

Can museums fight back?

A glimpse on inspiration by ecomuseums

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(This text was done as an introductory lecture for some museology anniversary at the University in Granada but I have no recollection or data that it has been published; if it has, it must have been in Spanish so what I can offer for the history of my own writing is the original contribution but yet as an imperfect version written in International English. Hugues de Varine was the second speaker and I felt so immensely privileged and honoured: he was one of the prophets of my “total museum” professional vision. I asked him to speak first).

Quite often one meets opinions that the ecomuseum is a model that can be applied anywhere and anytime; but the truth is quite opposite. An ecomuseum is a way of thinking in the discipline, a wall of feeling and knowing the social mission of the museum and its responsibility to endeavours to attain humanist and social objectives. It is not an institution that, as a form of practical solutions, can be copied and used to create one's own successful museum. In a profession that is exposed to social frustrations and rising expectations, it is natural to expect a psychology of quick fixes and hence certain expectations of life-saving formulae. Many, then, are apt uncritically to overvalue the ecomuseum, giving it the value of model (something like a new form of smarter management) and there are still more of those who are likely to want to ignore this way of thinking. To them it will seem that this is some kind of quasi-socialist invention, thought up for the European rural centres, and can be resorted to by curators still obsessed with the idea of 1968. Both are wrong, for the ecomuseum is a legitimate consequence of a century of museum practice and several decades of theoretical sensitisation of the profession. It is an innovation, then, but still more, it is a new kind of sensitivity to old problems, just as is the concept of sustainable development to what is called progress.

New professional philosophy turned into practice

Although simple in its claims, the new theory impinges on the very pith and marrow of museum tradition and, if fully understood, will lead to a professional metanoia, a different way of understanding things, the kind that was long expected as light in the museum world. In the centre of it is man in time and space, his heritage as the natural that he has affected and the artificial that he has created, the need for him to be enabled always to build and never to destroy, to be different from generation to generation, and never really to change in all that makes him different. The theory recognises the heritage as a nursery, an accumulation of experience, as guarantee that we have somewhere to go to when we need inspiration or useful information. Hence too the endeavour to create institutions that are capable of providing this, but in a manner that will turn them into the most effective means of teaching culture, places where it is possible to experience and understand it. For the profession to understand that the very past with which it is involved is a means, just as is the institution of the museum, it needed sensitizing through both theory and practice. Thus an advance has been made from the past to the present. In fact, right until the appearance of the concept of ecomuseum, there was no real disciplinary

philosophy capable of and wishing radically to change practice, rather with more or less success explicating existing practice and its variants.

Full identity

Most of the traditional museums have been created as a result of some individual initiative in some past and specific circumstances.

Thus represented by the accumulated and exhibited heritage, the identity of such places looks, in fact, like a box of pieces of a puzzle sawn in such different ways that no one can create out of them an intelligible picture.

Full identity consists of forms of nature, culture and civilisation, which create a whole only when they are together in the museum working process. Of course, not all museums are thus condemned to the panoramic image, but some are. Others create the beneficial impression that language is clear only when it is expressed with comparisons and context.

The philosophy of ecomuseums is in fact quite contrary to the tradition as found. In them the point of departure for all kinds of activities is a scientifically studied and defined complex identity. They are, that is, a priori multidisciplinary. Then the institution of the ecomuseum is applied to this identity, both for the sake of further research and for the sake of carrying out a manifold care assignment: for the identity to be recognised, to be supported, helped, strengthened, presented, expressed, to be restored to the life process in which it belongs. The main care is to keep alive the integrity and complexity of this identity. In the case of traditional museums the focal point was on some individual or scholarly interest (however justified by certain special circumstances). In the case of the ecomuseum, this focal point is the centre of gravity of the community, the place to which the whole identity of it drains and from which it comes again enhanced. Only completeness is a guarantee of its truthfulness and conviction. Scholarly interest is only a qualitative base for this process.

