

Archaeological Open Air Museums as Time Travel Centres

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Abstract

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Experiencing the past in the open air has never been more popular than at present. Not only have many archaeological sites been transformed into tourist destinations, “fake” prehistoric, Roman or medieval environments have been developed and are frequently visited by both tourists and school children. If in the past these archaeological open air museums referred to experimental archaeology as a touchstone, now these heritage centres are profiling themselves less with science and more with living history, experiencing and time travel. In this, archaeological open air museums are a successful response to the emerging Experience Society. They use very basic techniques which are as old as the first archaeology and cannot be seen separately from archaeological knowledge and original artefacts. If they can combine the old techniques with modern technology, they will even be more successful.

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What is an archaeological open air museum?

Trying to find out what archaeological open air museums are is far from easy. The name itself is under discussion. In Denmark they are called “historical workshops”, in Sweden some are called “prehistoric villages” and some in England use the phrase “ancient technology centres”, elsewhere they refer to themselves as “Archaeological Skansen” which again might be the same as an “Archaeopark” although that could also refer to an original archaeological site in a reserve. You always need to be familiar with the context of the name to understand what is meant.

The international federation of these museums, EXARC, uses the following definition: “An archaeological open air museum is a non-



Fig 1. An archaeological open air museum is an outdoor facility with (re)constructed buildings. “Neolithic” house at Heldenberg, Austria.

profit permanent institution with outdoor true to scale architectural reconstructions primarily based on archaeological sources. It holds collections of intangible cultural heritage resources and provides an interpretation

of how people lived and acted in the past; this is accomplished according to sound scientific methods for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment of its visitors” (www.exarc.eu).

The archaeological open air museums are united in having an outdoor facility with reconstructed buildings, a scenery so to speak, for their activities. In most cases the facility is themed with prehistory, the Roman era or a medieval scene. At these places a wide variety of matters is presented, ranging from in-depth archaeological workshops and school excursions up to spectacular events. There are at least 300 such museums in Europe and maybe 500 worldwide. They share some characteristics with other places, and although those qualifications might be true in some cases on some occasions, in general the museums do not live up to these expectations.

It is not a traditional museum

Archaeological open air museums usually have no collection of tangible artefacts. If their houses burn down – they are fake anyway – it is not the end of the museum. They collect information, (hi)stories, which they present in their prehistoric or medieval scenery. The information itself, the intangible cultural heritage resources, is the collection. Thus, archaeological open air museums, like science centres and heritage visitor centres, are ever more accepted in the international museum family.

However, the differences between an archaeological open air museum and a traditional “showcase” museum are apparent. A museum – even in modern commercial exhibitions – tends to be artefact-based, while archaeological open air museums are activity-based.

The atmosphere in showcase museums is much more aesthetic and “sacred”, maybe because of the larger role for politics, science and the establishment. Traditional museums are clean, civilized and organized and still have by



Fig 2. Artefacts in an archaeological open air museum are to be touched and used. The playground at the Middelaldercentret near Nykøbing, Denmark.

definition the roles of collecting and preserving, although education has become an important part as well. Their role is nowadays changing towards an emphasis on presenting. The National Museum of Antiquities in the Netherlands, for example, does not excavate (i.e. collect) anymore in its own country! Museum exhibitions become more and more the territory of production departments: professional text writers, Art & Design companies and of course a professional PR machine. Research loses territory in favour of presentation.

An archaeological open air museum has different tasks from a traditional museum. Their key words are: education, presentation, experiment, commerce and living history. That does not mean that they have a worse or less successful approach than the archaeological museum around the corner. Thankfully, there are more and more “crossovers”: a combination of indoor and outdoor.

It is not an original archaeological site

We, the archaeological open air museums, are fake. Most artefacts at an archaeological open air museum are to be touched and used. In many cases, tourist visitors think that what they see is exactly the way it was. The image of such a “Stone Age house” is so impressive

that people take it for real, for original. And we can tell again and again that what they see is just one of the possibilities of how life might have been back then, but the spoken message gets lost in the sight of the impressive (re)constructions.

True, in some cases reconstructions are set at the spot of the archaeological examples, as in Düppel, Berlin, or at the Crannog Centre in Scotland, but that is more coincidental and does not add that much extra value. Why not? Because the original archaeological remains in Europe, north of the Alps, can hardly be called spectacular. Besides that, the natural landscape has changed drastically since the old days.

