

HONOR AWARD

TING: Technology and Democracy

Norsk Teknisk Museum

Oslo

Project Area
850m²

Open Date
April 2014

Budget
€1 million

Design
Ralph Appelbaum
Associates, TAMSCHICK
MEDIA+SPACE GmbH

Design Team
Ralph Appelbaum Associates
Timothy Ventimiglia (design
director), Karin Knott
(project manager), Vanessa
Offen (developer), Sharmila
Sandrasegar (graphic
designer)

Tamschick Media+Space
GmbH
Marc Tamschick (creative
director); Tobias Ziegler
(production/project
manager); Natalie van Sasse
van Yssel, Marc Osswald (art
direction)

Fabrication
Norsk Teknisk Museum
(fabrication/installation)

Consultants
BLUWI Music & Sounddesign
GbR (music composer, sound
design), Stefan Will (sound
design)

Photos
Manfred Vogel



▲ With the blare of a Nordic horn, the Ting begins. The moderator leads the group through a series of discussions about emerging technologies and their impact on society.

Ting and the Art of Performance Exhibition

At Oslo's Museum of Technology, Ralph Appelbaum Associates creates a new kind of participatory museum experience.

▶ Visitors gather around the Ting table and explore artifacts from the museum's collection by placing their wooden block on the projected surface.



How would you answer this question: “Do you think it is possible to control technological development in a democracy?”

It may sound like a college essay question or the beginning of a TED Talk, but this thought-provoking theme is the central focus of an innovative new exhibit at the Norwegian Museum of Technology in Oslo.

TING: Technology and Democracy was planned at the confluence of two important anniversaries celebrated in 2014: the centennial of The Norwegian Museum of Science, Technology, Industry and Medicine and the 200th anniversary of the Norwegian constitution. Senior Curator Henrick Treimo recalls that he and his colleague Tone Rasch proposed an exhibit “that explores how relationships between technology, society, and democratic values might be understood historically and dealt with in daily life.”

Ralph Appelbaum Associates, the New York-based exhibit design firm, was one of five studios to receive this creative brief, and Design Director Timothy Ventimiglia, who had just opened the firm’s Berlin office, decided to pursue the project with Marc Tamschick of Berlin-based Tamschick Media + Space, a firm that describes its work as “spatial media, staging architectural spaces and their contents narratively with media.”

Ventimiglia recalls that the team’s initial brainstorming sessions were rather unproductive: “How can you exhibit democracy? We couldn’t even get our teams to agree on what democracy is.” Most museum exhibits explain a tangible topic through artifacts and narratives, but exploring the impact of inventions on democracy (and vice versa) within a museum setting was an abstract, elusive, and scholarly proposition.

To quote from RAA’s project description: “This premise was both disquieting and inspiring—and led to further questions. Could a compelling exhibition be created around such a complex subject? How would visitors access and navigate the intricate histories and as yet indeterminate impacts of future technologies?”

Putting technology on trial

The breakthrough came when Ventimiglia reframed his mission: “Instead of explaining it, let’s enact democracy,” in a sense, “putting technology on trial” and prompting visitors to evaluate technological innovations and debate and vote in a democratic forum.

Tamschick recalls Ventimiglia sketching “a sputnik—a circle with lines radiating into it, gathering visitors together” to show a central space where visitors could analyze and discuss these substantial topics. Over time, the circle became a large round table, 13 feet wide in diameter, as Tamschick says, “a tool that everyone knows” and one designed to spark conversation.

From then on, the exhibit morphed into a performance piece, and the team’s mission shifted, as Timothy Ventimiglia explains “to design a stage set and the interaction between people and ideas within that space.”

From table to Ting

The curators discovered a pertinent historical precedent to the form of the table: “ting” is the name for an ancient space where tribes in northern European countries would gather to discuss alliances and settle disputes. An area in an open field was defined by a circle of stones around the perimeter and often, a table at its center. Ting also refers to the meetings that occurred there, and over centuries, these assemblies grew into the governing bodies of northern Europe. To this day, Norway’s legislature is called the Storting, or “great ting.”

Now the exhibit had a name—*TING: Technology and Democracy*—and a rich cultural legacy to build upon.

