



*Odense Staalskibsværft 1918-2012, I-II* (ed. Jens Toftgaard). University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences vol. 525. Syddansk Universitetsforlag, Odense 2016. p. 943.

67

The modern maritime history is much about big things: big ships driving the big society-changing processes of the 20th century. Industrialization moved the majority of workforce from agriculture and small-scale manufacturing to large-scale industrial organizations changing the social and urban structure, and globalization spread commercial networks increasingly all over the shores of the oceans. The history of the Odense Steel Shipyard (Odense Staalskibsværft) 1918-2012 is a story of big international business in a small country. Even though many of the forces shaping the company's development were international, in a small community a single company may have a considerable effect on how the global challenges and opportunities are faced within the local context. The shipyard, as a rigid-to-change material and social construct, provides a historical window well positioned to explore industrial transformation in between the global and local.

Shipbuilding is based on complex systems that take form as a result of push and pull of technological, economic, social and political forces. Trying to grasp the multi-layered complexity of the business while also making sense of general trends is a common problem among shipyard histories. This two-volume book

of the Odense Steel Shipyard, altogether weighting almost five kilograms, is large-scale story-telling. The editor, Jens Toftgaard, has managed to encompass a respectably many and diverse approaches and information in a highly readable packet. The ninety-two years of the shipyard have been divided into five main periods, the beginning 1918-1935, the specialization 1935-1958, the expansion 1959-1978 and the technological leap to the advanced containers for which the Maersk Line is best known today, 1979-2006. In addition, this history examines the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the Odense Steel Shipyard before 1918 as well as its closure 2007-2012.

Nine authors have contributed with thematically organized articles covering the spectrum from global economy to shipyard workers' homes. The main chapters are opened with Hans Christian Johansen's review on trends in economy and shipping that shaped the economic foundation of shipbuilding in Denmark as well as elsewhere. How the Odense Steel Shipyard navigated these currents are more closely examined in articles on the management and strategy of the shipyard by Henrik Harnow, Henrik Morgen and Kristoffer Jensen. Although these articles in many ways present a traditional company history approach the authors, in addition to just describing the decisions, make considerable efforts to understand the decision-makers and their motives behind the decisions. This brings the reader to the interface between micro and

macro perspectives in industrial history. These chapters clearly show that although many of the flows that carried the business forward were global all of them were interpreted through and by individuals.

Articles focusing on global forces, grey-haired men with a vision, and giant concrete objects, are contrasted with other articles that concentrate on working and workers. Contributions on technology of ships and shipbuilding by Kurt Risskov Sørensen takes the discussion from the economic dimensions of shipbuilding to its materialities. He succeeds in analyzing the impact of the changes in technology and business in the working conditions. The tangible artefacts and facilities, together with the body of managers, steered the business by enabling or restricting certain kinds of production. Together with articles on the shipyard workers' quarters, written by Toftgaard and Bitten Larsen, these sections give faces to the anonymous masses, who actually build the ships.

While the variety of approaches, especially the leaps from shipbuilding to housebuilding when examining development of the shipyard village, makes the story-telling occasionally a bit bumpy and sometimes slightly repetitive, the resolution is an overall success. As such, this shipyard history could be described as the social construction of a shipyard: shaping and being shaped by human actors, technological artefacts, and a continuously changing economic environment. The articles are somewhat independent of the other articles in the book and these topics also

recurs throughout the book making it uncomplicated to follow the long developmental processes spanning over the periods.

The first volume starts with examining the context in which the shipyard was founded by the Odense Canal and its founder, A. P. Møller (1876-1965). Harnow and Morgen describe how Møller being born in a maritime family in the second half of the 19th century grew up in the middle of the long-lasting battle between traditional sails and wooden hulls against steam-powered propulsion and steel construction. He was first a ship owner, establishing his shipping business on the foundation of modern steam ships and later during the First World War expanded it by taking advantage of the neutral Danish flag. A shipyard owner he became in 1918 with the help of and in order to complement the shipping branch of his business.

The book paints a picture of a shipyard company whose longevity was strongly characterized by its ability to recognize the weak signals of future ship trade and to adapt to changes in a relatively fast yet controlled manner. Among European shipyards, most of which navigated from crisis to crisis especially during the second half of the 20th century, the sense of active and often successful change-management is something not so usual.

This ability to anticipate future development is strongly present in the story-telling from the beginning. Steam ships did not perhaps revolutionize the shipping business at in the late 20th century but they

radically restructured the shipbuilding industry transforming it from a small-scale craft based manufacturing into locally concentrated industrial production. The modern ship production needed to be organized and managed in a new way. As Harnow describes, the Odense Steel Shipyard came to be located by the canal instead of established ports on the coast, because the land was cheaper and more flexible to use as well as being closer to steel worker communities. The first part of the book contextualize the decision to launch a twin-business based on the relationship between a steel shipyard and a steam ship shipping business scrutinizing, why A.P. Møller opened the shipyard just where he did. In the international context with hindsight, the decision did make sense considering the current economic situation and technological development but through exploring alternative options, the authors manage to avoid a deterministic narrative.

