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## Chapter 7

# Re-Presenting and Representing the Vernacular: The Open-Air Museum

PAUL OLIVER

'History,' the car manufacturer Henry Ford is reputed to have said, 'History is bunk.' Bunk, or bunkum, means verbal rubbish, tinged with deception. Actually, what Ford said was 'History is bunk, as it is taught in schools.'

Ford's concern was so genuine that he founded the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village near Dearborn, Michigan, to introduce Americans to the material facts of their history.<sup>1</sup> However, Ford could be cavalier in his methods. Wishing to demonstrate that many American families came from rural England, in the mid-1920s he tried to purchase a row of Cotswold cottages to transport and rebuild in his open-air museum of Greenfield. But, alarmed at the impending demolition of Arlington Row, Bibury, the local community alerted the Gloucestershire Archaeological Trust, who succeeded in preventing Ford from going through with his plan. In 1929 Arlington Row was bought by the Royal Society of Arts, and twenty years later it was given to the National Trust for safe keeping.

Even though he failed to transport Arlington Row, Ford later bought a Cotswold house and blacksmith's forge from another village, and had all 500 tons of stone and timber shipped to Michigan. Whether Americans learned much more of their history as a result is open to question, even if, by default, Bibury was the richer for the preservation effort set in motion by Ford's plan.<sup>2</sup>

### The Skansen Movement

Henry Ford's Greenfield collection demonstrates how a single influential, affluent and motivated person, with a certain perception of history, can arrange for the location, demolition, transfer and re-erection of a collection

of buildings (in Greenfield, about a hundred) ostensibly for the benefit of present and future generations. A number of open-air museums started this way. Artur Hazelius in Sweden was responsible for assembling the buildings which, as 'Skansen' on Djurgården Island, Stockholm, opened in 1891. Hazelius believed that 'getting to know and falling in love with the past is the essential basis for all kinds of new production – a tree is the stronger the deeper are its roots.'<sup>3</sup> *Skansen* in Swedish means 'fort', and though the word referred to the former function of Hazelius's site, it came to symbolize the enclosed, contained character of the 'open-air' museum. Others soon followed, with the Lillehammer dentist Anders Sandvig building a collection which was adopted by the municipality and opened in Maihaugen in 1904. 'In my opinion Maihaugen should be a collection of homes, where it is possible to come close to the people who lived in them, to learn to know their way of life, their tastes, and their work,' Sandvig wrote, though he had more comprehensive ideas in mind. 'My aim is not merely to preserve a haphazard collection of old houses. No, I would like to include the whole parish, as a complete entity, in my picture-book.'<sup>4</sup>

Known henceforth as *skansens* in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, some forty-four open-air museums had been established by World War I, many at the instigation of passionate collectors, but others under museological or institutional, provincial or national auspices. The Seurasaari Open-Air Museum, for example, situated on Seurasaari Island near Helsinki, Finland, was founded in 1909 by Professor Axel Olai Heikel, whose declared aim was 'to collect typical buildings from the different regions of Finland in order to display folk architecture and how Finnish people lived.'<sup>5</sup> His purpose was at least in part nationalistic, symbolically using the museum to distance Finland from its Russian and Swedish neighbours. The site, which was part of a public park, was rented from the City of Helsinki by a newly formed company in 1911; however, two years later it was acquired by the state and operated as a national museum under the auspices of the National Archeological Commission (later, the National Board of Antiquities).

Other such collections were similarly adopted, for example the Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, Arnhem, which was founded by a small private group in 1912 and opened in 1918, operating independently for thirty years until the state assumed overall responsibility in 1941. Its declared purpose was to 'present a picture of the daily life of ordinary people in this country as it was in the past and has developed in the course of time.' In producing a 100-page guide, the group 'concentrated on the social and economic background rather than overburdening the visitor with technical terms or local names, or giving detailed accounts of the past history of the buildings, which in any case have mostly found their way to the museum more or less by chance.'<sup>6</sup>

Such museums grew in number, and many in size, between the wars, with Muzeul Satulut in Bucharest, Romania, which opened in 1939, eventually

displaying well in excess of 300 buildings. After World War II open-air museums continued to proliferate, with Norway establishing an association to unite more than a hundred in that country. Typical was the Trøndelag Folkemuseum, Sverresborg, Trondheim, which was privately founded in 1913. Staffed voluntarily and subsisting on private funds and later by grants, it has retained its independent status. By 1980 the Polish historian of the *skansen* movement, Jerzy Czajkowski, could write that 'there are approximately 500 big and small, ready or being built, skansen museums in Europe at present.'<sup>7</sup>

*Skansen*, Village Museum, Freilichtmuseum, Openluchtmuseum, Musée de Plein Air, Open-Air Museum, whatever the term used, they all conserve buildings within outdoor museum compounds. Or so it appeared, until notices of a Freilichtmuseum near Stadthagen in north Germany led to a park inhabited by full-size concrete dinosaurs! There is no agreement on terms, and often little on what is preserved, how buildings are relocated and restored, what form the museum may take, and even why they are assembled. This may be regarded as inevitable, bearing in mind the vast range of terrains, resources, materials, periods, traditions, functions, and building types which may be considered to merit preservation.

