

How we purposely, though unplanned, build an exhibition about Ghent Turkish heritage in STAM - City Museum of Ghent

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It's November 2023. A diverse group of youngsters from the Turkish diaspora in Ghent are gathered around the table in a community centre. After we have shown them the preliminary and hybrid collection of Ghent-Turkish heritage objects youth organizations have thus far collected, one of the youngsters shrugs her shoulders indifferently and utters: "I'm sorry but why are we constantly talking about the first generation of labour migrants? Why are we in this project if it's going to be constantly about them? Why can't it be about us?" Seconds later another girl joins this opinion: "You act as if children of migrants taking up the role of translators and mediators is something from the past. I still translate for my mother."

Neslihan Doğan, 'coordinator of the Ghent Turkish heritage project, STAM - City Museum of Ghent.

The discussion that followed set the baseline for the temporary exhibition: 'Those who preserve, live on' ('Wie bewaart, die blijft!/Koru ve yaşat') we ended up building together.

Making migration visible in the City Museum

It's 2020, STAM - City Museum Ghent celebrated its 10th anniversary and renewed its permanent exhibition. One of the exhibition rooms, 'The unbridled city', is dedicated to the last 200 years of urban history. The curators chose to tell important events or evolutions through objects. The renewal of the permanent exhibition was also an opportunity to address the diversity-related gap in the previous permanent exhibition. That's how objects like a drum of the lesbian-feminist samba band, Famba and



Youngsters having a brainstorm in a community centre about Ghent Turkish heritage and its significance in their daily lives. © Neslihan Doğan



The collection of Turkish tapes represents the Turkish migration to Ghent in the permanent exhibition. © STAM

a collection of Turkish tapes from several Turkish and Kurdish artists ended up in this part of the exhibition.

The story behind the collection of tapes was that children of guestworkers would buy lots of tapes of Turkish and Kurdish artists when they went to Turkey during their summer holidays. In an age before Turkish broadcasting channels and music streaming platforms, this was a way to stay connected to the motherland. In that way the collection of tapes and the story it represented about the Turkish impact on the city were deemed recognisable and generalizable. Choosing an object to represent a specific moment in urban history is also about not choosing so many other objects, stories and perspectives. The object-driven story-telling in the permanent exhibition has its limits. This was also the conclusion when two Ghentian doctors of Turkish descent engaged with the museum about this particular set of tapes.

High stakes or high engagement?

As true advocates, they started the conversation on representation of Turkish heritage in the City Museum of Ghent. They did so simultaneously with both the museum itself, while also engaging Turkish communities in the city by means of their socio-cultural association 'Burgerplicht'. Quickly the discussion was no longer about showcasing

Turkish heritage but about collecting it. The story of Turkish migration to Ghent is well documented and known, but virtually no objects are held by official museums. What started with two doctors grew into a core team of 6 socio-cultural youth organizations. Who is better equipped than the current generation of Ghent-Turkish youths to build a Turkish Ghent heritage collection?

For the first time ever the youth associations started a 'from below' trajectory in search of Turkish-Ghent heritage at the City Museum. Many of these youth associations did not previously find their way to the museum. When talking about participation and co-creation often 'a seat at the table' is a much-referred-to metaphor. In reality, participatory success does not rely on the mere table or gathering itself, but rather lies in the bargaining power available for these non-professional heritage enthusiasts. Guarantees in this case were provided by Burgerplicht vzw on the one hand. They repeatedly vouched for the youngsters and thus themselves waged their huge cultural capital and personal network. While on the other hand, the museum took on an engaged migration historian as project-facilitator on Burgerplicht's request. Only then they deemed it possible to create a safe space for the youngsters in the museum.



Some of the found Turkish Ghent heritage presented in the temporary exhibition 'Those who preserve, live on'. © Laura Vleugels

Negotiating the angle of the exhibition

In their quest for Turkish Ghent heritage, the youth associations, engaged from the onset in 2021, identified and questioned historic objects, discussed statements of significance, interviewed their family and presented their findings to a body of elders... Even though the youngsters are in charge during different stages, the project is unmistakably intergenerational. The youngsters ask their parents to join the interviews they have with their grandparents. They also consult the body of elders for their knowledge about a specific object, story, time, neighbourhood, craft or ritual. In doing so, the youngsters accumulated a hybrid collection. Only after the project arrived at this point, the idea of an exhibition was put back on the table.

The youngsters figured that we can't keep on collecting heritage from people without giving it back to the communities. It was important to keep the quest for

heritage as low profile as possible and with a high degree of openness. At the onset of the trajectory, a showcasing of objects was envisioned as a means to communicate about the trajectory. However, the overarching angle of such a small exhibition was a matter of much debate. The youngsters, the youth associations, the board of elders, Burgerplicht and the City Museum negotiated about the outcome. This was a challenging but crucial conversation.

Leading up to the exhibition, new individuals joined the existing group of youngsters, without firm affiliations to those organisations that were already involved. This November 2023 moment marked the second phase of our trajectory in which we no longer only talked about collecting but also about presenting. The quote in the introduction illustrates the diverse motivations of youngsters to participate. Some of them wanted to share a story about their grandparents, tied to an object they had found for the collection. Others wanted to contribute because for them the exhibition was a way to talk about

societal issues like sexism or racism. A third motivation was the perspective of the young creatives in our group, integrating the encountered heritage in their personal artistic practise.

That's how we built an exhibition about our preliminary findings, their significance and our participatory process. Our main goal however remains a collection from below brought together by youngsters of the Turkish diaspora in Ghent. This diverse collection is not only about representation but also about rewriting the story of Turkish migration in Ghent. It's not about diversifying the museum audience but about telling a more true story about the city. A story



Promotional image for 'Those who preserve, live on'. Mister and Misses Demirci pose in a photostudio in Ghent after their reunion. © Yener Demirci

that is not just about the first generation, but also about the people born and raised here and about girls that still translate for their mothers.



Visitors admiring the Turkish wall tapestry with embroidered feminist critique, made by Kübra Kuş and Şeyma Ünlü. © Laura Vleugels