the differences, we are all the same: we are human beings.<sup>20</sup>

This statement highlights the museum's interest in working together with different stakeholders to include narrations that reflect the interconnectedness of citizens right around the world. It points to its objects as representing human stories, despite the fact that their contested histories often bear connections with the inhumane colonial contexts in which the objects were acquired. This seems to mainly focus on the collection and the interpretation of the objects currently held by the Tropenmuseum. The collection strategy and future collecting practices are currently being reshaped, but do not bear a direct relation to the demands or wishes expressed by the Raad voor Cultuur (the funding committee of the national government). This museum group also includes the Research Centre for Material Culture (RCMC), which takes the lead on exploring the collection, its colonial origins and practices, and is fundamental in overseeing the evolution of the museums' strategies. The RCMC has also collaborated on restitution processes of artefacts obtained during the country's colonial era, leading to a report for restitution by the NMW in March 2020 and a political confirmation of the need for these restitution processes in October 2020. The Raad voor Cultuur stated that "Dutch museums should be prepared to unconditionally return cultural goods that were looted in formal colonies, upon request by the country of origin" (Raad voor Cultuur 2020). Attempting to move away from and challenge its colonial history, the museums are referred to as being first and foremost "museums about people". This scope is reflected in the thematic approaches of the museums, their engagement with local populations and their view on the importance of considering and challenging racism and the nation's history of, and current relationship to, slavery.

The museum is dependent on government funding, which means it needs to take into account the considerations of the Raad voor Cultuur and their

---

20 Though the museum offers a translation of their statement on their website, it is not a very accurate translation of the statement that was originally written in Dutch. It is a slightly shorter version of the mission statement, which does not include the introduction, which highlights the focus on humans and human emotions, but also addresses that there are differences in cultural understanding.

plans for the upcoming four-year funding period. In conversation with the staff about the project, they referred to the difficulties of being government-funded, due to the restrictions this brings with it (T-AO1 and T-AO6). For participatory work, for example, the museum (like other museums in this study) struggles to provide food and drinks for the participants, as the use of governmental funding is strictly monitored and such expenses are not considered vital for the organisation of museum projects. These financial infrastructures constitute limiting factors for participatory work, for which the museum – for the purposes of this project at least – was able to find alternatives.

As pointed out earlier, the *Aleppo* exhibition was not initially designed as a participatory project but as a photography exhibition featuring a select few objects about the city of Aleppo. However, while the project was being put together, the city of Aleppo was regularly mentioned in the news, as were the people leaving the city to find refuge elsewhere. The theme was broadly discussed in the media and the political sphere (see, for example, Sims 2016; Van den Dool 2016); and the incidents in Cologne sparked similar reactions in the Netherlands to those observed in Germany (Tolsma et al. 2021). The museum marketer who was responsible for the communications for the project at the Tropenmuseum referred to the start of the project, recalling newspaper coverage at the time bearing headlines like: “Testosterone bombs here to rape our women” (T-AO2). They realised how much these and other phrases were affecting public opinion and provoking prejudice against the forced migrants arriving in the Netherlands at the time (T-AO2). In their communication of the exhibition and the tours, they therefore aimed to challenge the prominent generalisations that characterised the media discourse at the time on the museum’s behalf. However, the media and political discourses continue to emphasise a predominantly negative view of forced migrants. The Dutch term *vluchteling* (refugee) is no longer a neutral way to define people who have fled their countries, yet there is no alternative designation that is used consistently today. In the programmes of the Dutch political parties for the elections of March 2021, many addressed forced migration either in an effort to assist forced migrants, or to use them as a scapegoat. This evinces the continued relevance of the debate and the potential for the museum to intervene in the discourse (further discussed in Chapter 6).

## 2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the different case studies and addressed the context in which they were carried out and their project outlines. An overview of the projects and some of their key features is provided below (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Overview of the different projects and their key features.

Project	<i>daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives</i>	<i>Museum Takeover</i>	<i>So sehe ich das...</i>	<i>Aleppo</i>
Host institution	Museum Europäischer Kulturen	Leicester Museum & Art Gallery	Museum Friedland	Tropenmuseum
Location	Berlin, Germany	Leicester, United Kingdom	Friedland, Germany	Amsterdam, the Netherlands
No. of participants	117	20	11	12
Timespan of collaboration	March 2016 - July 2017	June and August 2018	September and October 2016	February 2017 - March 2018
Type of project	Collaborative artistic project	Creative writing workshop	Photography workshop	Creative tour guide project
Output	Exhibition, events and performance	Additional labels for permanent exhibition	Exhibition and catalogue	Personal objects and weekly guided tours

The case studies took place between 2015 and 2018, providing a similar political climate across Western Europe. Their political contexts and the shifts in political and media discourse that intensified the need for these projects were very similar, but the way the museums and the project organisers approached the participatory work with forced migrants varied broadly. In each of the cases, the institutional infrastructures shaped and limited both the practices and the extent of participation as a 'valid' methodology

for contributing to the museological discourse. The institutions in which they took place differ in size, focus and location, though in case of the Tropenmuseum and the MEK, there is more overlap in approach and institutional infrastructure. As large-scale ethnographic museums based in the capital cities of their respective countries, and as part of a larger museum network, they share similar stakeholder relations and institutional structures. Despite these similarities and the comparable sociopolitical context, the museums took very different approaches to the theme, and engaged the participants at different stages of their projects. The projects in Friedland and Leicester were carried out on a much smaller scale, but dealt with similar structural limitations. Once again, though, their approaches were very different. Each of these projects took place over a specified period with limited scope for potential long-term outcomes for both institution and participants. The differences and similarities introduced in this chapter will become clearer throughout the discussion of the participatory processes in the respective museums.

The institutionally defined goals for these projects provide the outline for the analysis in the chapters that follow; they highlight the objectives defined by the museums, both those serving the museums' missions and those presumed helpful for the participants. Taking these goals as a point of departure, I explore the related practices and examine the extent to which these cultivate eventual outcomes (or negative consequences) for the participants themselves. The ensuing chapters are organised according to the goals set by museums. These are objectives regularly referred to in literature and practical guides on engaging with forced migration, and not all have been explicitly mentioned by museum practitioners during the interviews. However, in exploring the goals that museums often tie to such projects, I found that many of these are intended to serve the forced migrants or their integration. Museum practices often reflect these goals, even in cases where they did not explicitly outline them beforehand. The objectives are based on the museums' understandings of what people who have been forced to leave their home countries might need, and are often founded on assumptions rather than direct conversations with the participants. These goals form the basis for much of what museum practitioners do, as well as what they exclude from their practices. Despite motivations and goals often being clearly distinguished, they are not usually monitored together with the participants throughout the process.

Through the approach outlined here, this study seeks to provide the evaluation for the projects that was missing at the time. The analysis I carry out based on the reflections of practitioners and participants offers insights into the processes and limitations of the projects, many of which could have been addressed as part of the project. Discussing the projects outlined in this chapter, the following chapters will focus on the 'how'; addressing the processes in relation to defined goals and the projects' outcomes. This study serves as a basis for an in-depth analysis of these projects and their outputs and outcomes for all involved. As such, I assess the success of the projects in terms of their outcomes for the participants, as well as the negative consequences experienced as a result of the projects.