The territorial museum

A museum without walls is a frequent manner of picturesquely describing the extent of this kind of museum. Modern museums have a tendency to multiply, grow and specialise ad infinitum – carrying out the musealisation of the world. This, it seems, is the main feature of its response to the challenge of the contemporary. To this same challenge, the ecomuseum responds by broadening its scope and its influence on its own entire territory. It colours life and initiatives in such a manner as to enable it to fulfil its most important objective: to preserve the creative nature of the collective memory and ensure that it is present and of good quality in as broad a circle of owners or users as possible.

The diffusion and scope of the conventional museum is dependent on the circumstances and is quite often arbitrary. The compass of the ecomuseum is “its” territory, which is a territory corresponding to the coherence of a certain found identity. Identity, to simplify a necessary

complex definition, is every unit that is different from all the others – a unique system of values belonging to just some separate situation: social values, economic, cultural, geographical and natural. The ecomuseum, then, is not possible as the result of someone's individual ingenuity or the result of the way some particularly ambitious administration works. All of this can be useful, but the motives must be more thorough, deeper. They must be immanent to the collective identity that needs the museum as a resource for its self-protection and self-expression. Such a museum will function only as a central point, a point of take-off, for the heritage action.

“De-professionalisation”

The inverted commas of course tell of just what it means: it is not a matter of relinquishing any professional standards; retaining all the quality standards, the ecomuseum is open to all kinds of participation from the population in the midst of which or because of which it exists. The European museum tradition, particularly the ethnographic museum, is familiar with the practice of setting up a network of museum representatives in the field. This is very similar to what the ecomuseum does, except that with them it is a matter of a regular working process and a more thoroughgoing participation of the population in the process. All or at least the majority of ecomuseum outposts would not be able to function without the amateurs (in the original sense of the word) that carry out what is actually a professional job: supervision of the structures, custodian services, opening the places to visitors, guiding parties, interpretation and demonstration of the contents, maintenance and the like. Their engagement in the museum is always a non-compulsory continuation of their interests during their working life, of the skills that they possess or the calling they followed. Love for the identity to which they are devoted and part of the tradition and identity of which they are, will often take the place of any other necessary characteristics, and give a charm that no curator can ever have.

Of course it is clear that this kind of de-professionalisation and work with laymen requires from the curator more professionalism and a deeper understanding of the job than is the case with normal curators in conventional museums. Anyone who has tried to explain, particularly to a not highly educated but perhaps well-intentioned layperson what a museum is and what its purpose is knows what a difficult task this is. And finally, at least where most museums are concerned (for the necessary elite is available everywhere), it is precisely such users we wish to address. Only influencing them will provide the underpinning for the prosperity of the profession and the realisation of the mission. One more reason, then, for knowledge and consolation to be sought in heritage theory, even if it is called heritology, or precisely because of that.

De-institutionalisation

Every institution is to some extent self-sufficient and constrained by a set of defined rules. Institutions are often so self-referential that they are constantly tempted to do only what enables them to survive and thrive. An institution can easily forget the primary inspiration that was probably behind its founding, or the mission that was entrusted to it at the outset. Institutionalised memory is seldom able to overcome the pragmatism according to which it optimises the minimum effort necessary to meet the objectives of its own institution. If this is the case with political, medical and religious institutions, why would it not be so with cultural,

particularly with museums, conservative as they are. Unlike other museums, ecomuseums are aware of these trials, and systematically endeavour to avoid them. This is a laudable effort.

De-institutionalisation is, equally ideally speaking, that final utopian condition where the institution is unnecessary, the idea of the museum functioning as a social organisation and as a state of mind. As a non-institution. Properly understood, at any moment in time, a museum institution subserves life itself.

Determination by real time

Conventional museums are about the past, are present in the present, and devised for the future. Hence the traditional formulation that museums work “for the generations to come”.