During the past century the incursions made into the rural landscapes of countries on all continents have been of a scale which is almost beyond measure. The expansion of cities, the growth of suburbs, the migration of peoples, the construction of superhighways, the decline of small agricultural economies, and the growth of agribusiness are among the manifold factors which have contributed to the irreparably changed face of the world's rural landscapes. Such a summary may be platitudinous, but it is undeniable, nonetheless. Falling victim to such physical changes have been countless fields, farmlands and forests, among which have been untold rural buildings, sometimes of considerable age, that have been lost forever. Sometimes this loss has gone virtually unnoticed, as farm properties have fallen to the auctioneer's hammer along with the farmlands. But in certain other instances their destruction has been part of deliberate policies, motivated by industrial greed or political ideologies, of which the planned programme of village elimination and 'rural systemization' of the Ceausescu regime in Romania was the most notorious.<sup>8</sup> Their loss has been paralleled by the destruction of innumerable urban buildings of all kinds and often of considerable quality, that have obstructed industrial or commercial expansion and the exploitation of land values.

Though the safeguarding of certain examples of architecture has been assured through the efforts of individuals and conservation groups since early in the century, the period following World War II has witnessed a redoubling of efforts to do so. The 'listing' and grading of buildings, devising of heritage trails, establishment of eco-museums, declaration of World Heritage Sites, and other measures have been taken to ensure the

protection of significant buildings. Some are of archaeological importance; others are of unquestioned architectural merit – singular buildings, whose scale, architectural quality, prominence in their urban or landscape context, historic record, and, in most cases, religious significance are justification enough for their conservation. Yet many buildings are conserved for their historic associations rather than their intrinsic value as architecture. For example, it is its function as a national symbol and the home of the first President of the Union, George Washington, that is the primary reason for the preservation of the seventeenth-century Virginian mansion, Mount Vernon. Its conservation might also be argued on aesthetic grounds, but this could not be said of the modest homestead at Johnson City near Fredericksburg, Texas. Yet the conservation of the Sam Early Johnson Log House, the reconstructed birthplace and restored Boyhood Home of Lyndon Johnson, whose memory is preserved with the building while emphasizing his rural background, could be justified as examples of regional, vernacular architecture.

Distinguished from free-standing châteaux, churches and country houses, monasteries and mosques, by their rural and largely domestic character, the majority of open-air museums display examples of what their publications variously term 'regional', 'folk', 'traditional', 'peasant' or 'vernacular' architecture. Such assemblies were suggested as early as 1790, and a number of precursors date from the nineteenth century. Though some of these consisted of only a few structures, as was the case with the buildings relocated on Norway's Bygdoy Peninsula on the orders of King Oscar II in the 1880s, a few were larger. Among these early efforts was the Ethnographic Village of twenty-four houses, a church, and several farm buildings from the Carpathian Basin re-erected in 1896 as part of the Hungarian Millenary Exhibition. Dismantled the following year, it nevertheless inspired the formation of a number of open-air museums in Hungary a lifetime later.

### Museums in the Open Air

Though it has been in international use since the 1950s, it remains uncertain at what date and to which location the term 'open-air' museum was first applied. The vagueness of the term means that it can embrace a variety of situations, though it is generally employed to identify a museum of buildings located in a territory often approximately equivalent to that of a provincial zoo. The unifying concept of the 'open-air' museum refers to the dispersal of the buildings within the territory and not to the inherent nature of the exhibits themselves. This permits the display not only of domestic buildings but of cart sheds, hayricks, farm outbuildings, and unique structures such as the chain-maker's shop at Bromsgrove (England) or the water-powered laundry at Arnhem.

Certain such complexes could be on open access, but for the purposes of this discussion the open-air museum is defined as one in which diverse buildings have been relocated in a physically, if artificially, defined landscape setting to which access is gained by payment of an entrance fee. Encompassed within the concept are village museums, such as Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts; folk artefact collections, like the Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagan's; museums of building, such as Avoncroft near Bromsgrove, England; ethnographic museums, for instance, the Park Etnograficzny W Sanoku, Poland; and heritage centres like the Isle of Arran Heritage Museum, among several other more or less synonymous designations.

Within its territorial confines the open-air museum may conform to one of a small number of specific types. In much of Europe the term 'park museum' denotes an arrangement in which buildings are dispersed at intervals that are sufficiently distant so as to preserve their distinct identities, whether in function, period, method of construction or region of origin. The Niedersächsisches Freilichtmuseum at Cloppenburg, north Germany, is a representative of this type. By contrast, the term 'village museum' is applicable to those where a number of buildings have been clustered in village form, simulating, for instance, the relationship of domestic buildings to church, windmill, smithy, and village green, as at the Provincial Open-Air Museum, Bokrijk, in Flanders, Belgium. The disposition of elements may depend upon the intentions of the museum authorities. For example, the last-named was founded within the Bokrijk Provincial Domain in 1958, with its objectives 'based on Culture, Nature and Recreation'. Commenting that 'earlier open-air museums erected their buildings with little thought to their actual inter-relationship,' the 'museum village' of Bokrijk was constructed 'so that visitors feel that they are stepping into the past and entering a snapshot of life in former times.' It is unusual in that it includes a simulated Brabant 'Old Town' comprising buildings transferred or partially reconstructed from Antwerp, now located around the 'Antwerp Square', with additional streets of buildings from Leuven and Diest. Future plans include clusters of urban buildings from Limburg and Flanders.

