



# A Place Where Fairy Tales Are Hidden

*A magical world right in the middle of Odense, the museum dedicated to Denmark's most famous storyteller Hans Christian Andersen sends visitors on a journey into the underground to experience his work in a wholly original way.*

*By Julia Wäschenbach*

The design for the new Hans Christian Andersen House by renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma contains almost no 90-degree angles.



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## OUND HEDGES THAT

meander in what looks to be an enchanted garden form the entrance to the newly opened Hans Christian Andersen House in the Danish city of Odense, designed by star Japanese architect Kengo Kuma. The lines between the town and the outer museum space appear to have been blurred on purpose. Tracks of a tram run directly past the labyrinthine garden, which is accessible to the wider public.

“And then this green oasis full of curves, where there are no 90-degree angles, whispers to you while you are on your way to university or to the hospital: Get off the tram. You don’t have to live your life simply getting from A to B—it’s not about reaching your destination,” Henrik Lübker says. “That is the promise: that a new experience awaits you behind each of these round hedges.”

Lübker is one of the creative minds behind the new museum and served as its curator in the years leading up to its opening in 2021. From a tiny exhibition space revolving around Hans Christian Andersen’s birthplace on a cobbled street in the historic part of town, the museum has been transformed into a modern 60,000-square-foot complex. In addition to the superb garden, the complex is home to sinuous wooden pavilions with extensive glass fronts, which—in good weather—send beams of sunlight into the area of the museum lying above ground.

Two-thirds of its space, however, likely to the first-time visitor’s surprise, are not visible upon first glance, but hidden underground. To experience them, visitors need to dive deep into Andersen’s fairy-tale world. “The idea behind the architectural design is similar to Andersen’s method, where a small world suddenly transforms into a larger universe,” says Kengo Kuma, who is renowned for merging architecture with nature.

INSIDE, THE MUSEUM SENDS ITS VISITORS DOWN A winding path, tracing Andersen’s life via showcases and projections along the way: his travels, his love affairs with both sexes and his creative work ranging from journal entries to paper cuttings. The most prolific writer in Danish history, Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) penned over 150 fairy tales—including “The Little Mermaid,” “The Princess and the Pea” and “The Emperor’s New Clothes”—while also writing numerous poems, novels and plays.

But the exhibition is not merely a display of Andersen’s works and life. “The museum is not about telling his stories; you can read those at home. It’s about experiencing them in a brand-new way. We wanted to make a museum that is not about Andersen, but speaks like Andersen,” explains Lübker. Equipped with headphones before they begin their journey into Andersen’s world, visitors can create their own individual museum experience, much like a play that spontaneously unfolds before them.

PHOTO: MITCH WIESINGER



The museum is located in the historic center of Odense, Denmark's fourth-largest city.





**Kengo Kuma** used ordinary materials including wood and glass for the three pavilions, which are home to the main museum, a children's universe called Ville Vau and a café.

PHOTO: BJÖRN KLAUSEN



*Sometimes, the objects will even converse with each other, much like within some of Hans Christian Andersen's tales.*

Thanks to state-of-the-art location sensing technology, once a visitor approaches any object in the museum it begins “talking” to them, be it a souvenir from his travels or the princess’s pea. “And as you get closer, it speaks even louder,” Lübker explains. “It’s like walking through a living theater environment.” Sometimes, the objects will even converse with each other, much like within some of Hans Christian Andersen’s tales. The American writer Daniel Handler, best known under the pseudonym Lemony Snicket, put together the English script for the audio track. He is one of many recognized artists—Henrique Oliveira, Kim Fupz Aakeson and Louise Alenius among them—who have contributed to the artistic design of the museum.

“I have been entranced by Andersen’s stories for as long as I can remember. It was an unearthly delight to wander through his life and work and to be responsible for the words whispered into the ears of strangers,” Handler says of his work for the H.C. Andersen House.

**A**T THE END OF THE SERPENTINE RAMP, THE VISITORS find themselves in the underground section of the museum, moving past fluttering and almost transparent curtains into a large open hall, the space in which Andersen’s fairy tales are brought to life. Flocks of paper birds soar in the air while the visitors move between 12 loosely defined circular spaces, each of them disclosing a different one of the fairy tales. This is where visitors encounter well-known stories such as “The Ugly Duckling” and “The Nightingale,” some displayed in a flashy neon light environment and some in an almost melancholic fashion.

“The Little Mermaid” is a clear example of the latter, a dreamy circular space bounded by airy, rustling long curtains. In the middle of the room, huge stone-shaped cushions invite the visitors to take a seat and look up. When they do, they see a pool of water from the museum gardens shimmering through a glass ceiling, giving them the impression that they are underwater looking up into a distinct and inaccessible world.