A social institution that is financed with the money of the taxpayer is, in most cases, obliged to social pragmatism. Modern societies have on the whole created museums that attribute to the past the values and judgements that primarily reflect their collective wishes, rather than giving an objective, useful image of this past. They offer self-justification instead of critical and usable introspection. It is not likely that any of the average museum visitors will sense, behind the majestic pile and the fascinating objects, a deceit – that of the useless and alien museum. Anyone will easily pillory you for belittling the serious scholarship and basic values on which the system reposes. Emphatic statements are still taken as evidence of non-scholarly discourse. And this is why scholarship and knowledge are marginalised, servants of the possessors of power. Heritage institutions have not yet been understood by those who work in them, and even less so by those who should be using them. It is impossible to say that the average museum of contemporary art is useless, but it should be said that it has become part of the elite circle of creators of art, instead of being a mediator, an interpreter, a facilitator and ultimately a means by which art is given back to our everyday life, and not sucked out of it in order to be just in museums

Social commitment

Let us suppose that in some community all the politicians are convinced myth-making nationalists (supposing that they are ever capable of being anything wholehearted). This kind of deviancy spreads intolerance, racism, xenophobia and produces ostracism, and enables all other kinds of perversion of the mind and the social system. Museums cannot obviate the inevitable downfall that such a social and moral degradation entails, but they can either abet this evil or do all they can to fight against it. Deriving their social autism from the maintained scholarliness and alleged objectivity, when they are best, such museums are silent. Qui tacet consentit – Silence gives consent. Heads are safest in the sand of scholarly isolation. A genuine ecomuseum is not a militant social activist of a quasi-socialist origin, but it is aware that it has betrayed the interests of its users if it does not by exhibition or some action speak out when the community is faced with avaricious manipulation, dilemmas and uninformedness. It thinks itself bound to offer some contribution to the truth, with some integrated information that gives the problem, if

nothing else, at least realistic dimensions and more thoroughly informs everyone who is interested in making decisions thereon.

Ecomuseums are not so virtuous nor are social forces so iniquitous that conflict of interest is part of the regular reality of the ecomuseum. But practice does show that only the ecomuseum and museums that think in this way really do have problems with the governors. Deciding to act in real time is not an empty museological exercise. The museum job will no longer be unattended by risk. The problems that beset contemporary society are so numerous and so urgent (with consequences that we most often describe with the terms irreversible, fatal, ultimate) that museums cannot allow themselves to be displaced in their backward-looking refuge. Since many ecomuseums have turned this into practice, the future of museums should be learned on their innovations. They are museums for *hic et nunc*, not just for now but also for here.

Adopting this approach, the ecomuseum more clearly than the other has responded to the call repeated by marketing and management in general to museums: define your product. Since this is a topic of its own, let us say that the ecomuseum has considered its product to be the practical wisdom deduced from the past (important for everyday life) or the qualities of identity that thanks to the action of the ecomuseum have remained alive. After this they are left only with the intention that the product should be useful and attractive, so that the users should value it the more. Knowledge, then, if well-chosen and used, is useful, and wisdom is usable and beneficial by definition. In brief, when museums, guided by this innovative stance of the ecomuseum, start to speak about the present and using the past, then they will exit from the crisis in which they are caught, in spite of their apparent successes.

Like every other cybernetically organised museum, an ecomuseum is part of the community in which it works, part of the *locus communis* where the identity it cares for is celebrated and mediated. As identity-central, as forum for debate and insight into the reality, as some kind of transposed "council of elders", such a museum can and should act as moderator for its community on its way through time and states of threat. Continuing with picturesque similes, we might easily state that such a museum with all its openness to everyday life, is a permanent warranty for individuality in the inflationary production of instant identities that globalisation has forced upon the world.

Ecomuseums are part of the community and are not in fact made for others outside it; these others are of course welcome but not part of the definition of the museum. A museum that is well and attractively made will always be well enough attended. Tourists are becoming much more demanding, particularly those from what is called cultural tourism or as it had better be called heritage tourism. They look for originals, not those (even if they are of superlative quality) that decorate the interior of splendid museum showcases, rather those that are still, if less grand, living their own original (even if inroads have been made into it) life context. They have had enough of the packaged and stereotyped fare that the tourist industry provides for their free-time spending. And so, particularly in the case of the ecomuseum, it would be a mistake to make the usual call that local administrations usually make on museums, that they should do something special to attract the tourists. They are not so devised, although high-quality tourism will always particularly value them.