A regional approach to the organization of the open-air museum is particularly evident in 'national' collections that seek to illustrate the local or provincial traditions within the frontiers of a country. Such is the Swiss Open-Air Museum at Ballenberg near Brienz, founded in 1978, where some eighty farmsteads from all cantons are 'arranged in thirteen architectural units, on the basis of their regional origin.' About 80 hectares have been devoted to buildings in clearings on a mainly forested total site of some 200 hectares. Here the visitor can 'discover a realistic representation of the peasant style of living. Ballenberg does not just consist of ancient dwellings that have been rebuilt, but represents a vivid reconstruction of rural Switzerland of the past centuries. Truly a dream . . .'<sup>10</sup>

Founded earlier, in 1967, but still far from completion, the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre, near Budapest, was more ambitious. Within a space of 46 hectares, its master plan envisaged 'the relocation of about 300 buildings to the Museum for re-erection in nine groups, each representing a region in Hungary.' The regional groupings, of which four are completed, 'show[s] the pattern of settlement characteristic of each region,' and with furniture and demonstrations of customs, give visitors 'a comprehensive picture of life in the villages and market towns of Hungary in a defined segment of time.' Similarly, while the director of the museum at Szentendre is committed to the authenticity of the depiction of the chosen periods, he also emphasizes that 'authenticity also means authenticity of material and structure. The buildings chosen are usually not exhibited in the form they were found. They have to be restored to the form, material and structure they had at the time to be represented.'<sup>11</sup>

Smaller museums may also opt for the 'village' structure, either by arranging the component buildings that they have acquired in a village format and obtaining others that would complete the notional ensemble, or by assembling from scratch the representative buildings necessary to create the preconceived village considered to be typical of its locale. Old Sturbridge Village, 'a bit of past history come to life,' is pre-eminently such a museum. It began when Albert and Cheney Wells of Southbridge, Massachusetts, purchased a tract of some 250 acres on which stood just two buildings. Relocating and re-erecting over thirty additional buildings, including several around a green, they opened the village in 1936. Private and non-profit, it was 'chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to carry on its work of instructing and entertaining visitors, giving them a brief glimpse into rural New England that existed in 1800 or in 1820.'<sup>12</sup> More eclectic still is the Harold Warp Pioneer Village at Minden, Nebraska, the buildings of which were drawn mainly from Nebraska, but the contents of which and other exhibits were chosen and purchased in the United States, Canada and Mexico to illustrate 'Man's Progress'. In spite of its name, a Nebraska village form is not simulated, the buildings being arranged in a cartwheel plan permitting the visitor to 'see everything, by walking less than one mile.'<sup>13</sup>

Open-air museums whose stated intentions are fundamentally architectural are fewer than might be expected. In England the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings was initiated by a group of people, led by F.W.B. Charles, the architect specializing in timber framing, who endeavoured to prevent the demolition of a fifteenth-century timber-framed building in Bromsgrove. Though they were unsuccessful in this, they saved the framing timbers and re-erected the building on a 10-acre site in 1967. Other projects were commenced with the aim 'to encourage interest in buildings of architectural and historical value, where possible to prevent the demolition of such buildings when they are threatened, and to give advice on their

restoration.'<sup>14</sup> Buildings that could not be restored in situ have been rebuilt at this museum, their value being the criterion for inclusion rather than their relationship to others within an ensemble. Perhaps the most notable rescue is the early fourteenth-century roof originally of the Guesten Hall at Worcester Cathedral. Of similar date and intention is the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singleton, near Chichester, England. Founded by J.R. Armstrong in 1967, and opening four years later, its buildings today range from a fine Wealden house to a man-operated tread-wheel. Its founders aimed 'to establish a centre that could rescue representative examples of vernacular buildings from the South-east of England, and thereby to generate an increased public awareness of the built environment.' An introductory exhibition displays 'regional building materials and methods,' and a collection has been gathered of 'artefacts representing the country crafts and industries, the building trades, and agriculture.'<sup>15</sup>

Many museums serve a single function, preserving the architecture of a particular cultural or religious group such as the Shaker Museum at Hancock, Massachusetts, or an industry or craft like that of the leatherworkers displayed at Das Museum im Lederhaus, Purgstall, Germany. Curators have differing perceptions of the purpose of such museums, and of their clientele, and these influence the manner in which they present the architecture in their care. But ask a director whether a museum is there to preserve buildings, to educate children, to inform the public, to communicate a past way of living, to aid architects, anthropologists or ethnologists in their work, and the answer is invariably, 'all of these'. Beyond this, museum directors generally define their objectives in terms that reflect their respective views on quality, relevance, historic significance, status, and architectural merit. And to support these views, they may have teams of ethnographers and architectural historians, engineers and technologists; they may also be subject to an administering institution or university. In 1966 an Association of European Open Air Museums was established, which has agreed on standards of conservation, display, facilities, and other common aspects of their work, though many museums do not subscribe to the organization.<sup>16</sup>