The institutional and personal connection between the shipyard and the shipping company is obviously one of the central themes. As a contrast to many other European maritime groups, the vertical integration did not go beyond the shipyard to engine and steel manufacturing but the production relied on external suppliers and contractors. Despite of the close relation, the shipyard and the shipping branches were semi-independent units. Whenever possible, the shipyard was expected to take orders outside of the company group as the Mærsk shipping company bought tonnage from other ship-

yards as well. However, especially in the beginning of the production and during the 1930s crisis the orders from the sister-company were critical and only its liquidity kept the shipyard afloat. Sometimes it is difficult to avoid an impression of the shipyard being a little brother in the company group with his own mind but surviving crisis only with the help of the family.

The second part focused on the phase after the 1959 when the gravity of the company's shipbuilding started to move from the old shipyard by the canal to the new Lindø shipyard in Munkebo. The volume and structure of the demand from the A.P Møller's shipping company expanded beyond the physical boundaries of the old ship docks. The new production unit made the Odense Steel Shipyard a leading Danish shipbuilder and superior large oil-tanker builder in European comparisons. Again, the considerable investment in new facilities and production technologies were possible only with the support from the shipping branch. A close relationship with a state-of-the-art shipyard enabled the shipping company to secure its supply of advanced vessels and to react fast to the changing demand on the global shipping markets. In the beginning, it facilitated its specialization on liners, then in large oil tankers and, from the 1970s onwards, large container ships. The large capital-intensive shipyard was built up in certain economic circumstances to respond to the skyrocketing demand following the post-war reconstruction and the closure of the Suez-canal. The capacity

however, having been a great asset during an upswing, was difficult to downscale to adjust the costs to the crashed market demand after oil crisis in the mid-1970s.

This fundamental juxtaposition and interdependency between the dynamic shipping business and the rigid shipbuilding business goes through the two-volumes but is most strikingly manifested in the chapters on the 1970s crises. The shipyard needed to halve the workforce but it survived unlike its competitors in Sweden. In addition to the shipping company, there was the state. Discussion on shipbuilding subsidies is practically unavoidable when speaking about commercial shipbuilding in the 20th century Europe. All companies, governments and institutions related to shipbuilding needed to take a stand between subsidies and relocations of the shipyards to cost-competitive Asian countries. Because of the huge political, economic, and social value of shipyards for local economy, there were no easy answers. Politicians, owners, and business managers, even those who in principle opposed state interventions, were ready to accept temporary over-pricing or direct subsidies to keep shipyards afloat during a crisis. Thus, as the second part of the book well describes, the shipbuilding strategy-making and policy-making became negotiations on the future expectations.

In the mid-1980s, Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller, the son and successor of A.P. Møller, decided to opt for developing the shipyard instead of closing it. Valuable orders from the shipping company together with

state support and heavy investments to modern production technologies brought the shipyard back to the front line of ship business. Eventually the launching of Emma Mærsk, once the world largest Mærsk E-class container ship in 2006, culminated the development at the Odense Steel Shipyard.

Cutting-edge products, early adoption of new generation production technologies such as welding, section building, and computer-aided design, active benchmarking of competitors and rational cost-conscious management kept the shipyard as an affordable advantage in the company group for ninety years but no longer. In the course of the global financial crisis, the group directorate valued the costs of Danish shipbuilding lower than the estimated benefits. The Odense Steel Shipyard completed the last ship in 2012.

Industrial histories aiming to tell a story of a single company are often good-looking disappointments with large pictures, high-quality paper, and light-weighted content that fails to connect the company with its local and international context. The two volumes of the Odense Steel Shipyard history avoid the imminent traps of hindsight and a restricted national gaze, and instead provide an intellectually stimulating journey through the century of ships that changed the global economy and local community. In addition to that, the books are pleasant to browse with airy graphical design and lively illustrations.

Even in such a colossal-sized work as this is, it is not possible to cover all the

possible aspects. Neither does the book make considerable theoretical or conceptual innovations. That is not its purpose. Described as a “biography of the shipyard” it contextualizes the birth, life and death of the shipbuilding company and studies its relationship with the society. It does that well. The editorial choices are reasonable and form a versatile, colourful, and elegant whole. Like a well-built ocean-going container, also a well-compiled history, should endure time.

*Saara Matala, Aalto University, Finland*