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The staging of folk culture in open air museums – the example of the Skanzen (Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum) in Szentendre

- PhD dissertation -

Propositions

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In my study I examined the museum theory problems of open air museums and the unique features of the Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum in Szentendre, called Skanzen wearing two hats at the same time. The theoretical questions were prompted by the everyday, practical observations acquired in the practice of managing the Skanzen's staging for a decade. My expectation in their conceptual examination was to come to conclusions that enable the professional shaping of the display in a very direct, practical manner to make it even more up-to-date and focused on the public.

Therefore my main interest studying the history and the operation of the Skanzen in Szentendre was to explore what picture does a museum that intends to preserve and show the cultural imprints from the past, gives about the present, more precisely about the notions of society concerning folk culture and their relations.

It is not by accident that my basis were the idiosyncrasies of **museography** and **interpretation** since the kind of visualizing that I described as staging is unique in museology and permanently – apart from the also long-time applied dioramas of natural history museums with the same methodological prompting – they have been used only in exhibitions of ethnology character, and within that, primarily to present one's own folk culture. **I was interested in how and why the open air ethnographic museums, that were birthed at the end of the 19th century within the framework of world exhibitions and which later on followed the operational model of zoos and amusement parks instead that of the great national museums', could preserve even a century later the methodology of the opening era, while in the majority museum world newer and newer visualization theories, schools have competed with one another.**

First I defined the genre of this museum type. It became clear that **there are numerous types of open air ethnographic museums that introduce the construction and home interior**

culture of ordinary men and that the open air ethnographic museum is primarily a methodological category. The conformity was primarily valid for complex museum visualization, less for the composition of the collection or the actual orientation of the research. In open air ethnographic museums the two general tools of museography are the regional unit and the interior. (Throughout their existence skanzens have extended their aspiration for perfection: landscape – settlement – home – interior.) The selected objects are transferred to the exhibition site where they are rebuilt and furnished to have a functional connection. The arrangement and furnishing of the edifices follow a museological matrix that aims to display the chosen research segment (a country or a region) in the most representative manner. The major aspects of the matrix are the geographical borders, historical era and the divisions of society based on wealth, rights, ethnicity/language and religion. There is another important scenic rule that influences the building of the interiors: the visualization of events related to the calendar year or individual life events in a complementary manner. Open air ethnographic museums express this scientific concept whereby the goal of creating a realistic scene is to make a perfect illusion of the past. In order to do so, traditional museum tools of contextualizing (descriptive texts, captions, lighting, illustrations and graphs etc.) are usually omitted, even though their application is not excluded in the methodological suggestions.

I examined the history of open air museums even on a Europe-wide scale. Skanzens in the region were created at a very defining time, at the end of the 19th century. Romanticism, the birth of nation states and colonization provided the social and ideological framework that made the distinction between the strange and the own, the discovery of the primitive and the ancient an important program. **The first open air museums were established in the inspiration that stemmed from the creation of world exhibitions and ethnography museums. These exhibitions were primarily made to be a spectacle for the public, where the didactic goal was to be reached by creating emotional tuning and assimilation instead of keeping an academic distance. The desire to attract was given supremacy over interpretation.** Due to this, the ‘in one piece’ and without comments reconstruction is the prevailing visualization style both in ascetic skanzens that only display buildings and objects and in skanzens with a reviving, elated mentality as well.

Although I gave a few examples of the variety found among European open air museums, in the end I examined only one institution in depth.

Even though I examined the history, structure and operation of the Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum – Skanzen (Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum – Skanzen), the later analysis focused first and foremost on museography and interpretations, i. e. the exhibition itself. The longest chapter was devoted to the analysis of the permanent exhibition of the Skanzen, the applied visualization, the conveying of the expressed contents and the messages and the various forms of knowledge delivery. The aim was to expose the limited subject of inspection in the most comprehensive manner possible, from manifold aspects.

The presupposition, given the previously mentioned uniqueness of museum display, was that **the open air ethnographic museum is reminiscent of a stage where the buildings and the interiors also function as scenic tools. In the exhibition the snapshots of peasant life, the to-be-conveyed knowledge about peasantry that I collectively called folk culture is communicated through static elements and complementary live performances.** I attempted to describe the staging by using three important concepts that have relevance to the social science discussion of our times. These are the questions of **tradition/heritage, identity** and **authenticity** that were examined in view of the museum and its social surrounding and above all, its relation to the visitor.