While the ting would be the center of the experiential exhibit, Ventimiglia and his team recognized a need for some browsable and less-structured displays that would act as a prologue to the dialogue in the Ting.



▲ A 25-meter-wide, 5-meter-high shelf displays 100 objects from the museum's permanent collection and functions as a 180-degree projection surface.

Low-tech interaction

When you ascend the museum's central stairs and turn into the exhibit space, the first thing you see are mounds of plain wooden blocks on the floor in front of angled plywood panels that introduce the exhibit. Pick up a block and you'll soon realize this unassuming cube is your key, your vote, and your voice to engage with the exhibit and with your fellow visitors.

The block had playful and practical origins. Tim Ventimiglia was inspired by watching his 4-year-old son Felix playing with blocks and arrived at this very low-tech device for conversing about leading-edge technology. The high tech/low tech dichotomy sparks questions about how we interact with tools and what makes them effective and familiar. Wood also conveys warmth and what Ventimiglia calls "an equality of the graphics system and the architecture." Plus, the museum has a talented team of in-house woodworkers who were able to build all the cabinetry and armatures, along with about 60,000 wooden blocks.

The exhibit begins with four objects from the museum's collection: a television transmitter, a military rifle, an industrial robot, and an early computer. Each item is showcased on modular wooden platforms. When a visitor places their block on a niche next to the artifact, a narrative about its impact on society is revealed. In these galleries, Ventimiglia wanted to convey: "Here I am not just going to read a story that a curator has written, it's something more open, more provocative."

Visitors assemble in a dramatically lit amphitheater circumscribed by an 85-foot long, 16-foot-wide arched wall of shelves that encircles one side of the Ting table. One hundred artifacts—from a bullhorn to a waffle iron—each framed in their own nook, sit on the shelves. (Why a waffle

iron? Curator Henrick Treimo explains that waffles were and are a common and [literally] sweet accompaniment to Norwegian cultural gatherings, "which are important to the democracy as they create a sense of community and belonging.") A sophisticated lighting system can either illuminate the object itself, or using what Ventimiglia calls "a very old theater trick," video can be projected over the objects on a seamless transparent scrim, creating a 180-degree projection surface.

At the Ting

Ambient pixelated waves wash over the ting table, projected from above, attracting visitors to gather around it. They can interact with the giant curio-cabinet by putting their block on a corresponding image on the table, which then initiates a descriptive animated interlude on the wall. For example, a length of railroad rail iron poised in its niche dissolves into a larger-than-life locomotive barreling right at you. Sensors above the table track the positions of the blocks and a show controller launches corresponding video clips projected on the rounded wall.

A Nordic horn sounds. A facilitator from the museum staff welcomes visitors to the Ting and introduces one of several controversial emerging technologies to the group to discuss.

To introduce the object of discussion, a short video wipes over the enormous screen. Marc Tamschick explains that the video introductions or trailers "immerse people in these themes by using this huge screen and bring them into the loop very quickly—you are inside the topic."

Then the facilitator opens the discussion, asking the group to vote on increasingly complex issues about the given invention, sparking conversation and debate across the table. Treimo

▼
As they exit the Ting, visitors are asked one last question: “Do you think it is possible to control technological development in a democracy?” They use their wooden blocks to vote.



recounts, “To our great satisfaction and surprise, we’ve observed that visitors of all sorts are willing to discuss, and to discuss with each other.”

Ting sessions run from 8 to 30 minutes depending on the number and age of the visitors. Each session ends with a real-time video visualization of the current group’s votes in the context of previous sessions—a visual metaphor for a democratic world cumulatively built by individual choices.

Since TING opened in April 2014, more than 150,000 visitors have taken part in Ting sessions, including companies and agencies that have staged public debates in the forum. Tamschick sums up the exhibit’s unique achievement: “I think it’s a prototype with a lot of potential to create an atmosphere where people are not just consumers eating the food they are served, but instead they are the cooks—their own involvement becomes the value of the experience.” ■

Leslie Wolke (lesiewolke.com) is a wayfinding technology consultant and writer based in Austin and New York City.

“The combination of physical and digital elements gives strength to this project. The use of a basic wooden cube as a haptic interface creates an interesting contrast with the digital layer of projected visualized data.”

—Jury comment