It are not original artefacts or debris which form the character of an archaeological open air museum but the (re)constructed houses make up its true identity. A trail is set out; hopefully the public picks up the right information, the right image, but you can never tell.

If we compare visitors to archaeological sites with those visiting archaeological open air museums, some striking differences can be observed (Masriera i Esquerra 2007). Different kinds of people visit the different places: archaeological sites are visited by the more highly educated. "This particular type of university-educated visitor [...] may simply wish to prove their membership of a cultural elite" (Masriera i Esquerra 2007, 45). Maybe more important is what people learn: people always learn from visiting an archaeological open air museum. However, when visiting an archaeological site, people usually do not learn anything new, but rather leave the place confused: "people understand less as a result" (Masriera i Esquerra 2007, 45). Also people are more satisfied when visiting a reconstruction than visiting an archaeological site.

It is not an animal farm or zoo

Archaeological open air museums are not

just about the position of man in antiquity in their environment. But the term "life" is important, whether you talk about living plants, crops and trees, animals or even "living history". For many children, an important group of visitors, these museums are attractive as they have so much different life. Using this is a way to get in contact with the visitors, to help convey the story behind the product. The people first see a goat or a sheep, but when they leave, they might see it as a "prehistoric" kind of animal instead of just a pet.

It is not a Disneyland park

Archaeologists are not sure of the value of archaeological open air museums, if they are serious enough, or if they are not just pleasing the public, out to make some fast money. These museums are indeed more commercial than a traditional museum, but much less than theme parks are. Theme parks make imagined settings, based on some romantic past, for example the "Pirates of the Caribbean" or the Wild West.

As museums of this kind have to earn most of their own income and are in no way protected against "bad years", commerce was introduced, besides science, education and presentation. When a National Museum in the Netherlands earns 80% of its budget from governmental funding, for archaeological open air museums, the proportions are usually reversed (www.rmo.nl). Income is only generated in the summertime, meaning that these museums usually are heavily in debt by February. They need to be very flexible. And even in season, the difference between a Monday and the day of the main event (a Viking market, for example), shows extreme differences. Sometimes 20% of all leisure visitors gather on one single weekend, as at Biskupin, in Poland, where up to 85,000 of the 250,000 yearly visitors join during the nine-day festival (www.biskupin.pl).

In some cases, the restaurant department

or the facilities for “partying in the medieval monastery” have become so essential that the respective parks cannot survive without it. Proper funding would be able to guarantee the most important activities at such museums.

The history of archaeological open air museums

Different objectives have led to the reconstruction of archaeological remains through time. Every (re)construction is a documentation of the state of knowledge of that time: the buildings at, for example, Saalburg, as built in 1907 (Batz 2004), are recognizable as “old” reconstructions in comparison to, say, the 1988 “Roman buildings” at Carnuntum in Austria (Jobst 1988).

Early history

The early days of the development of archaeological open air museums can be recognized in the construction of scenographic stages, loosely inspired by a view of the past. Those staged settings were in many cases for the elite, to convey a political message, an image of an idealized past, or to confirm myths or some kind of ideology or to legitimize the role of the ruling elite. At present, instead of the elite of the old days, it is governments and even the EU who sponsor archaeological open air museums, as for example the construction of a full museum at Kanzach in Germany (www.bachritterburg.de) and the liveARCH project with eight such museums involved (www.liveARCH.eu).

Already in the 18th century, parks were planned with “historical” features, whether original, renovated, reconstructed or fabricated (Ahrens 1990, pp. 12–15). There are Romantic “nouveau riche” landscape parks known with lake dwelling reconstructions,



Fig 3. The impressive “Saalburg” Roman castellum reconstructions were commissioned by the Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany to represent a heroic past.

and in 1922, in Unteruhldingen at the Bodensee (Germany) (Schöbel 2008; www.pfahlbauten.de), the first steps were taken to start an archaeological open air museum with similar romantic lake dwellings. From 1933 onwards, however, Nazi propaganda dictated the presentation more and more. At several other locations in Germany, other archaeological open air museums were founded to “teach people about the high culture of their own forefathers – a heroic past”.

Even in Sweden, in 1932 at Gotland a house reconstruction was built with the constructors referring to the “high culture” of the original Iron Age site (Boëthius & Nihlén 1932).

