H.C. Andersen Was (NOT) Here

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'Our office is on Rolighedsvej,' I said, during a casual conversation with a colleague after a seminar. 'Rolighedsvej?' she replied, 'H. C. Andersen died in Villa Rolighed'. I shivered. What a strange coincidence. The building next door to my office is called Villa Rolighed, an elegant eighteenth-century villa in what was once rural Frederiksberg and which is now part of the campus of the University of Copenhagen. 'Really?' I said. 'I thought he spent his last years in Nyhavn?' I knew this, because, at the time, I was living in one of the buildings in Nyhavn, a well-known seventeenth century canal in the city centre, where H. C. Andersen was known to have resided. 'Yes,' she said, 'but he died in Villa Rolighed!' What a surprise. A double nearness. I rushed home and looked it up. Yes, indeed, as is well known, H. C. Andersen lived at many addresses in Copenhagen in general and in Nyhavn in particular. The high volume of tourists gathering on the pavement outside several houses in Nyhavn every day, seeking a somewhat uncanny sense of closeness to the famous writer, is a constant reminder of this fact. Yet while Andersen spent his last years overlooking the canal in Nyhavn, where he was given two rooms by his benefactors the Melchior family who owned the first floor of number 18, he also partly lived in their summer villa, Villa Rolighed. This is where the Melchior family brought the famous writer on 12 June 1875 to nurse him during the illness from which he died on 4 August 1875.[1] Yet, their summer house was Villa Rolighed on Østerbro, not the Villa Rolighed on Frederiksberg I can see if I lean out my office window. The double movement of nearness thus became a double movement of alienation, once again distancing H. C. Andersen's mysterious ghostly presence from that momentary feeling of proximity in spatial terms, despite the undoubted temporal distance

of the long dead writer to my everyday life.

Tellingly, Andersen's split existence between Nyhavn 18 and Villa Rolighed, and the confusion about where Andersen may have said to have 'lived' or, in this case, the place where he died, a confusion typified by the conversation with my colleague, can be applied to much of his biography. What is at stake here is thus a rather uncanny dialectic between nearness and alienation. This dialectic arises when places in the city become 'literary' attractions because they seem imbued with the spectres of deceased iconic writers like Andersen. This is a theme which I will approach from a rather subjective angle in this essay contribution. First, however, let us explore the question of what 'home' may have meant to H. C. Andersen in more detail.

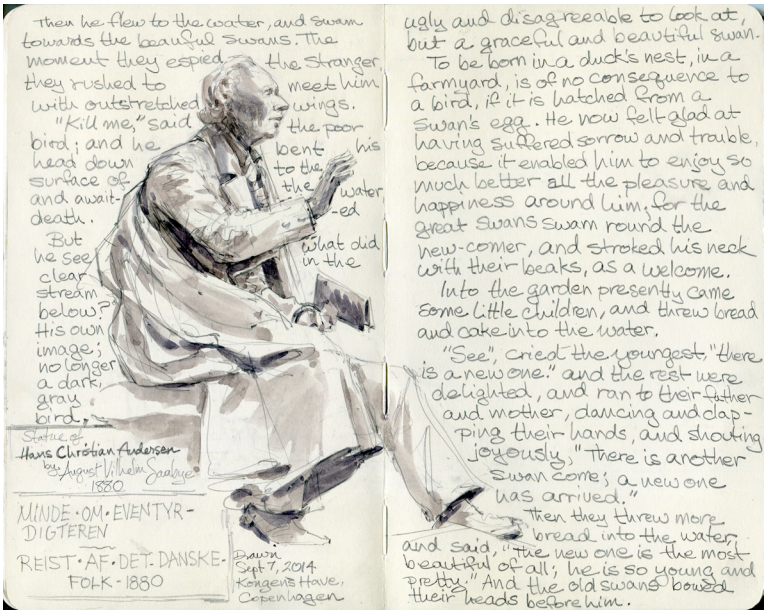

Figure 1: Drawing of the statue of H.C. Andersen by August Wilhelm Saabye from 1880 in Kongens Have in Copenhagen with a handwritten fragment of the Ugly Duckling. Credit: Deborah Kaspari.

