HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

JACOB A. RIIS MUSEUM
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Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914) is perhaps the most influential Danish emigrant throughout history. He created social change in his new homeland – the USA, and was in his time a famous person and close personal friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. As a journalist he is seen as the creator of documentary photography. By means of his photos he showed the squalor of which he wrote more vividly than his words could express. He gathered his experiences in the book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). This book had great influence on the public understanding of the miserable condition under which especially immigrants lived in New York.

Jacob A. Riis is to this day still current and relevant. The Tenement Museum, Manhattan, presents the story of immigrants at the time of Jacob A. Riis. The Jacob A. Riis Settlement plays an important role in Queens. The Museum of the City of New York, which holds the vast collection of Jacob A. Riis’ glass negatives, show the exhibition *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York’s Other Half* in Fall 2015; the publication of *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York’s Other Half* (Yale University Press, 2015) by Riis expert Bonnie Yochelson – all testify to his continuing relevance.

In the center of Jacob A. Riis’ birth town, Ribe – the oldest town in Scandinavia – Museum of South West Jutland (Sydvestjyske Museer) owns a block of renaissance and 19th century buildings. These buildings are to be developed into a museum complex. Among the buildings we find the home where Jacob A. Riis grew up. In this house the museum will create an internationally oriented museum, which on one hand will show the efforts and importance of Jacob A. Riis’ work and on the other hand will focus on and put the themes that Riis was so highly involved in improving into perspective. Furthermore, with basis in one of Riis’ other famous books, *The Making of an American*, the museum will focus on what made Riis into the person he was and what more generally is part of forming a person’s identity and nationality.

Flemming Just
Museum Director, Professor
How the Other Half Lives, Jacob A. Riis Museum will be part of a whole museum block, Quindens Gaard in the central part of Ribe.
IDEA AND CONCEPT
Danish-American Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914)

JACOB A. RIIS WAS A PIONEER in combining engaging reporting and documentary photography. He became an influential social reformer, a muckraker, as his friend, the later President Theodore Roosevelt, called Riis and the other reformers.

His childhood home in Ribe offers Museum of South West Jutland a unique opportunity to convey his story and influence both as social documentary photographer, writer, and social reformer. The house will also show exhibits which will focus on the power of the photo as a significant factor of influencing history.

Jacob A. Riis emigrated to the USA in 1870 and struggled his way from the bottom of society to become a very famous/influential person, not least through his book How the Other Half Lives. President Theodore Roosevelt stated that Jacob A. Riis was the most useful citizen and the ideal American.

In New York Jacob A. Riis gained a first impression of the city’s slum as he himself struggled to survive. He saw how mass immigration created inhuman living conditions. As a reporter, photographer and writer Jacob A. Riis was the first to show the public how government, employers, and landlords treated the impoverished. As the first documentary photographer he shocked the world by depicting the slum in words as well as illustrations. In collaboration with other social reformers he managed to change legislation in the City of New York.

At the museum we want to focus on Jacob A. Riis’ influence on society and on other social reformers, who took part in changing the social conditions for the exposed immigrants in the melting pot of New York at the end of the 19th century. At the same time we want to tell the story of Jacob A. Riis’ astonishing life – the story of the contrast between the provincial life in Ribe to the hectic metropolitan life in New York City.

The goal is to create “a reason to go” – a place with focus on the influence of documentary photography with basis in Jacob A. Riis’ life and work. We want to create a place that offers thoughts of perspective and sympathetic insights.
Sortebrødregade 3. The house in Ribe where Jacob A. Riis spent his childhood.

Memorial plaque, Skolegade 1, Ribe.

The inscription reads:

In this house in 1849
Journalist and philanthropist
Jacob A. Riis was born.
Died in Barre Massachusetts, USA 1914
Faithful son of his native town
Named “America’s most useful citizen”
by President Theodore Roosevelt.
CONTENT
The house creates a framework for the story of the person Jacob A. Riis, his activities and importance. The concept consists of three elements, where the entrepreneurial and unusual life of Jacob A. Riis will be conveyed in relation to the life of that time. This will be presented at several levels:

- His public and outgoing activities as journalist, writer, public speaker and photographer.
- A look behind the façade of the life that formed him, with focus on his love story, his experiences in the USA and his childhood home.
- A room for special exhibitions with focus on different aspects of documentary photography as a cultural, political and social critical phenomenon then and now.