This is one of the connections that the architects have created between the different levels of the museum, inside and outside, underground and aboveground, referencing the many layers in Andersen’s work. “What we were trying to do here was to create a sense of longing for a different world, no matter what that might look like in one’s mind,” Lübker notes.

Kengo Kuma and his team, who were also behind the new Olympic Stadium in Tokyo, enhance this notion of space in the architecture. There is no spot in the museum’s garden where visitors can get a full overview of it.



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**The museum shop** sells works by H.C. Andersen in different languages and other objects connected to Andersen’s universe.





PHOTO COPYRIGHT: LAERKE BECK JOHANSEN

Behind loose curtains, some of Andersen's most famous fairy tales take form in creative, modern ways.



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Reflecting the visitor's own image in triangular mirrors, an installation recreates the frozen lake of the fairy tale "The Snow Queen."



In the circular space dedicated to "The Little Mermaid," visitors seated on stone-shaped cushions look up at the grounds through a round glass ceiling.





PHOTOS COPYRIGHT: H.C. ANDERSEN'S HOUSE, LÆRKE BECK JOHANSEN

After a journey through Andersen's life, visitors enter an open underground space of fairy tales.

To widen their perspective, they must embark on a journey. "The materials we used for the Andersen Museum are nothing special. Green hedges, wood and glass. Those are normal materials, but we tried to show another world through them," Kuma says.

"Andersen gave us a special experience. His message to us was that even in daily life we can both find dreams, and live dreams. It is a very strong message for people in the 21st century because we live in a very limited world with much stress and many constraints, but we can still have a dream. And our museum can show that kind of dream on a humble scale," he adds.

**T**HROUGHOUT THE CONSTRUCTION PERIOD, THE project suffered several setbacks, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In June 2021, the museum was finally able to celebrate a so-called soft opening in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen of Denmark, though a large part of the museum grounds still resembled a construction site. At that point, the two pavilions which housed a children's universe and a café respectively were yet to open, and the gardens and paths were unfinished.



"The Steadfast Tin Soldier" and "The Nightingale" are among many of Andersen's fairy tales represented in the museum.

Technical difficulties with the headsets at the time also meant that the audience wasn't able to listen to the carefully curated sound experience while wandering through the exhibition—a disappointment for the many locals that came to the museum during the summer months. Nevertheless, they embraced the new museum celebrating their town's most famous son. "I was born in Odense, I grew up here, and I grew up with Andersen's fairy tales, so they mean a lot to me," visitor Rikke Sunding Vejlebo says.

**I**N DECEMBER, THE MUSEUM WAS FINALLY ABLE TO OPEN completely, enabling visitors now to enjoy the full experience. Since its soft opening, the museum has welcomed 100,000 visitors. Post-COVID, the museum hopes that the numbers will reach upwards of 200,000 to 300,000 per year.

While the tour through the main exhibition only takes a couple of hours at most, the museum has become far more enticing to families since the opening of the children's universe, Ville Vau. Designed as a fantastical space with imaginative historical costumes to try on and facilities in which kids





In the pavilion of the Ville Vau, children can role-play tales in a magical fantasy world.

—and adults who can’t resist the urge—can use their imagination to engage in role-play, it includes a little post office, a bakery, a lake with a small boat and a horse carriage.

ON THE UPPER FLOOR, AT LEAST A DOZEN EASELS and countless paper craft materials invite the children to become artists themselves. “I like the fact that it is not a traditional museum,” Sunding Vejlebo, a mother of four boys, says. “It is great that there are many things that the children can try out and touch.”

Lübker, who has since moved to a new position following the opening of the H.C. Andersen House, believes that the museum will inspire creative minds across generations. “Just like Andersen, the museum wants to appeal to all ages,” Lübker stresses.

PHOTO COPYRIGHT: METTE RISAGER

## HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN HOUSE IN A NUTSHELL

<b>Opened</b>	June 30th, 2021 (soft opening)
<b>Architects</b>	Kengo Kuma & Associates
<b>Exhibition Design</b>	Event Communications Ltd., London
<b>Landscape Design</b>	MASU Planning
<b>Architect of Record</b>	C & W Arkitekter A / S
<b>Engineering design</b>	Søren Jensen
<b>Consultant architect</b>	Cornelius + Vöge
<b>Owner</b>	Odense Municipality
<b>Sponsors and partners</b>	A.P. Møller Foundation (258 million DKK), Augustinus Foundation (27 million DKK), Knud Højgaards Fond (4 million DKK), Nordea-fonden (4.7 million DKK)
<b>Facilities</b>	Main exhibition space, children’s universe, café, museum shop, Andersen’s birthplace
<b>Construction</b>	Cost: 390 million DKK (\$120 million)
<b>Floor space</b>	60,277 square feet



**Hans Christian Andersen**  
mural by street artist Don John, in Odense, Denmark.

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