Never at Home

The list of places in which Anderson lived in Copenhagen, the city in which he arrived on 6 September 1819 at the age of fourteen and where he had to endure much before becoming famous, numbers around twenty-five different lodgings in Copenhagen alone. On arrival, he lodged at an inn on Vestergade, and a closer look at the list of places he lived in the city tells us that Andersen was a lodger for most of his life – or as a guest of various benefactors as his fame blossomed.[2] This should not be a surprise. Lodging was common at a time when living conditions in the city were cramped and when the concept of the 'family home' being equated with the nuclear family was only slowly developing (Hepworth 1999: 17-29). This was not least the case for an unmarried man like Andersen. Records from the period also show that while wealthier households at the very least encompassed servants beside the central family members, many less wealthy families took in lodgers, and it was not uncommon to live in cross-generational constellations.[3] While a mapping of the places in which Andersen lived in the city conflicts with ideas of 'home' in the modern sense of the living spaces of the conjugal family, involving purchasing of furniture, other *Hab und Gut*, and even the property itself, Andersen's living arrangements were typical of his day.

While the equation of 'home' with 'dwelling' also corresponds to the largely accepted understanding in our own time, at least in the Western World, this has not always been the case.[4] To equate the home with a unit that is simultaneously legally defined (in the sense that its primary paradigm is the conjugal family) and materially (the actual apartment or house) only becomes central to a post-Victorian understanding of domesticity. In the nineteenth century, the feelings of belonging associated with an idea of home were still largely evoked not by one's dwelling but by one's place of origin. This place would typically be in the countryside, outside the city, and would refer to a district or region rather than the unit of the dwelling itself. In the case of H. C. Andersen, this lack of emphasis on the equation between dwelling, or property, and home also has another consequence that may seem odd to most people in today's consumer society: namely that it was as late as 1868,

at the time when Andersen had passed the age of sixty (and when he was living in rooms on the corner of Kongens Nytorv) that he bought any furniture of his own. Interestingly for the present exploration of Andersen's life and death in the city of Copenhagen, this included the purchasing of a bed, which Andersen bought at the cost 100 *rix-dollar*, and about which he said that this would be his 'deathbed'.[5] Whether in fact this would be the case seems unlikely. We must assume that Andersen died in a bed owned by the Melchior family.

The Writer's Den

Off Kongens Nytorv and a short walk from the rooms that held Andersen's alleged future deathbed in 1868, we find another place where Andersen lived in Copenhagen. In the period 1827-28, when he was twenty-two years old and before he found fame, he rented a small attic room at Vingaardstræde 6. The building was later demolished to make space for the department store Magasin du Nord, which was established here in 1870. Since 2005, in a distant corner of the department store, which is still a prominent shopping destination in the city, it has been possible to visit the so-called Hans Christian Andersen room, a reconstruction of that very attic room. Here, I rely on the stunning documentation and precise description of the place of one of my former neighbours from Nyhavn, the American artist Deborah Kaspari, who forwarded me beautifully textured drawings from her sketchbook after visiting the H. C. Andersen room in Magasin.

As noted on the drawing (Figure 2), we must imagine that the notoriously long-legged writer had a hard time fitting into in the space, bumping his head on the slanting walls of the attic room, unable to stretch in his bed (he must have been sleeping in a more upright, semi-seated position as was common at the time). The drawings evoke the quaint atmosphere of the room but also a slightly creepy, dusty and ghostly ambience, hovering as it does between between 'image' and 'place'. This is due to the way the room is used as a strangely hidden marketing manoeuvre, tucked in behind the aisles of shiny goods for sale in the department store. And as Deborah reports wittily, musing on the strange in-authenticity of the room:

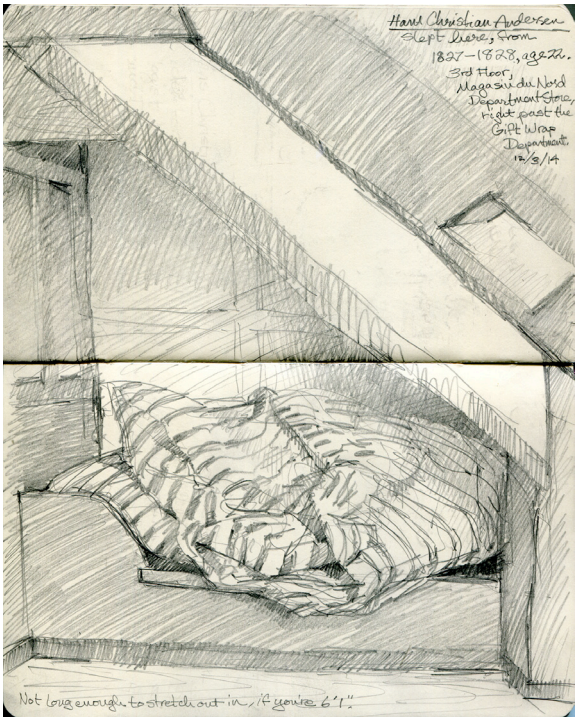

Figure 2: Drawing of the H.C. Andersen Room in Magasin du Nord. Credit: Deborah Kaspari.