TARGET GROUPS
With its thematics and content the museum will target both Danish and internationals tourists and will of course also be of interest for the local population, not least for schools and students. It will be possible for families, small groups, and individual visitors to get an informative and exciting experience, which will inspire curiosity and reflection. The visitors will be offered an extended language dimension (i.e. Danish, German, English, Dutch, French, Spanish and Italian). Audiovisual texts will be provided both digitally and via audio-guides.

CONCEPT OF PRESENTATION
The experience of visiting a museum must speak to all senses and the story should be felt through the whole body. Riis’ photographic and journalistic experiences will come to live through words, smells and scenography – the goal of the presentation is to awaken curiosity and create a surprising experience for the visitor. To heighten the many emotional impressions the museum will create oases for mental immersion – places to reflect and process.

AESTHETICS AND DESIGN
The childhood home of Jacob A. Riis from 1850 will be the location of the museum. The house is part of the national cultural heritage protection scheme and represents in itself a cultural historical value, not least because the original walls and layout of the small rooms are preserved. This will be preserved in the museum, where a simple and timeless design will be the principle. Not many items from Jacob A. Riis’ home is preserved, hence will the design be based on scenography and will function as an experience and not as a visit to a home from the 1850s.
The collection will be displayed on two levels: the ground floor and the first floor.

**THE GROUND FLOOR** will work under the title: *How the Other Half Lives* – Jacob A. Riis’ experiences, his activities and his influence on the world.

**THE FIRST FLOOR** will focus on the theme: *The Making of an American*. It will take the visitors behind the scenes and show them a fascinating journey through the personal life of Jacob A. Riis. In the following the layout and staging of the collection will be described.
THE FIRST FLOOR

ENTRANCE FIRST FLOOR

ELEVATOR
THE INTRODUCTION ROOM will be the beginning and will tease the visitors’ curiosity: in this room Riis’ worlds and life story is portrayed by kaleidoscopic tales with a time travel from Ribe in the 1860s to New York 1870–1914. Big digital screens will show changing pictures and give an impression of Riis’ life and experiences – and changing texts will tell the visitors who he was. The walls and ceiling of the room will be layered with digital screens, which in unison will create a total image and individually will show pictures to create a time flow. The story will be told through the experience of each visitor stepping into a 3D scene and being surrounded by the story and experience. The effects to tell the story will include surprising elements to tease the visitors’ emotions, shock them and to give the visitors an experience beyond the expectations of a visit to the museum, such as rats darting across the floor, screams of men’s voices and the sound of babies crying. The rooms’ messages conveyed through illustrations, sounds, words and smells will focus on why there is a museum for Riis, show parts of who he was, the contrasts in his life and the influence he gained in the USA.
Thousands were living in cellars. There were three hundred underground lodging-houses in the city. The first room gives an introduction to Riis’ two worlds and his life portrayed through illustrations and sound.
JACOB A. RIIS WAS A PIONEER by the way he used photography to document the shadowy side of society. This room will depict the photos, which Riis is known for. He showed the American middle class how the other half lived and how the dark side of society formed itself.

For the time his pictures were shocking, strong, and terrifying. Using the photo as a way of telling a story had until then been a way of depicting the beautiful side of life and society. This means that not only did he change the journalistic covering of the impoverished but also the aesthetic use of photography.
In this room his story of nightly photo shoots in the slum, his special way of surprising his motifs when he sneaked in on the people to get his photos, and the special and sometimes dangerous techniques he developed to catch the perfect and most telling motif. He used his photos in connection with his public speaking and his book *How the Other Half Live* to reform society. The story in this room focuses on the social history of the time and the reality, which the photos portrayed.

A digital table with a touch screen will give the visitors the opportunity to enhance the details of the photos of New York’s slum, gain more knowledge, explore and share the experience to gain an insight into Jacob A. Riis’ documentary photography. Photos and texts will be available for immersion with information about both motives and the social conditions of that time. On the walls specially selected themes will be presented through separate touch screens – the visitors will be able to explore e.g. living conditions, homeless children in the slum, workplaces, or tenements in further detail. This room will offer the visitor a chance to immerse oneself into the universe of Riis’ photos and the social conditions of New York at the time.