The interpretation of the heritage was based on the Skanzen's aspiration to introduce the essence of peasant life. Density and homogeneity were examined in view of the interior and the festival. The interior aims to present the general tied to concrete individuals. **The merging of the characteristic and the individual happen on the level of furnishing with no interpretation (in situ) and on the level of narration (exhibition information brochure) as well. While the *general* enhances the coherence of the tradition imprint, the *individual* boosts the legitimacy of the exhibition.** The realm of the interior places disproportionately big emphasis on the indoors, while peasant life happened mostly outdoors. The showing limited on privacy is in contrast with the dependency on the outside world (wars, famines, epidemics, taxes). **The orderly interior sterilizes and creates an impression that directs the visitor to nostalgia instead of interpretation.** The empty rooms make the observer feel like a peeper, who on the other hand, being left alone in the interpretation is misled by his or her associations that stem from the present in regards to intimacy. The phenomenon whereby present value is attached to canonized traditions point to the interpretation challenges and research needs of open air museums (20th century: mass production, village-development directed from above, etc.). In the museums the displayed

buildings and interiors become monuments of positive content and peasants turn into anonymous heroes. Since there is no local spirit in an exhibition that was brought to life by relocation, memories are suppressed by wonder and awe. The festival is a good example for the attempt to evoke life among unanimated objects. Such summoning gives space primarily to folklore. Festivals can have multiple focuses in space and time, allow for simultaneous reception and give more stimuli to senses than exhibitions. Through the example of Easter I outlined the problem of holy and profane, that between the real holiday and the museum display and their aims (experience-based knowledge transfer and religious piety) there are inextricable tensions at times. **In the course of festivals time and space is aligned to the major events of the *traditional village Easter*, where in order to create a laboratory infused, coherent Easter holiday, the regular time and space structures of the exhibition have to be temporarily suspended. These performances are the preconceived, synthetic adaptations of the holiday customs to the museum locale. Visitors hope to partake of an authentic Easter experience in the Skanzen. By folklorizing the Easter, the museum meets the social need to experience the foundations of one's cultural identity.**

Issues related to identity were detailed in the example of the opening ceremony of the Southern Transdanubia regional unit (2005). It consisted of a livery ritual of property, and a consecration of bequeathing and inheriting. Participants were grouped according to their roles and time units of the transition were confined (preparation – ceremony – holiday meal and the initiating act of the legend as an exhibition unit). A main task of the preparation was to muster identity at the places of origin, in the villages in question in order to give legitimacy to the museum as a rightful heir. The space usage during the ceremony, the election of endorsing powers, the opening speeches, the gestures of the ceremony (church blessing, gifts, soil scattering, hospitality) were repeated proclamations that the exhibition was birthed based on consensus. The repetition and the stylization were given pivotal roles even in the later events of the ceremony (the menu of the reception, the folklore performance that brought the exhibition to life). **The opening ceremony proved to be a public ritualization of strengthened collective – local (white mourning clothes), regional (Szekszárd wine) and national (herdsmen, hussars) identity. Oneness was created by reflecting on the past by framing the folk customs in the moments of *cultural intimacy*.**

The requirements for museological authenticity posed at the formation of the exhibition were stressed in the sections that dealt with the introduction and the history of the Hungarian Open

Air Ethnographic Museum in Szentendre. **The reconstruction arranged without any narrative creates the natural connection between the objects and gives the air of matter-of-factness by veiling the presence of a researcher's reflections, choice and election. This attitude is formed as a result of infatuation and respect towards the object in question. It desires perfect sharing and moral righteousness. As far as staging is concerned, it is decisive what the relationship is like and how synergy happens between the interpretations (education, animation) of the already existing exhibition and the content and message of the regional unit, the house, the interior. Three different approaches were introduced:** the prevalent method is the content-wise fulfillment of the exhibition (baking in the oven, spinning on the tread-loom) where the interpretation takes place – mostly by using the tools of drama pedagogy – through fostering empathy. Dressing and playing – the repetition that fosters imprints and identification with the preconceived play – has a great significance (Day of St. Martin). A method less frequently used is interpretation from an outside perspective that is independent from the actual content of the exhibition and which is created to show its different nature on purpose ('spinning room'). This type of knowledge sharing is more prone to make the visitor ask questions, instead of providing answers. The third solution is the interpretation that is seemingly homogeneous with the exhibition. It emotionally involves and alienates the visitor at the same. The invoking nature of the manifestation is made obvious through the use of humor (Potato Festival). While in the case of the **first mentioned interpretation technique authenticity happens by reviving that aims to repeat the exhibition the smoothest possible way, the latter two create authenticity through self-reflective museological existence.**

