

Open air museums, some general problems

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The most prominent feature of open air museums as compared with the more ordinary types of museums is their being out of doors, in the open air. That is where they derive their name from.

Now it is quite possible to present very different objects in the open air, such as sculptures, boats, archaeological remains, models of pre-historic animals, living animals — zoos being related to museums —, in short anything that either is too big to be placed within four walls in an indoor museum or that requires a specific scenery. For all practical purposes there might be a great variety of institutions called open air museums. On the other hand, for the time being, when open air museums are mentioned more often than not it is a question of collections of buildings, which as a rule are composed of specimens of popular and pre-industrial architecture. Sometimes the nucleus of such a collection consists of one or two houses which have been left standing on their original sites. Usually, however, most if not all of the buildings have been brought to the museums from elsewhere, having been selected, dismantled, transported, reconstructed and maintained for the special purpose of providing an open air museum.

This might seem to be good news for people who are looking for a safe place to keep their ancient monuments from further decay. As a matter of fact one of the reasons for creating open air museums has been and still is the preservation of at least some important specimens of architecture, usually rural, such as farmhouses, dwellings of shepherds, fishermen, workshops of craftsmen and artisans, shops etc. Besides these, there are equally important technical buildings such as mills, driven by animals, water or wind. Some few open air museums, such as that at Hagen in West-Germany and that at Sibiu in Rumania are dedicated almost exclusively to the "Age of Wood" in the history of technology and to early industrial machinery, but also other open air museums usually contain so many items of technological importance that they too may be regarded as historical technological museums as well.

Dwellings, mills and other buildings undoubtedly require open spaces

and, therefore, when reduced to museum objects, demand open air museums. On the other hand open air museums in principle are not merely collections of specimens of architecture. The standard definitions from which I have been quoting in the above, distinctly mention other aspects besides the buildings, especially when dwellings are meant. They speak of "their appropriate furniture and equipment" both for living and working, and also pay attention to equally appropriate surroundings and scenery, out-houses, ovens for the baking of bread, poultry-houses, orchards and kitchen-gardens, fields and everything else which played a role in the life of the people who are thought to have inhabited the houses. To say the truth, once those houses have been removed and rebuilt within the enclosure of the open air museum nobody really is living in them and the fields and gardens, too, are kept for the sake of the visitors. Most of the presentation of an open air museum is more or less make-believe, using imitations of material things, houses and interiors which once have existed and have been lived in, but are now museum objects, providing by suggestion and evocation situations which are no longer real but, nonetheless, at least may be called realistic. They should be in agreement with former configurations as far as the houses, interiors and surroundings are concerned, and with situations which are suggestive of the way of life and cultural patterns of the people concerned as they might have existed.

The triads of houses-interieurs-surroundings, repeated over and over again on the grounds of any open air museum, represent the essential units which may be supplemented with other elements, such as mills, herbal gardens, ponds etc. Each of these is meant to help to convey an impression of the way of life of some local or regional population, i. e. of the "people" mentioned before. This intention lying at the root of by far the majority of open air museums, it may be useful to speak of open air folk museums, which are concerned with "folk", "folk-culture" as such.

Nevertheless, it is an obvious fact that all open air museums do contain quite a number of buildings, either dwellings or technical works. In other words even when they are not meant to be reservations for dilapidated ancient monuments, they actually are, in a restricted way, asylums for at least some of the most important representatives of, for the most part, types of architecture. Presentation in the open air of farmhouses, mills, workshops, either as separate units or arranged in the manner of a village or hamlet, generally is thought to be more satisfactory than the resurrection of town-houses in a park or woodland scenery. Maybe townhouses again are more individualistic than farmhouses which often represent a conventional regional type. Nevertheless in the Arnhem open air museum we have some houses from the Zaan district taken from small towns and showing a traditional type of building and decoration which certainly is different from that

of the farmhouses but does not essentially disagree with the latter. As to more distinctly urban houses there is at least one open air museum which gives an impression of the way of life and work in an old town: the well-known Gamly By in Aarhus (Denmark). This, however, is not situated somewhere in the country but consists of an independent quarter in the centre of the modern town, where old houses from various Danish towns have been assembled and rebuilt. This certainly would seem to be a much better solution than combining distinctly urban houses and rural farmhouses in one museum, both categories having very little in common as to their sociological backgrounds.

A term like rural architecture should not give the impression that open air museums contain preferably specimens of some kind of primitive architecture. Indeed, in the early days of the open air museums such as in Arnhem, there was a certain preference for constructions like sod huts and wooden shelters which were thought to be suggestive of very early historical or prehistorical periods, whereas actually they are extremely recent dwellings and shanties of pauperized people. The Arnhem museum has only in a rather recent stage admitted the houses of well situated and even rich farmers and merchants, which nonetheless display a traditional style of building and living. It must be stated, moreover, that even buildings such as for instance the farmhouses with undivided interiors, often (mis) called "Saxon" houses, in which human beings and cattle lived together, are by no means primitive constructions. They are often very important specimens of architecture in wood. Even more striking are the enormous farmhouses which for many centuries in succession have been in the possession of generations of a local nobility of rich farmers, such as we find in the open air museum at Cloppenburg. Rather different both from a social and an architectural point of view are the manor houses transported to the famous Skansen in Stockholm.

Open air museums are first of all museums of popular culture and folk life in their manifold aspects. Among these aspects also is their importance for the study of various types of architecture which otherwise are usually spread all over the country, being difficult of access if reachable at all. Many of our farmhouses, mills, shops and early factories, barns and churches in the country are doomed to give in to the demands of modern living, agricultural renovations and realloiments. One of the possibilities to preserve either some of the great monuments of rural architecture or at least some of the most important types is transportation to an open air museum. But, mind, only one of the possibilities. The preservation of monuments is a matter for many kinds of people, societies and institutions, not for the open air museums alone. As museums the latter have other tasks, partly connected with their buildings, partly with other aspects of their collections. As an archaeologist I am of the opinion that in the case of important architectural monuments by far the best solution is to keep them on their original site. Only when there

is no possibility to leave them where they are, removal to an open air museum is to be preferred. In that case any director of an open air museum will welcome the opportunity to make his choice from really monumental specimens instead of from the usual representative types. Not a few of my colleagues apparently have had this opportunity and made good use of it.

In 1966 my good friend Jozef Weyns, director of the open air museum of Bokrijk in Belgium took the initiative for a meeting of a number of his colleagues. This was the starting point for the foundation of the Association of European open air museums as an independant member of Icom, the International Council of Museums. Our association for the time being comprises the representatives of about 30 open air museums (150) in Europe mentioned in a handbook which is being prepared by the Association. After the first open air museums had been founded in Scandinavia about 80 years ago, gradually more museums were created in various other countries. In about the last decade their number has been increasing very rapidly and the end is not yet to be expected. Open air — outdoor — museums are indeed, paradoxically, very much "in".