Like Italy and Spain, France came late to the idea of the open-air museum, but at Cuzals on the Célé river is to be found 'le plus beau Musée de Plein Air du Quercy, unique en France.'<sup>17</sup> It is of interest in a number of ways; for instance, it has a château on the site. Châteaux are common enough in France, but this was different from most, rebuilding on a former site having been commenced in the 1920s and discontinued by the late 1930s. Its anachronistic hydrological service system, with a pumping station and gravity feed to the château, was restored in the museum. Other buildings at Cuzals include a farm, allegedly built in 1910, and a reconstruction of a farmhouse from the pre-Napoleonic period. Examples

of roof types and a row of stone walls demonstrate different methods of construction. A collection of oil presses, another of tractors, a toy museum, a basket-making exhibit, physick garden, children's carousel, an apiary, a bakery, and a 'museum of fire' have much that entertains while having little sense of direction, or evidence of co-ordination. In 1998 two corbelled stone *cabanes* were being built by architectural students from La Villette, Paris – in an area where many stone builders still live and work. Within its 50 hectares, Cuzals demonstrates both the successes of open-air museums and the problems confronting them.

### Presentation, Re-Presentation and Representation

As the foregoing examples have shown, the creation of an open-air museum is almost without exception, the result of a motivation on the part of an individual or of a group of people sharing a common concern or interest, to preserve a number of buildings for posterity. This means that the essential drive is one of a perceived need, but the distribution of the museums in different countries, their prevalence in some and virtual omission in others, indicate their unco-ordinated establishment and development. Some have been adopted as national or as regional collections, but most are subject to ideas of classification; only in Norway is it possible to see local museums that demonstrate the vernacular traditions of most of the country, permitting comparative study without undue preconditioned selection. In the majority of open-air museums the buildings on display have been appropriated by a founder, an organization, a provincial or other authority so as to project an overriding concept, whether this is of a presumed local tradition, a style of living in a favoured period, the values of a religious sect, the home of a memorialized individual, the labours of former workers, or some other historical construction. Statements of founders, extracts from charters, or quotations from published guides reveal a preoccupation with the visual image, often expressed in romantic terms: to create a 'picture-book', to 'present a picture', to enter a 'snapshot of former times'. The image is seldom of buildings alone but of a 'comprehensive picture of life in the villages'. Though it is unusual to acknowledge that the resultant picture is 'truly a dream', the emphasis on the presentation of 'life' in the past is ubiquitous.<sup>18</sup> But these constructed environments and picturesque images raise many issues that bring the validity of the open-air museum into question.

The issues are ones of presentation, re-presentation, and representation. Rarely are buildings that have been presented to a museum, rescued from demolition, or 'saved for the nation', or which have 'found their way to the museum more or less by chance', in a state where they can be simply transported and re-erected. Removal of a building is not in itself a simple process, but one which may involve legal, contractual and planning

approvals. Eventually, if this task is to be responsibly completed, it requires detailed surveys, the examination of the building's condition, and the drawing, recording and numbering of its component parts for dis-assembly and re-assembly. In turn, the latter necessitates much physical but specialized work and sensitivity and method in the sequences of dismantling, handling, transporting, storing, and protecting from damage or deterioration.

Neither will the building be in a condition that permits straightforward re-erection. Extensive repairs may be required; materials that are considered inappropriate may need to be replaced (corrugated galvanized metal sheeting by thatch, for example); extraneous elements (add-ons) may need to be removed; and missing parts may need to be replaced or constructed. This is done in the name of 'authenticity', a concept which, however, normally relates 'to the time to be represented' – like the Japanese museum of buildings in which a representation of William Shakespeare's birthplace is declared to be 'more authentic' than the Stratford-upon-Avon house because its new construction is comparable with the state of the original in the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Such work cannot be undertaken lightly or spontaneously: it requires forethought and planning; selection and design decisions; professional skills in history, archaeology, architecture and building; and not inconsiderable investments of money, time and effort. Some may be given voluntarily, but whatever the circumstances, the processes of re-erection and reconstruction are demanding and time consuming.

They also require explanation, though the terminology employed is not consistent and can be misleading. 'Erection' of a building and 're-erection' are often used synonymously, while 'reconstruction' may mean 'rebuilding' in one museum, but largely obscure the fact that a structure is a new simulation in another. The use of the term 'reconstruction' to mean 'new construction made to represent a former building' (such as the Napoleonic farmhouse at Cuzals) is now widely adopted but less widely made known to the visitor. Similar ambiguities relate to 'repair' and 'renewal', to 'renovate' and 'restore', to 'reproduce' and 'reproduction', and, notoriously, to 'preservation', 'conservation' and 'restoration'. Though some or all of these terms are generally used in guides and museum handbooks, a glossary that explains them, as distinct from one which gives historic or indigenous terms, is extremely rare. The looseness and ambiguity of the terminology assists museums in conveying their 'pictures' of 'life in past times' by laying a thin cloud of obscurity across the simulated villages and their furnished but lifeless buildings.