With a little adjustment (in signals, captions and possibly with audio-guides) each museum that is good for local users can also be good for incomers. In dealing with the real problems of real

people in real time, the ecomuseum is a democratic means par excellence. This is a museum that is a centre of social transparency and decision-making – essential then in every democratic living. Such museums literally correspond to the marketing formulation that presumes that the formula for success is in the creation of a necessary and attractive product and in the effort to notify those for whom it is intended.

Conclusion

Idealisation is like an enthusiastic review: too simple and too easy to be true. The basic innovations of the ecomuseum mentioned here were not quick nor did they occur everywhere, nor in the complete number, even in those places where we might reasonably discuss an ecomuseum project. An ecomuseum is a processual value: least importance attaches to its physical substance (whether it is a matter of a building or a collection, although here there has to be a margin of acceptability) and most important is the attitude to the concept of the heritage and the role of that heritage in the lives of people who have set up the museum and who maintain it. An ecomuseum is a form of active social awareness, a mechanism for self-knowledge and self-regulations. Everything else is just there to serve these tasks. From this apparent imprecision come plenty of misunderstandings that have slowed down the progress of this manner of thinking. After three decades of existing, developing and proven relevance, after the influence that it has exerted everywhere (as colouring that can be applied to every, literally every, situation in the discipline), the ecomuseum is still an innovation. One semantic problem, an unlucky coincidence, has contributed to this slowness: the prefix *eco* that should have marked its essential difference from other museums has brought it too close to everything that once was or still is related to the environment in the sense of the living habitat. Hence the many confusions in the usage, with many still thinking that this is a museum that, if nothing else, is at least mainly to do with natural history. Probably, bearing this confusion in mind, such museums should be called “integral”¹ or perhaps “total”² museums, “community museums”³ or “society museums”⁴ or really “cybernetic museums”⁵. Some of these terms are the consequence of the mere need to have the name convey the essence of the innovation as well as possible, and yet only when they are collected in a single place like this do they well describe the innovation, and tell of the scope of the term.

The term *cybernetic* is not specific to the ecomuseum, but it does describe well the need of reformed social institutions to become an aware part of the governance system of contemporary society. A museum that is set up as such, which is run as an active developmental factor, which does not sit twiddling its thumbs in front of the betrayal of the average citizen by those who run the society – this is certainly a cybernetic museum, and perhaps also an ecomuseum. The term *ecomuseum*, in the strict sense, is concerned mainly with rural museums, but as we have seen, speaking in general, of museums limited to an integral interpretation of the identity of some

¹ The term often used by Rivière.

² Šola, Tomislav. “Towards the total museum”, doctoral dissertation, Ljubljana University, 1985.

³ Varine, Hugues de

⁴ *Musees de societe*”, a term often used in the last few decades in France to indicate all the museums that cultivate a clear awareness of their social responsibility.

⁵ Šola, Tomislav. *Essays on Museums and Their Theory – towards the cybernetic museum*. Museums Association of Finland, Helsinki, 1997.

defined community. This focus on quality of life of a given community necessarily makes every ecomuseum a cybernetic museum.

As a theoretical concept concretised in decennial practice, the ecomuseum is a radical innovation that is still changing the world of the heritage: for the profession by redefining the tasks, and for the users by redefining the product. A museum of synthesis in a time of synthesis is actually a logical consequence of an ordinary need. Museums do serve, but not themselves, or the profession, or scholarship, and least of all those who hand out the money. Money is a social good, however much the new right and economic liberalism think it created by individuals. The experience of the ecomuseum might help in having the heritage campaign⁶ in developing into a governing force of contemporary society. The heresy constituted by ecomuseums in traditional practice and its concomitant theory is revealed thus to be a revival precisely at the time when it is most needed.

⁶ Thinking here of all the regular and professional forms in which heritage institutions work.