> The little room exudes a Dickensian poignancy, more *Oliver Twist* than *A Christmas Carol*, and while I was there the sensation was further enhanced (or depending on the song, demolished) by piped-in Christmas music. When I walked in, the heart-tugger 'Little Drummer Boy' was playing. The rustle of gift-wrappers at work in the next room could have been the sound of starving orphans weaving brooms from straw.[6]

Little objects and writing instruments – allegedly touched by the writer (Figure 3.) – are offered up as an attempt to arouse sentiments of authenticity. This, arguably, creates a setting which is not just any

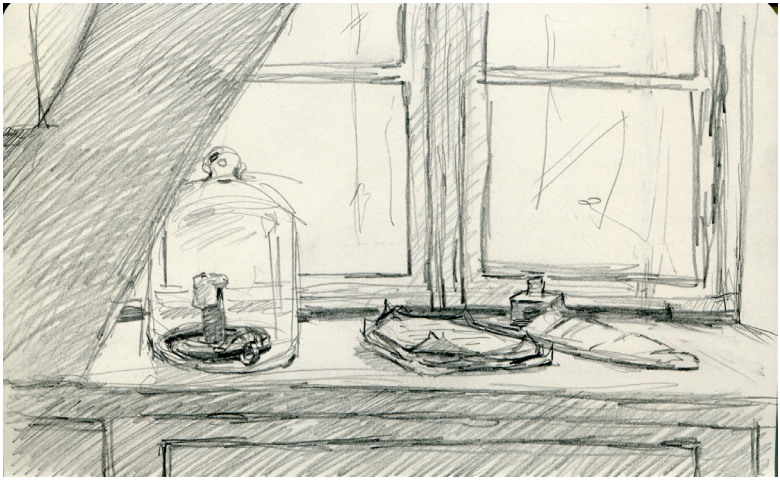

Figure 3: Details from the H.C. Andersen room in Magasin du Nord. Credit: Deborah Kaspari.

tourist attraction, but a place of literary quality. Its rationale lies in the way it is presented to us as the site of production or very engine room of the famous writer, a way of thinking that fully buys into the Romantic myth of the genius. As we know, this is a myth that H. C. Andersen himself rarely neglected a chance to nurture, most famously in the fairy tale 'The Ugly Duckling'. Much effort has gone into re-constructing this room *in situ* with such care that it allows us to literally step into the ambience of the room in which Andersen lived and worked and thus to reach a high level of spatial and even suggested temporal overlap with the famous writer. Yet, it is difficult to fully immerse oneself into the time capsule suggested by the room; it concomitantly invites the visitor in and keeps him or her at bay.

That a private company has taken on the task of the reconstruction of the room, however, is indicative of H. C. Andersen's acceptance into mainstream Danish culture as both safe and relevant for all. It

would be hard to think of the same attention given by a department store to, for example, an avant-garde modernist writer. Yet, curiously, it seems to have been forgotten that Andersen approached modern consumer culture with highly ambivalent sentiment. While he immersed himself in the new forms of urban culture that arrived from the large metropolises of Europe to Copenhagen during his lifetime and was an avid traveller to these cities, he was also highly critical of the superficiality and spectacle this entailed. This is evident in the fairy tale 'The Dryad'. If the room in Magasin du Nord is a place that is part museum, part marketing, its felt in-authenticity may thus be found in the way in which it displays conflicting loyalties to the myth of the genius and to an outspoken sense of object fetishism that can, arguably, be said to align with the particular temporality of modern consumer culture. On the one hand, the setting evokes images of the artist who, despite his humble setting, was able to put words on paper in this very location in the city and create works of lasting and universal quality that are still relevant to our own time. On the other hand, the place is oriented towards that which is spectacular yet fleeting; it is of the 'new', a temporality of which the department store is one of modern culture's most evident forms.

Yet, behind the perceived in-authenticity, we may conclude that visiting H. C. Andersen's different homes in Copenhagen does, after all, alert us to questions of the different forms of temporality that clash in the city. Such temporalities are embodied and engendered not only in the typical places we encounter in the city (here, the writer's den and the department store) but also in the figures and forms of practice of the people who make use of these places (here, the writer and the literary tourist). It therefore may also serve to reveal some of the deeper urban qualities of Andersen's way of life in Copenhagen. Perhaps, in fact, his many homes in the city, and our (along with many tourists') quest to find his home (in the singular) in the city, may tell us something crucial about cities more generally. It is on this note that I would like to end this short essay.