The buildings in an open-air museum cannot be casually obtained nor merely presented as they stand. Many are selected – or rejected – for what they are believed to represent within the chosen context, and good (if possible, excellent) examples are sought. As such, they are represented on specially selected sites and displayed as representative of the underlying

theme of the museum. In forming part of a larger and more complex whole, their interrelationship with other buildings may be invented rather than replicated in the process of re-presentation. Representation in the chosen context is dependent on an understanding of the building-producing and -occupying culture in history, and its interpretation by the museum's curatorial management. How these are achieved and for what purpose will depend on the message that is intended: no museum re-presentation or representation is value free.

### Outside and Inside

That the buildings are gathered within a compound is made explicit at the entrance to the open-air museum which, in the majority of instances, has a bureau and ticket office, administrative offices, and gated access. These are necessary and often extensive, but frequently, as, for instance, at the Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, Arnhem, or the National Folk Museum, St. Fagan's, Wales, the offices of administration and conservators are placed close to the entrance. Apparently, this is to assure the visitor of the extent and intensity of the work involved in preserving the buildings, even if the conservator's premises are generally closed to the interested tourist. Their design often presents problems. Thus, having failed to buy Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Henry Ford had it replicated for the entrance to Greenfield. The entrance at Frilandsmuseet, Lyngby, Denmark, is of similar scale and palatial impressiveness, notwithstanding the museum's declared purpose 'to portray the living conditions of the countryman.'<sup>20</sup> The forms and details of these entrance buildings emphasize the Classical tradition rather than the vernacular, while the defensive walls of the museum compounds distance the visitors from the buildings and artefacts within, with a security that merits the term *skansen* (fort). That the contents represent the 'other', the peasant community of the past, could not be more emphatically expressed. The Niedersächsisches Freilichtmuseum at Cloppenberg, north Germany, is one of the few open-air museums which uses a vernacular building as its entrance. Albeit a large one, the Ausstellungshalle, 'Münchhausen-Scheune', dating from 1561, is skillfully employed to allow the building to indicate the character of the museum without large notices or announcements.<sup>21</sup> More inviting perhaps, but in an essentially modern group of buildings, the entrance to the Hungarian Open Air Museum, Szentendre, is a veritable market of pavilions, shops, souvenir stalls, and cafes.

Beyond the entrance the visitor enters the invented environment and artificially constructed 'open-air' landscape of the museum. Few are geometrically planned, and many group the houses around an open space or 'green'. Often, the arrangement of buildings appears to be determined at least in part by the circulation pattern prescribed for visitors and the

convenient placing of restaurant or other facilities. In some museums, buildings may be clustered according to their affinity with others in arrangements which can appear convincing but which are not necessarily accurate. Such is the case at Sirigoino open-air museum in Yugoslavia, where all the buildings of a simulated farm were placed in parallel on a sloping site and facing the same direction even though the internally facing farm settlements located on contour patterns were clearly evident in the immediate locality.

Some collections are assembled *ad hoc* as buildings have been salvaged, bequeathed or made available, rather than by planned development. Often this has meant their relative isolation, as in the 'park' type of museum. Such serendipitous accumulation has its benefits, but purposeful expansion depends on the potential availability of buildings considered important enough to save and restore. Both the clustering of unrelated buildings and the distant dispersal of others can be seen at the Frilandsmuseet, Denmark. In many instances a compromise is effected by creating the semblance of the village form of a region, which is linked to another with a path or roadway, symbolizing considerable physical distance. This is the case at Szentendre, where a group of houses from the Upper Tisza region was located nearest the entrance, selected in the Communist era to demonstrate by the contrast of their styles of living the oppression of the serfs by the 'minor gentry', and of them in turn by the nobility. Now made less blatant, the museum bears a revisionist message.

Many fine buildings have been conserved in literally hundreds of museums, but when selection has been possible, museologists may bring professional criteria to exemplify, as in this case, a socio-political theme. But they may also bring criteria of quality, for example, in craftsmanship, decoration, sheer size, or the uniqueness of the building concerned. While this can be meritorious in itself, it can result in an overall distortion of the extent to which they are representative of buildings in their local context, emphasizing the special rather than the commonplace. In the early years of many museums, collecting was coloured by romanticism, as was the case at the Openluchtmuseum, Bokrijk, Belgium, founded in 1953 by the artist C. Wellens, who rebuilt the Wellenshoeve from Kempen 'in accordance with his own ideas' which included the addition of a dog-powered butter mill.<sup>22</sup> This was a salutary warning to later curators who have been assiduous in their restoration, though they cluster buildings by their province or region rather than by their functional relationships.