“It was photographed by flashlight on just such a visit. In a room not thirteen feet either way slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor.”
JACOB A. RIIS WAS A POLICE REPORTER, journalist, public speaker and a writer. It was these jobs with access to the underworld and the dark side of society that made him realize the disparity of society. This room focuses on his writing and the activities, which functioned as the groundwork of his writing. The visitor will be able to see his evolvement in journalism, from his first steps as a police reporter till he as a journalist and human being chose to engage in and try to influence the conditions of the other half. The room focuses on the debates of poverty and on Riis’ influence on these debates. How was the poverty issues viewed at the time and who spoke up for both rich and poor?

This part of the collection will bring the writing to life. The written word will be conveyed to the visitors’ eyes and ears through both audio and visual texts. On a screen the visitor will see how letters transform into words and sentences and convey messages – the visitors will achieve the feeling of seeing the text being written. Soundscapes with stories told to the visitor will add to the visual texts. Selected works of Jacob A. Riis will be exhibited to the visitors, while digital versions can be flipped through, touched and read. The visitors will have the opportunity to contribute by commenting via a typewriter from the time period – the texts will be transferred to digital screens both in the collection and to share online.
“Abuse is the normal condition of ‘the Bend’, murder its everyday crop, with the tenants not always the criminals.”

“A sadly familiar story – before the day is at an end. The child is dying with measles. With half a chance it might have lived; but it had none. That dark bedroom killed it.”

“I wanted to run my own paper, and I told him so.”
JACOB A. RIIS TOURED the USA with lectures about the other half. Two small but connected rooms will take the visitors through his lectures – portrayed in words and pictures and show how society viewed him as a social reformer.

The reviews and debates stemming from the publication of Jacob A. Riis’ books and lectures will be placed in the cultural view of the world and the socio-political flow of the time. International visitors will be able to experience their own history and values reflected in Jacob A. Riis’ messages and the reactions stemming from his work.

In a small movie theatre the visitor will be able to experience Jacob A. Riis’ lecture How the Other Half Lives with the original photos and his words conveyed on a ghost wall, where Jacob A. Riis’ will be brought to life by an actor giving Riis’ speak to the visitors.
“Homes must be built for the working masses by those who employ their labour; but tenements must cease to be ‘good property’ in the old, heartless sense.”

The visitors will be able to experience Riis’ lecture How the Other Half Lives through words and photos conveyed by a ghost wall.
In the photo studio, children will have the opportunity to play with the media both in front of and behind the camera.
The target group is primarily children from the age of 12 years and up, who through play with the photographic process will gain an insight into the environment of the time, and the work of a photographer by trying to photograph and stage a photo shoot in a studio looking like it would have done at that time. The results of this activity will be a digital photo with the opportunity to print the picture and use it as a postcard or to share it on social media and give the visitors an opportunity to receive a memorabilia from the visit.

"A horde of dirty children play about the dripping hydrant; the only thing in the alley that thinks enough of its chance to make the most of it: it is the best it can do. These are the children of the tenements, the growing generation of the slums; this their home."

A PHOTO STUDIO anno the 1890s will give the visitors the opportunity to test their abilities in photography and play with the media either in the genre of documentary photography or by portraying oneself as part of a scene from the time, wearing time appropriate clothing. This part of the collection is aimed at children and teens who through the hands-on activity will experience how it was to be either behind or in front of the camera at that time – the photographic process will be the focus point of this part of the collection.
Always on the move

THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN

AT THE FIRST FLOOR

the themes of

the collection are dedicated to the personal
evolution and journey of Jacob A. Riis. The
visitors will be invited behind the façade and
experience how his growing up in Ribe in some
ways influenced his understanding of society
and the ideas he brought to the USA.

In 1901 Jacob A. Riis’ book *The Making of
an American* was published. In this book he
described his struggles to survive as a young
immigrant, his fight to get the love of his life, the
fight to make a career and to be acknowledged
as a human being, a son, an inhabitant of Ribe,
an American citizen and as a social reformer.
As a human being he fought his whole life to
combine these different identities to become a
whole person.

His motto: “never give up” is crucial to the under-
standing of his personality, character and drive.