Science

In the first decades after World War II, not many new open air museums were conceived. This was true not just in Germany where many existing museums were closed, but in general almost everywhere in Europe. Presentation techniques used in the war – even though some went back to the 1920s – were rejected. The past was preferably seen in a technical context, a museum context, not as a living museum or reconstructed area. It was about products and techniques, not about people and stories. The adventure was over,



Fig 4. An “Iron Age” house under construction at the Historisch OpenluchtMuseum Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

the years of collecting, sorting and keeping had begun (Keefer 2006, pp. 17–18).

It was not until experimental archaeology became fashionable in the 1970s, for example with Lejre in Denmark (www.landoflegends.dk) and Butser (www.butserancientfarm.co.uk) in England, that anything happened. Both initiatives have been followed, but not as much in their experimental approach.

Experimental archaeology – pursuing new knowledge – in these museums could take the shape of documenting crop yields or monitoring the decay of wooden constructions. However, there are not many long-term permanent research programmes in these museums.

Reconstructions and experimental archaeology seem inseparably connected with each other, but reconstruction is not an experiment or vice versa. A reconstruction or construct alone might be at best a by-product of experimental research. The real product of an experiment is data, the story which can be told. The construct, or model, serves other goals. The new buildings, ovens, clothes and landscapes are serving as a framework, as scenery, for telling a story about the past.

Changes are made in the possible reconstruction before it has even left the drawing board, as it is made fit for future use, ready to be a part of the “prehistoric” or “medieval”

scenery. Experiment and experience are however two different things (Coles 1979, p. 1; Reynolds 1999, p. 156). However, after 1985, the technological-typological approach got competition from a more cultural scientific approach, with roots in the “New Archaeology”: people came back into the foreground.

The archaeological open air museums present archaeology for various reasons. It is not only about explaining how they know what they know, but by stating that archaeology provides facts and these facts are the museum’s foundation, the museums try to legitimize themselves.

Education

History taught at school is usually about politics. Over a short period of just a few weeks, pupils are taught about Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. It is only when parts of Europe north of the Alps are conquered by the Romans, that those countries appear in the history books. The Middle Ages again are taught in terms of “Dark Ages”, kings and emperors and the moving of borders. This outdated cliché is still used widely. So why on earth would a teacher think of taking his or her class on excursion to an archaeological open air museum, where the daily life of daily people is the focus of attention? History can play an important role in the development of children. Thanks to our past, our society has become what it is. Archaeological open air museums are to teach children about their common past.

The “hands on” approach of archaeological open air museums is a way of non-formal education outside the established formal system. The non-formal character is made explicit when children dress up or are introduced to role play, forming “families” or “tribes” (for examples see Kahl et al. 1995).

Education in archaeological open air museums primarily serves the mediation of knowledge. However, missions also concern training social abilities as well as dexterity. In contrast

to experimental archaeology, which is mainly concerned with technological issues underlying social questions, education in open air museums is much more focused on the position of people themselves in the past, not their artefacts. A clear danger arises when neither the teachers nor the education officers of an open air museum are ambitious enough and remain at the level of simply entertaining children without a lesson, a theory to be taught (Hein, 2000, 61). It is the museum's and the teacher's obligation to make sure the school children have at least gained some knowledge about how life might have been back then.

The importance of school children for these museums becomes clear when seeing the statistics: 50 to 95% of the visitors come in groups. Compare this to the less than 20% of the National Museum of Antiquities in Holland (www.rmo.nl)! And that 20% is reached thanks to special arrangements with the authorities who sponsor the local schools to visit the museum at least once a year; even the busses that transport these children are paid for. And in these museums, the national or regional archaeological past itself plays a minor role. Modern art or Egyptian mummies are the teasers here. Archaeological open air museums do not have such arrangements, but they still attract many schools.



Fig 5. School children visits are very important to archaeological open air museums. With simulated excavations, they learn how we know what we know about construction at the Historisch OpenluchtMuseum Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Tourism

When coming to large festivals or on any other summer day, tourists expect something different from an archaeological open air museum than from a traditional one. That is partly because these are different people. The traditional cultural tourist is 40–60 years old, wants to spend money, provided there is enough on offer. But archaeological open air museums? Most of the visitors are 40 or younger. They usually travel far to visit such a place but are no frequent visitors. The next day they might go shopping somewhere, go to Disneyland or lie on the beach with their kids. For them and their children, it is much easier to visit an archaeological open air museum than to visit a traditional museum because the threshold is much lower. In a traditional museum, you have to behave, in an archaeological open air museum, you are much more free, enjoying the open air, the houses, the stories, the food and so on.