Not least of the problems confronting museologists is one of period. There is a general archaeological tendency to restore a building as it was first constructed, without the additions, adaptations and appurtenances that accrued over time. Only historic alterations, such as the insertion of a solar floor in an English hall house, are sometimes spared. This is done in the name of authenticity and does not take into account the modification of

buildings to meet changing needs and functions. Comparison of many photographs taken both before and after dismantling, transferral, conservation and re-erection confirms the widespread practice, though there are numerous exceptions. A building may remain in largely unaltered form, even if the roofing thatch has been replaced by slates over several centuries. But interiors are more subject to change, not only in the removal or building of partitions and other minor alterations, but also in the furniture, artefacts and furnishings utilized. Certain of these, such as wooden bowls or andirons and crooks, have changed comparatively little in form, but ceramics, textiles, painted decorations, stoves and many items of household equipment are more period specific.

Curators may choose to keep the interiors vacant, as is occasionally the case, but though an empty room may hold the interest of an architect, it can have little appeal for the general public. Usually curators have to decide what period their recreated interior assumes. This is largely conditioned by what is available from the museum store – few buildings arrive with artefacts intact. Sometimes the reserves are considerable – for example, Anders Sandwig left a legacy of 30,000 objects to Maihaugen. Inevitably, most furnished interiors appear as stage sets for specific historical drama productions, undisturbed by any actors. Conscious of this, some museum directors have arranged tableaux of wooden or waxwork figures, such as groups of purchasers and shopkeepers, or schoolchildren and their teacher in a classroom. These and some fifteen other period settings with characters in arrested action are displayed at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, Wattrelos, near Lille, northern France. Others have followed the lead of Colonial Williamsburg and dressed some of their staff in period costume, a practice which brings with it further dimensions of the problem of representation, creating not only an artificial ambience but also fictitious characters to people it. Some measure of accuracy is introduced when the actors are involved in a craft or occupation, such as firing pottery or baking cornbread, but such events are customarily to be seen at scheduled times only, perpetuating the impression of museum as theatre.

In the majority of museums the buildings have been restored and, where necessary, rebuilt, so that they have an ensured life of a few generations. Their crisp edges, tight bonds and joints, colour-washed walls, unimpaired brick and stonework, painted doors, and sharp mouldings are often at variance with the condition of similar buildings standing beyond the museum enclosure. The exteriors bear no evidence of the dirt and damage of cattle, draught oxen and horses, of lurching loads and lumbering carts which leave their impressions on the buildings of working farms. Across the threshold, the interiors are usually immaculate, the tiled floors, the treen and pewterware, ceramics and hardware, plain and painted furniture, clean and polished. Devoid of mud and grease, they frequently present an idealized and antiseptic version of the peasant environment.

This distancing from the hardship and, not infrequently, the discomfort of rural life is made still more detached by the inhibitions against entering rooms or handling of objects. Suspended ropes, even glass walls and doors, separate the visitor from some of the living spaces, which remain mute, inflexible and undisturbed. Though the museum is not one of conventional glass cases, this curatorial fixation persists. Protection of the artefacts against damage or theft is, of course, the most readily offered reason – the objects in the Frilandsmuseet, Lyngby, for instance, being wired into position and alarmed. Moreover, there are serious problems of safety for both objects and visitors, as indicated by the fire at Arnhem in 1970 and, even more drastically, the fire at the museum of Sanok, Poland, in 1994, when thirteen large buildings and 140 exhibits were destroyed.<sup>23</sup> At the opposite extreme, it is unusual for a museum to be the outcome of a disaster, but such is the case with the Buried Village of Te Wairoa, Rotorua, New Zealand, a museum of a Maori settlement which was engulfed by a volcanic eruption in 1886 and subsequently recovered, Pompei-like, by excavation.<sup>24</sup> Here is one museum whose still emptiness is the essence of the site.

Departures from the hygienic standards shared by the majority of museums are rare. At Arnhem a single exhibit, a farmhouse from Krawinkel, has been re-erected as it was found: 'Beyond the smart facade, the old huddle of buildings, lean-to's and sheds remained unaltered.'<sup>25</sup> But the smell of the fodder that once boiled in the fireplace is undetectable, and even the dung-heap seems sanitized. Of listing walls, loose joints, peeling plaster, and rotting timbers there is little to be seen; verisimilitude in representation does not extend that far. A more remarkable exception is the museum at Howick, New Zealand, an open-air museum which is a recreation of a 'fencible' (defendable) military settlement of the 1840s.<sup>26</sup> More than thirty buildings have been recovered, largely due to the efforts of the Howick Historical Society and, as at Maihaugen, the initiative of a local dentist. He sought to keep every building in the condition in which it was obtained, with layers of soiled and peeling wallpaper and paint, broken and rusty locks, nails as wall hooks, and splintered floorboards. The society was in conflict with regional authorities who, with the safety of visitors in mind, wished to avoid infection, contamination, or minor injuries. Apparently, this was not considered to be a problem at Cuzals, where the farmhouse, the cattlebyre, and the cowman's room within it were left as they were found, in a welter of dishevelled clothing and bedding, with mud-caked boots and socks in the manure on the earth and cobble floors, so that the living presence of the former occupants was almost tangible. This is rarely the case: objects are displayed with the meanings and aesthetics of the mid-twentieth century; with qualities of orderliness, cleanliness, purity and simplicity clearly apparent. Restoration of the buildings to their presumed genotypes, the precision and refinement of the

skills applied to them, the undisturbed interiors with their ascetic frugality and perfection in the placement of artefacts, speak of the values projected on them rather than the values of their former inhabitants.