Our Home(s) in the City

Tracing the footsteps of an author like H. C. Andersen may very well always be fraught with our own projections onto, and readings of, architectural settings. Yet, the sensation of a magical 'touch' by the famous person, on which literary tourism thrives, is harboured by and through the longevity of the spatial fabric of the city and, if anything, allows for a momentary sense of (self)-reflection, one that is brought about by the interpretational effort in and of itself. At the very least, we are faced with the potential for new knowledge insofar as we allow ourselves to pay attention to the way a situational narrative may align us with something which is inherently temporal in character (going beyond the flatness of the touristic *image* of the site/sight).[7] For, if nothing else, what does connect us to the deceased famous writer can only be that we are also given the possibility to simply *go on with* daily life in these spaces that we share across time.

Even if what is at stake is a precise if somewhat bland reconstruction, as in the museum in Magasin du Nord, a room may have held the practical everyday activities as well as even sparkling moments of genius conjured up in the image of the writer working there. The reconstruction promises to bring us closer to that alleged moment of magic in which art is created. And due to the enormous surge of energy involved in the traveller's effort to visit such a place, we witness a phenomenon that taps into the true heritage of Romanticism, as can be seen from the prominence of themes such as the longing for authenticity, genius and individual creation that such a discussion evokes. Yet, what seems more intriguing about the attempt to reach that nearness, as this reading has emphasized, is its capacity to open up issues related to our urban lives as children of today's post-Romantic city. What the strange situation of the room in the department store conjures up is motifs of the superficiality of the object for sale and thus of the city as a space for consumption not just by the tourist's gaze, but by the tourist's entire sensory apparatus. Yet, this also tells of an ongoing search for authenticity, for something 'lost', something we may 'recover' in a way that can be obtained through bodily experience, which, again, both challenges and emphasises the sense of superficiality.

What, then, lies beyond the longing for authentic experience: a theme so central not just to the ways cities develop today under the banner of the 'experience economy' but also an idea which art has, often in problematic ways, engaged since the 1960s?[8] Perhaps we may be able to identify a different register of urban experience, one that may allow us to reflect on our own understanding of life in the city and one that may thus probably best be experienced outside the museal context. I would like to argue that it is conjured up in the way the rooms and spaces continue to form that concrete horizon of or background to the everyday life of individuals in the city. This is a situational structure suggested in the final image my neighbour sent me (Figure 4.): a sketch of her visit to Andersen's former rooms in Nyhavn 18, the rooms he was offered by the Melchior family towards the very end of his life. A room which is not stifled by that quest for authenticity of the room in Magasin du Nord but one which lives on in strange dialogue with whoever happens to be an occupant here. We thus reach an understanding that is, simultaneously, both much more open-ended and down-to-earth than anything the literary tourist would ever hope for. If anything, it may speak to us about the well-known basic human practices of everyday life that are carried out at home, as given in the casual combination of study and bedroom, the sign of a child at play, captured so poetically in the watercolour. If, as Peter Carl suggests, a city is an institution whose stability is enacted through change (Carl 2015), the fact that H. C. Andersen was (or was not) here may thus allow us to begin to understand, feel, touch, listen and thereby begin to see how the city forms a horizon for praxis of individuals who may have nothing in common but that common ground. In this way, we may begin to understand how the urban fabric may embody unarticulated cultural forms of continuity.[9]

Figure 4: View of the sitting room facing the canal which H.C. Andersen occupied periodically from 1871 and until his death in 1875. Credit: Deborah Kaspari.

Endnotes

[1] See http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/rundtom/faq/index_e.html?emne=boliger (Accessed 9 June 2015)

[2] For a list of all H.C. Andersen's many residences after he moved to Copenhagen, see http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/rundtom/faq/index_e.html?emne=boliger (Accessed 9 June 2015)

[3] See my discussions of the evolving forms of domesticity in the Copenhagen of H.C. Andersen's lifetime in Steiner 2014.

[4] For a cultural history of the concept of the home, see Rybczynski 1987.

[5] See http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/rundtom/faq/index_e.html?emne=boliger (Accessed 9 June 2015).

[6] https://drawingthemotmot.wordpress.com/2014/12/05/friday-sketchbook-hans-christian-andersen-slept-here/ (Accessed 9 June 2015).

[7] See my discussions about these very issues in the forthcoming article Steiner 2016.

[8] See Mechtild Widrich's critique of the culture of experience of late-modern society, here in an art context in Widrich 2014.

[9] A a version of this essay will be presented at a conference at the University of Kent in summer 2016.

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Images

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