To show the perception of Jacob A. Riis’
thoughts, personality and spiritual evolvement
into the social reformer we know of today,
different means and instruments will be used to
underline emotions, streams of consciousness
and tempi. The senses and emotions will come
into play throughout the collections. In this part
of the collection smells and doors will play a
role. The doors will be part of the collection for
the visitors to open and reveal different scenes
and aspects of how it could have felt to be Jacob
A. Riis – behind each door the visitor will find
a different scene that will work as an example
of his inner struggles, his focused goals and his
rigorous will.

This part of the collection will be based upon
his challenges conveyed through central and
symbolic stories, which in combination will
create an image of his inner world, his ambitions
and demons, his dreams, his character and drive.
First floor: The overall theme *The Making of an American* conveys Jacob A. Riis’ inner journey and personal struggles throughout his life.
JACOB A. RIIS’ STRUGGLE to break through in the USA were ruthless. He was always on the move and worked day and night. He led a hand-to-mouth existence in his chase for the next job, the next meal and a place to sleep.

On the way up the stairs to the second part of the collection the claustrophobic, manic and pulsating atmosphere will be created. The visitor will be bombarded with impressions. The inner stream of thoughts, experiences, and the struggle to survive will be interpreted in flows of images and soundscapes, which will make the visitor feel uncomfortable and create a feeling of being under enormous stress. The soundscape meeting the visitor while moving up the stairs to the presentation of Riis’ inner world will a.o. consist of heartbeat, clocks chiming, and shouting.

“Tomorrow there was another day of starvation. How long was this to last? Was it any use to keep up a struggle so hopeless?”

“Three wasted years! … I was bankrupt in hope and purpose.”
**RAW SENSELESS VIOLENCE** is part of one of Jacob A. Riis’ tales of destiny. A true story, which Jacob A. Riis lived through in his first years as a deprived immigrant in New York. The tale of how his only friend – a stray dog was brutally beaten to death by a police officer, left a lasting and changing impression on Jacob A. Riis and influenced his later work in changing the culture among the police force and the closing of the police managed lodging rooms.

When the visitors open the door to one of the first floor rooms the story will be activated as a projection of images and a soundscape depicting the horrifying experience – if the experience will be too emotional the door can be closed again.
NEVER GIVE UP! • ROOM 7

The love story

AS A YOUNG MAN IN RIBE Jacob A. Riis fell madly in love with Elisabeth – an upper class girl. The love story became a central part of his life and influenced his intend to prove his worth by doing well in the USA. Despite the tough odds he never gave up hope of returning to Ribe as a wealthy man and being able to marry Elisabeth. She became an obsession for him – a hope he clung to while trying to survive. The hope fuelled his will to survive. The love story is a tale of destiny of unrequited love, redemption of hope, and marriage and family with Elisabeth in New York.

The room chosen for this tale is where Jacob A. Riis spent his youth gazing at the villa where Elisabeth lived. In the window glass he edged a greeting for Elisabeth – this window glass is preserved and will be on display. The room will be staged as a dream room that will allow the visitors to sit and rest and experience an artificially orchestrated image flow on walls and ceiling to give a feeling of tranquillity and harmony.

The soundscape will be used to underline the feeling of being in love and loving another person. This room will offer the visitor a place of meditation and reflection where he/she will be able to get a sense of Jacob A. Riis’ lifelong love for Elisabeth.
“As she stands one brief moment there with the roguish look, she is to stand in his heart forever – a sweet girlish figure, in jacket of gray, black-embroidered, with schoolbooks and pretty bronzed boots – “

“How much of sunshine one little letter can contain!”

“It is true that all the world loves a lover. It smiled upon me all day long, and I smiled back.”

Elisabeth Riis (1853–1905) and Jacob A. Riis. After many years of unrequited love, Riis succeeded in having Elisabeth’s yes. He and Elisabeth got married and founded a family in the USA.
From muckraking journalist to social reformer

THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN

- ROOM 8 & 9

The Making of an American asks the always relevant questions: how was his identity created? What created the feeling of belonging, being good enough, and when do you stop searching for feeling like you belong?