### Guided and Misguided

To take the visitor through their collection, virtually every open-air museum publishes information. This may simply be in the popular twice-folded A4 leaflet form by which most museums attract browsers in hotel lobbies and information centres. Couched in phrases that evoke nostalgia and sentiment, awareness of history, and, above all, regional and national pride, they are published in their tens of thousands. Most museums publish a separate and more fully descriptive guide, though they vary in the amount of information they carry. All buildings are numbered as if they were in a display case, and in so presenting them a circulation route is implied. In most guides they are illustrated with photographs, now in colour and with current graphic styles, though less frequently with the perspectives, isometrics, or other orthographic projections which formerly conveyed architectural information. The imagery employed indicates the museum's expectations of the market, which may now be larger than in the 1970s. Arnhem, which succeeds in including photographs, sketches and plans in its guide, claimed in excess of half a million visitors in 1990.<sup>27</sup>

Some museum guides use reproductions of prints, plans, sections and projections of selected buildings, and sometimes pictures that record both the buildings *in situ* and after removal. The guide to the Australian House Museum, Geelong, Victoria, uses most of the above, though its drawings are sketch isometrics. Early photographs and reproductions of documents and media reports give it a distinctive character.<sup>28</sup> Texts may range from the elementary to the informed, from a catalogue to a history, or a carefully edited combination of these. As few visitors read the guide in detail while entering buildings, a summary text is helpful. Inevitably, the approach varies with the type of museum and the expected clientele. Cover photographs tend to emphasize the bucolic, in lands where the sun always shines. The layout may be lively while the typography remains conventional, signifying both open-mindedness and seriousness of purpose. In some cases booklets or game sheets are available for children, with line drawings to colour, items to name, or blank pages for their own drawings. More frequently, these are issued to assist teachers with their classes, for school groups constitute the largest bodies of visitors to some museums, though adult bus tours are also numerous. The attention span of such groups is frequently brief, and many museums produce a basic map guide issued with the ticket to simplify the circuit.

To offset the impression that the simple guides can give, it is important for many museums to underpin their work with publication of their

research. In part this is to establish their credibility with conventional museums, many of whom, after a century, still regard open-air museums of building as dubious. Academic papers on archaeological surveys, specific building types, technical problems, and socio-historical accounts are numerous. Some publish monographs like those of the Stichting Historisch Boerderij-Ononderzoek, the research wing of the museum at Arnhem, while others may have a regular publication, such as *Haz Ès Ember (House and Man)*, the yearbook of the Hungarian Open Air Museum, Szentendre.<sup>29</sup> Though some independent museums publish such studies, Old Sturbridge Village Museum producing its 'Booklet Series' since the 1950s, they are typically the productions of museums that have institutional, provincial or national interests behind them.<sup>30</sup> This reflects both the economic and the academic bases of these museums. But it is also indicative of the motivation on the part of the latter to reinforce the regional and historical provenance of the buildings, promoting identification with former folk communities. Sometimes this is overtly expressed, as in the case of the Orkresne Vlastivedne Muzeum (the District Motherland Museum), Stara Lubovna, in the Slovak Republic.<sup>31</sup>

In the corner of a display of agricultural equipment, and close to the bakery at Cuzals, someone had posted a notice:

QUELLES SONT LES DIFFERENCES ENTRE UNE ÉCOLE,  
UNE PRISON, UN ZOO ET UN MUSÉE DE PLEIN AIR?

Freely translated, it reads 'What are the differences between a school, a prison, a zoo and an open-air museum?'<sup>32</sup> Whether the question was written by a perplexed visitor, by a teacher for her class, by a doubting museum employee, or a member of the management could not be ascertained; Cuzals was hardly burdened by officials. Behind the rhetorical question, it seemed that there was a recognition of the didactic, idealistic, puritanical, contained, herded, classified, near extinct/surviving, wanted/unwanted, re-presented and represented features which are common to the forms and philosophies of all open-air museums. In effect, the question may well be asking by implication: is history as it is taught in open-air museums, also bunk?

### Open Air and Overseas

The foregoing observations have been based on visits to open-air museums in over twenty countries and more than a dozen US states, though for this chapter the examples cited have been more limited. After a century of existence the nature and purpose of circumscribed and gated museums of buildings need to be re-examined. Such places can, and often do, serve useful purposes, but there is too little agreement on their functions, the



basis of the selection of buildings, the degree to which they should attempt to evoke a sense of place and period, the planning of the environments in which they are sited, and the movement and freedom of visitors. The nature and quality of the publications produced, the research which they permit or encourage, and the extent to which they serve local or national political interests are frequently constrained. This last condition is clearly evident at the museum of Chinese Regional Architecture at Guilin, whose imposing entrance, lined with the flags of many nations, underscores its propaganda role. The entrance building on its plinth, approached by a full-width flight of steps, leads to a geometrically formal garden around which are newly built and austere versions in replica of the indigenous architecture of some of the peoples of south China, including the Dai and Hani. There has been no attempt at the relocation of existing traditional buildings, nor any evidence of how they are situated in their authentic contexts.