The majority of the museums are run by the state or by the municipalities, therefore they need to react not only to changes in science, but also to the current issues of economy, politics and society alike. Thus the *raison d'être* of a public collection is based not only on its past, the safekeeping of its collection and the results achieved in research and publications, but also on the number of its visitors and cultural influence. Expectations towards museums have undergone a huge change even in Hungary in the last few decades, and the educational mission has come more and more to the forefront. The role of public education has increased and presently the major museums are among the most important scenes for dialogue with the public in politics. The museums shall fulfill an agora-like function in addition to the cultural representation that allows for the mobilization of the masses. This scope of duties is especially dominant in the national public institutions, since their visitors consist of the citizens of the

bigger cities. In order for these masses to organize into a reachable and orientable community, the adequate democratic, public and neutral platforms and networks are required. **Compared to the other communication channels, museums are less noisy and chaotic, presently non-dispossessed media, through which public attention can be maintained more easily. The primarily tool for recruiting masses is experience that could very easily transform the museum into an important player in economy. Besides the responsibility for the cultural heritage, this is the other reason why significant museum investments are effectuated in Europe and Hungary alike. In the last chapter, the French ethnography museum's (MNATP, Paris – MuCEM, Marseille) refurbishment and the presently ongoing developments in the Skanzen in Szentendre were introduced.** Although the two institutions are of different scale, it is very useful to draw a parallel between them in order to examine their reaction to the external social needs and the changes in the political environment. The development policy of the two museums follows two different models. **The French museum boasts of an immense institutional history and an international reputation with all its drawbacks. This example represents a careful renewal that follows in-depth theoretical and political evaluations. The uncertain future of MuCEM signals how difficult it is to carry out extremely long-term development plans. Even though besides the scientific interests of the institution the factors of decentralization politics and urban development were also taken into consideration, they were not able to translate the benefits and the results of careful planning into visible and measurable steps in the short-run. On the contrary, the Skanzen in Szentendre, through its intense development plans, could align to the current cultural interests of the given government and thus acquire the necessary political and financial support for the planned developments. This latter solution implies the risk of omitting a conceptual re-consideration of the basic tenets of the institution, where the relevance and sustainability can be warranted only by adding newer and newer activity threads, leaving the old ones kinked.**

In the summary I established that the peculiar research object, the social formation 'peasantry' described in the paradigm of tradition prescribes the measure of quiescence and attachment to open air ethnographic museum's methodology and display. It can be also the lasting effect of the long-prevailing positivist understanding that man is defined by his environment. But the realistic fullness, the coherent view made up of mosaics can be explained by ethnography's descriptive approach as well that traditionally divided peasant life into chapters (construction,

culinary customs, clothing, agriculture, transport, industry etc.) Finally the open air museum's touristic popularity and success can be the main reason for preserving the museography of long standing. **The Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum's understanding of their mission is to draw an objective historical picture of the Hungarian peasantry's living conditions. Open air museums attempt to reconstruct this reflection in its essence through the objectified environment of a laboratory venue, based on original sources and memories, with the help of a clear methodology.** The witnessing look-alike copy that is exhibited without the museum's commentary could be interpreted as the indication of the scientific intention or supposition that the exhibition avoids the evaluation process of the object itself and of its memory to the present as well. It neither exalts nor criticizes the peasant, but at the same time it does not reveal nor judge the system of social conditions that for many centuries preserved the living arrangements of the peasants. It does not tackle the underlying motifs of our behavior, may it be attraction or distance, towards folk culture. However, such neutrality remains only a failed intention. **In the hyper-real environment, lacking guidance, the visitor is urged to complement the given picture with his own knowledge, prejudices and gesture. On the other hand, by making the exhibition public, it is impossible to circumvent the further inscenation of the show and reception – live museum, services (shopping, cafeteria and transport opportunities), which all give room for further interpretation. As a result, the expounding happens much more sense-driven than based on intellectual impressions. These impressions mean more a tourist attraction and less a scientific reflection in their relations to the museum. Since open air ethnographic museums have identified the visitors' longing for originality and the search for the foundations of identity in the traditions and pictures of the past, their secondary expressions allow for, even incorporate these motivations. A potential problem or threat in meeting these needs could be, if for pragmatic reasons, the creativity of the museums is concentrated more on the leisure industry or the expectations of the political environment than on the primary product, the exhibition itself, which is meant to demonstrate the complex relationship between man and his objects. Therefore it is essential that open air ethnographic museums would make room in their exhibitions and reviving practices for the kinds of interpretations that provide opportunity and access to explore this relationship in a more complex way. By introducing the peasant past in a sensitive manner, open air ethnographic museums might function as compasses in the questions that determine the future of our generation (environmental awareness, social solidarity, multiculturalism etc.).**

And at last I drew the attention to some dichotomies that are going to determine the future of the Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum.