The public wants to be entertained, visiting Viking markets and Celtic events, but that is just a start. If there had not been more, the tourists would have chosen to visit an amusement park. To turn an event into a success, however, besides good weather and good communication, innovative extras need to be developed year after year. Target groups change and so do their demands (Lucke 2004).

Experiencing has become much more important lately than passive consuming as in the old days. Visitors are used to computer games, to interaction, to exciting films on Discovery Channel, something different from reading a book or visiting an exhibition to a long-lost castle. Perhaps many visitors come to an archaeological open air museum to be amused, and it is only when they get there that they realize it is more than a small-scale park. The new generation's different approach to everything around them needs to be emphasized. This Internet generation is used to having a lot to choose from, picking up small



Fig 6. Were these knights back then much different from us nowadays? Medieval fair at Archeon, the Netherlands.

bits, being able to choose by oneself what to see, do, experience and what not. Texts with the maximum size of an SMS text message are a good way to start. Still, layered information is important, not just superficiality.

Living history

Living history is as old as the 1890s. In those days, at the Skansen museum in Stockholm employees were dressed in reconstructed period costume. In the Stockholm case, it was remains of a disappearing way of life. In the living history scene from the 1950s onwards, it is a reinvented past that is depicted and acted out (Pettersson 2003, pp. 241–246). Living history can be seen as focusing on people and stories, while experimental archaeology focuses more on artefacts and techniques. It has become increasingly popular since the 1980s, with developments to live interpretation, live action role play, Fantasy, re-enactment of events, show fighting, and as a hobby,

supported by serious research – or not. It is a challenge to call living history groups to set their own standards in order to get a sound presentation to the public at archaeological open air museums.



Fig 7. Living history at the Bachritterburg Kanzach in Germany – from event to daily life is practised here.

The future success factors

The future can go in different directions. More than ever, global trends dictate what will happen at archaeological open air museums.



Fig 8. Texts, numbers and audio guides to test how visitors like to get their message at the Federseemuseum at Bad Buchau, Germany.

There is a need for experiencing, “hands on” as opposed to Internet, mobile phone and television. If this also means “minds on”, then we have gained a lot. The quality and enduring success of these museums lies in their not offering simple fun, but offering layered information.

In the future, more of these museums will focus on the local heritage instead of some distant general concept of “Vikings”, “Middle Ages” or “the Romans”. The past gets a face,

a local face. Only that way will the visitor be able to identify him- or herself with what is experienced.

This experience will refrain from modern interpretation tools as far as they are visible as such: audio guides or plastic signs. True, the visitor knows we are in the present and not the past, but he or she still doesn't want that atmosphere to be ruined too much. Virtual reality could augment the atmosphere, if used properly.

Living history is an important method of presentation. This often remains limited to merely a demonstration of fighting behind a barrier or buying souvenirs in a stall. But when this goes beyond the simple passive observation for visitors and turns into active participation, then we are getting somewhere. The experience takes shape.

The future lies maybe not just in what is presented, but also in how it is prepared. Archaeological open air museums need to be based on up-to-date archaeological and historical information. A changing museum – not necessarily the buildings, but changes in the stories told – is a successful one. The goals are not just to attract enough visitors, but also to initiate a dialogue between scientists and keep that dialogue running. A museum without an active link with science is a dead museum.

The combination of having replicas besides the original artefacts is a smash hit in many places. These are two sides of the same story and need to be presented as one. Combining indoor and outdoor will not only make the visitors stay longer, but makes the museums and tourism in general less dependent on the weather. The best combinations are between indoor, outdoor reconstructions and an outdoor archaeological (= original) site which again emphasizes the regional or local character.

Experimental archaeology – in the academic sense – can be an element for successful museums. They have something most univer-

sities haven't got: endurance. Projects can last for years or even decades, as the Lejre Land of Legends in Denmark recently proved by publishing the burned house experiment of 1967 (Rasmussen 2007).

Archaeological open air museums will also increasingly combine the cultural with the natural heritage. The story about the past is not just about humans and their society, but also about their position in the environment.

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