Similar issues become highlighted when the small but growing number of open-air museums in the industrializing and developing world are considered. For example, the differences in quality and objective become readily apparent when the Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture at Jos is considered. This extensive and remarkable museum was the inspiration of Professor Zbigniew Dmochowski of Gdansk Technical University, Poland. His detailed research in the 1950s and 1960s led to his attempting to represent the diverse architecture of Nigeria's peoples on the 65-acre site. With a few exceptions, he chose less to preserve than to replicate, and he greatly benefited by the employment of indigenous craftsmen to build the houses.<sup>33</sup> Though less thoroughly documented, Bomas of Kenya, a museum of traditional building near Nairobi, was also built by the members of tribal groups, the dwelling types being current, though less monumental than many that were reconstructed at Jos. Both museums were created by motivated expatriates, but the Village Complex in the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum, Delhi, was built for the Asiad '72 Exhibition. Representing some fifteen regions, its huts being 'built in facsimile with authentic construction by the villagers themselves. In every hut items of day-to-day life are displayed in order to recreate the cultural contexts in which such objects were actually used.'<sup>34</sup> The modest administrative building was designed by the Indian architect Charles Correa. More contentious, however, is the regular plan to which the displayed huts and houses conform.

Though construction by indigenous builders is less likely to misrepresent traditional structures, the Nicobarese builders at Delhi's Village Complex were obliged to reduce their traditional meeting house to an eighth of its customary volume. Such distortion of scale or quality is also evident at Taman Mini, Jakarta, where each Indonesian province has been required to provide a representative building. Thus, Bali built a typical domestic compound, while Central Sumatra chose the 'aristocratic' Minangkabau

house with its rich carving and painting and its collection of regal wedding costume. Sulawesi was represented by the Toraja, who produce one of the most spectacular building types of any vernacular tradition. They had no need to embellish or exaggerate, though they did miniaturize their grave figures by building a rock shelter in perspective. But northern Sumatra, represented by the Batak Toba, built an immense and over-scaled version of their domestic house, doubtless to rival other regions. Both the Indonesian Taman Mini and the Indian Village Complex are well patronized by their own nationals as well as by tourists. The management of the Delhi Museum hope that their complex 'will symbolize the urgency for the preservation of rural technology and traditional aesthetic values in rapidly industrializing India.'<sup>35</sup>

Already the small but growing number of open-air museums in industrializing countries are encountering the problems of re-presentation and representation; these problems are not necessarily the same as those in Western museums, but they are clearly comparable. As their numbers increase, issues of intention, of veracity, guidance and publication will become more problematic. Associations of museums may be instituted, and advice based on the experience of a century in the West may be sought. Whether or not this is the case, the time is surely overdue for a serious reconsideration of the functions and forms of open-air museums. Many are deceptive, their invented, rather than authentic, environments being based on sentimentality, nostalgia, and the falsification of 'life' in selected periods by sanitizing, insulating and idealizing the buildings and their contents. By rejecting the changes that have been wrought by generations, by deleting all references to the modifications and influences of subsequent periods, they fossilize them in mythical time.

There is little doubt that many open-air museums are popular, and many are used for such educational purposes as allowing schoolchildren to 'step into the past'. It may be argued that by so doing they bring history alive and make future citizens aware of their heritage. It may also be contended that by preserving vernacular domestic and functional buildings, they are helping to generate an understanding of regional architecture which will ensure respect for it in the future. Such was not the case in Romania, however, where one of the most respected of museums and oldest of scientific academies concerned with conservation was powerless to prevent the destruction of whole villages in the name of progress. In fact, the open-air museum may be counterproductive in this respect. By saving 'representative' examples of the vernacular for contemplation in idealized surroundings, they can relieve those intent on the destruction of such buildings in the world beyond the museum's walls of any responsibility to protect them. Again, by creating 'a picture' that associates vernacular buildings essentially with the past, they also isolate them from the modern world, an isolation which is emphasized by their enclosure within the

museum confines. As many of the buildings are presented or selected for their uniqueness or special qualities of scale, craftsmanship or decoration, by implication they low-rate the simpler and less singular buildings which nevertheless contribute unspectacularly to their environmental contexts.

These considerations are important with regard to the European and North American open-air museums, whose continued existence in their current forms and serving their present purposes is seriously open to question. They are even more important in the developing world where self- and community-built buildings based on vernacular traditions will continue to be essential if the housing demands of expanding populations are to be met in the twenty-first century. Rather than romantic depictions of old buildings with invented histories in spurious and contrived settings, vernacular architecture in the developing world needs respect and support, with encouragement given for its continued use of renewable resources, passive climatic modifications, spatial organization based on social structures and scale according to need. Admittedly, this too is part of an agenda, but it is one which, together with instruction in building skills where they are declining and more forethought in the choice of building examples and their presentation, could give new purpose and relevance to the open-air building collections of the future.

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