Sustainability: theme park / competence center

The maintenance of the Skanzen in its present format would not be viable without government grants. In addition to moral concerns, that is the reason why it shall remain a museum. However, it shall become a museum that besides taking care of its collection is able to develop such a cultural-social adaptivity that helps communicate its virtues and unique abilities in changing institutional and financial conditions. **Catering for the main tasks as a network (education, folk monument protection, intangible cultural heritage, rural development) seems a capable survival strategy, because the new roles are based not only on professional interaction, but on catalyzing knowledge to be used by society as well. It is important that a long-lasting professional and social program, surpassing the interests of museum politics, could be created and maintained in the various fields of competence.**

Staging: in situ / in context

The museological experiments of the last three years (spinning room, the washer and the presently built Northern Hungarian Village regional unit) along with the latest social expectations (such as green operation and accessibility for wheelchairs) sooner or later are going to prompt the Skanzen to answer conceptional questions far more vital than the ones so far raised. **Such a major question is how long could the interior-centered museum display both as a semantic background and technical infrastructure, organized into regions, divided into houses according to their correct ethnographic layout, could be maintained?** Will the new initiatives bring real breakthrough? How long and with how much energy is it possible to co-ordinate the often diverging threads of open air museum theory, the new scientific and museological trends and the needs of the public? **In the long run, the institution's budget, the social interest primarily measured by the number of visitors and the museum's national and international professional reflections shall be the main indicators as to what track the Skanzen should pursue.**

Live museum: living history / self-reflective commentary

Although the use of drama pedagogy tools are occasionally justified in the museum (primarily in education, and at festivals), the general introduction of living history forms with the main purpose of historical adherence are not welcome in the Skanzen. Emphasis is given to develop self-reflective forms of live interpretation since this kind of communication has to remain the prevalent one in the skanzens' practice due to the character of the exhibition. The professional interpreter plays a key role in this. He makes the objects 'speak up' and thus, translates the significance of the museum work, the length and the depth of the message adjusted to the visitors' interest in the form of a one-person-theater. Using these forms of live interpretation, the skanzen is able to turn the museological disadvantage, i. e. it can run the exhibitions only with a large number of staff, while it offers little access to the visitor, into an advantage. **The live museum allows the public and the museum itself to take objects back into the hand, to involve them in games. It also offers a unique interpretation opportunity, which is more than an act mimicking the past.**

Operation: factory / manufacture

The question arises: what kind of an operation model should the Skanzen follow as it is becoming a mega-institute with more and more public service functions that organizes networks? Should it be like a factory or a manufacture? The dilemma of professionalism or amateurism, mass production or handicraft, culture as a product or as an inherently value-bearing entity, elite or civil, building a distribution system or using direct contacts come up. It is certain that individual tasks can only be performed well if the institution continues the professional specialization. **At the same time it is very important for the workshop-museum to remain, since if market interests or state administration countervail, the Skanzen shall lose its professional identity that presently serves as the basis for all its new tasks.**

Community: symbolic / local

The most exciting upcoming question of the Skanzen is taking shape in relation to the planned Transylvania Region. The new exhibition offers a reasonable solution for saving the decaying Transylvanian monuments. On the other hand, it offers the possibility to introduce the uniqueness of folk architecture and home design that have never been subjects to country borders. However, when the museum was opened, there was neither scientific nor political prompting nor opportunity to incorporate it into the settlement concept. In addition to these

merits, the new regional unit's real significance will not only be the appearance of the Transylvanian house on the museum's palette. The original concept of the Hungarian open air ethnographic museum was to visualize the national past. It deemed that folk traditions and the peasant's culture give the most authentic picture of what it means to be a Hungarian. Even today, the archaic is being used to create the national identity, with the only difference that in our time the authentic, declared source of the *Hungarian character* does not lie in the disappearing peasantry, but instead, in the Hungarians living on the other side of our borders, primarily in Transylvania. In the Transylvania Legend of the Hungarian Open Air Ethnographic Museum there is an attempt behind the motif of heritage-making and the longing for the scientific *virgin lands* to gain newer self-legitimacy resulting from the status of the place for national remembrance. **This undertaking can live up to these expectations only if the dawning exhibition, i. e. the staging of Transylvania in a museum format can express not only the distinctiveness-montage that consists of the archaic but can also express the complexities, similarities and differences of the historical experience of separation both for the Hungarians in the country and in Romania as well.**