The story will be based on the process of creating his identity and will give cause to reflection. His professional career from police reporter and muckraking journalist to his role as "the most famous Scandinavian writer in the USA" included a variety of identities: small town boy/big city man, carpenter/writer, poor/wealthy, excluded/respected and this part of the collection asks the always relevant questions: how was his identity created? What created the feeling of belonging, being good enough, and when do you stop searching for feeling like you belong?

When Jacob A. Riis Wrote The Making of an American in 1901 he was well-known and had created a name for himself in the USA. In his autobiography he expands on how he went through a transformation from being a Dane from Ribe to becoming an American.
a social reformer and his collaboration with and close relations to the future president Theodore Roosevelt on improving the social conditions in New York. Riis wanted better schooling, kindergartens and orphanages. At the same time he agitated for urban planning including the creation of green oases and the feeling of air and light by demolishing tenements in the overly crowded city districts. Jacob A. Riis was by nature a Social Darwinist and a conservative and seen with the understanding of today a racist in his view on different nationalities, but he realized that the unbearable, dirty and dire straits was the reason for a lot of crime. He wanted to create equal social conditions to make sure that people would be able to live up to their potential as working citizens. His message was that all deserve a chance but you have to work for it.

As one of the social reformers of the time Jacob A. Riis was part of the struggle to define poverty and the reasons for it. The characters and people behind social reforms, social movements and political interests will be portrayed in these rooms, which are based on Jacob A. Riis' transformation from being a hireling to become a writer with a cause.

“Only let us go ahead.”

“I had found it, and my heart, too, at last. I knew then that it was my flad; that my children's home was mine, indeed; that I also had become an American in truth.”
JACOB A. RIIS’ CHILDHOOD and youth in Ribe can be viewed as a remarkable contrast to his later life in the USA. But his life in Ribe was not without grief and concern. He lost his biological siblings one by one, 12 in total, and became the only living son in the family. This put him under a lot of pressure from his father, who, as a strict school teacher and caretaker, disapproved of Riis’ choice of becoming a carpenter. The lack of acknowledgement from his father may have been one of the reasons for his migration to the USA – to start anew and prove his worth to the world – to Elisabeth and his father. The relationship to his father was re-established when he visited Ribe now as a well-known American writer, and he gained the respect and acknowledgement from his father.

His background in a small medieval town in Denmark, his experiences throughout his childhood and youth, growing up in Ribe and the surrounding area was highly influential to his view of human nature/humanity and his special care for the children in the slum and is described in his idealizing book The Old Town.

“This world is without a purpose, and least of all what you and I are doing, though we may not be able to make it out. I got that faith from my mother.”

“I dreamed a beautiful dream in my youth, and I awoke and found it true.”
After Riis’ death his influence as a social reformer, writer and photographer was described in obituaries and articles. Here is an example of a Danish obituary from the 29. of May 1914.

**THE TALE OF JACOB A. RIIS**

Jacob A. Riis was an active, eventful and hectic life that will end with the story of his death and legacy. Obituaries tell of his influence on American society and a later photographer's rediscovery of Jacob A. Riis’ photos many years after his death will be presented. This room will offer the visitors a place for peace and reflection and an opportunity to say goodbye to Jacob A. Riis and his life story.
IN THE EXHIBITION ROOM variable exhibitions will be found. All with the common goal of celebrating documentary photography.

The exhibitions will focus on both new and historical documentary photography. The themes of the exhibitions can be of both social historical character and news footage from trouble spots around the world or illustrate subcultures in today’s society. The themes will all show that photography still is able to influence and change the world.
THE STORIES and content of the museum will offer unique opportunities for learning for lower and upper secondary school students. The Jacob A. Riis Museum will provide rich opportunities for creating current learning courses and will offer the students a chance to identify with and be challenged by the themes, which will be unfolded. The museum will create several types of courses and materials, digital and on paper for the use of visiting school classes and families.
**ACCESS AND OPERATION**

Part of a museum complex

**THE JACOB A. RIIS MUSEUM** will be part of a whole museum block, Quedens Gaard, from where tickets, books and souvenirs will be sold.

A general plan for communication and operation of the museum has been made. In the Jacob A. Riis Museum handicap access will be made available on both floors via elevator(s). Plans for accessibility will be undertaken with respect for the protected building.
The young Jacob A. Riis scratched his signature on a window in Ribe.