Summary of the results of the doctoral thesis

NEW METHODS AND TOOLS FOR CREATING PERMANENT EXHIBITIONS IN OPEN AIR MUSEUMS

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The aim of the dissertation, the topic

My aim with writing the dissertation was to present how the methodology of open air museology had been renewed with the creation of the recently opened Northern Hungarian village regional unit (whose curatorial work was my responsibility) in the Hungarian Open Air Museum; to highlight the background of this reformation and to explain why the open air methodology needed reformation.

Some processes, phenomena which determine the present day museum discourse are to be mentioned at the beginning, as they influenced the creation of the regional unit as well. Consciously reflecting on these topics results in creating authentic, enjoyable exhibitions. The notion of antropologised museum is crucial as it basically changes the methods and circumstances of collecting objects, emphasising the complexity of object meanings, the importance of researching the relation between object and their surroundings, the necessity of enquiring after as much information as possible connected to the objects. Data are needed to be able to engross meanings and organise complex exhibitions. Matching the needs of visual society in these displays is a basic requirement; with the help of well-thought-out multimedia content new segments of society can become target audience. New museology calls for dialogue, focuses on the connection with the present and does not suggest the myth of unchangingness for the audience, constantly growing in number. Although more and more people visit museums, the level of classic knowledge has decreased and this results in a necessary change in the forms of mediating knowledge. In an experience-based institution the aim is to generate personal reflection in visitors and the discovery of the fact that knowledge is not a static but a dynamic process. Edutainment is a significant notion along with the idea of life-long learning.

Firstly methods of interpretation were important for me, as this was the most significant change in the institution’s new exhibition. This was an answer to a complex process, which is taking place nowadays in traditional and open air, Hungarian and foreign museums considering the habits and demands of visitors, the roles and responsibilities of museums. These methods of interpretation are not new in traditional museums, however, their application in open air exhibitions raises several issues, and I faced these problems on all levels of the preparation work.

After considering the issue of interpretation I thought over several work processes and realised that reformation was not only needed in the area of interpreting the exhibitions. Since the 1960s several factors of our work have changed: such as the principles, circumstances, methods and possibilities concerning the drawing of the concept, selecting and rebuilding a
house or ethnographic research in general. Which are the new methods? How can we exploit digital technique? What kind of sources can we use in connection with an interior, whose exhibition time is closer and closer to our present? What kind of solutions do we find in the open air museums of the world? Answering these questions is not easy; I based the dissertation on the experiences I learnt from the case study, which is the Hungarian Open Air Museum’s Northern Hungarian Village regional unit. That is why; apart from the abovementioned I reviewed the issues of collecting, the new characteristics of creating interiors, the renewal of communication methods and the reformation of necessary documentation. I hope that such a summary is useful, because in open air museology we do not even have the handbook of the original methods.

Thus I broadened the extensive research, carried out for the concrete exhibition with information from museological literature, foreign volumes and essays so that I can present my experiences in context.

In the first chapter the review of the starting point was needed, so besides the history of open air museums, the circumstances of the foundation of Hungarian institutions and the creation and history of the Open Air Museum are represented. In the chapter about the theoretical background I also designated the places of research. It is significant to note, that this issue can be interpreted at two levels, as apart from the research points of the regional unit, the locations where I informed about methodological questions, problems and solutions (conferences and travels in Hungary and abroad), are also listed here. Concerning research locations, the most significant fact is that the Northern Hungarian village is the first exhibition unit where we connected the presentation of former Hungarian territories beyond the present-day border to the existing concept, realising this idea with the help of the small chapel from Kisgömöri and the dwelling house from Nemesradnót. The period of research means not only the exhibition times but the amount of time spent with methodological and ethnographical research. In the subchapter about research history, I listed the most important, Hungarian and foreign literature, dealing with open air museums and indoor exhibitions.

It is essential to review the history of the Northern Hungarian Village regional unit, to be able to understand the appointed problems, changes and reforms. Apart form the alterations of settlement patterns I also mentioned the history of the buildings on the yards: manor (granary and servants’ quarters), cave dwellings (Szomolya and Noszvaj), common yard (dwellings from Karancskeszi, Márianosztra and Domaháza villages), house from Novaj, gentry yard, barn enclosure, edifices from Perkupa, dwellings from Erdőhorváti (Hatház and Egres Street) and the buildings on the last yard with a dwelling from Filkeháza. It was
essential to analyze the sacred edifices of the museum village: the small chapel from Kisdömőri, the roadside Crucifix from Regéc and the belfry from Debercsény; complemented with thoughts on sacred places and the methodological questions of relocating, copying or rebuilding sacred monuments. The description is completed by the presentation of smaller objects such as the hut of the trough maker, the cellars in the vineyard (Emőd, Diósjenő, Magyarnándor) and the history of those elements which had been omitted, e. g. the cemetery or the objects of the forest.

I reflected on theoretical issues such as the difficulties and possibilities of selecting outbuildings, wells and fences or the more general problem of choosing a house in the 21st century for exhibition purposes. Compared to the earlier period, namely, the foundation of 1967 the professionals working in the institution nowadays carry out research in completely different circumstances, with modern equipment, often restricted by the possibilities of a tender, looking for houses in a totally changed village with a very complex representational aim in mind. However, lots of changes occurred in the concept and we also have buildings which had to be left out. It is important to list these, as it reflects some methodological problems and makes it possible to attach them to other exhibition units after careful research. Due to the changes in architecture, the smaller number of vernacular buildings appropriate for museum representation and fitting the strict concepts, the role of reconstructions and copies is emphasised and the question of authenticity is raised. There are parallel examples abroad, and the topic of reconstruction was also touched upon by Hungarian professionals; it is essential to reflect upon these issues.

The methods and sources of ethnographical research have also changed a lot in the past years. Exploiting archival sources and ecclesiastical documents is still important. The role of statistics, museum archives and specialised literature in the research is evident and the same is true for ethnographical interview. In connection with the latter one must bear in mind that the memory of today’s interviewee reaches only as far as the period between the two world wars. In the case of the exhibition I made “traditional” interviews and also contacted students and members of local pensioners’ club. By expanding the exhibition time towards the present I could gain information from examining old photos, postcards and illustrations, newspapers or catalogues from the age. The local in situ preserved monuments with museum interior can also be seen as sources; the object-focused collecting was also assisted by information about collections on the web. Professionals working in the area and local aidants also contributed to the research work. I carried out research at the National Office of Cultural Heritage. To be able to understand settlement patterns and settlement history different kinds
of maps and military surveys can be used, thus they constitute an important source of information. During the ethnographic research, we have shot several films (with the aim of documentation and interpretation), however, valuable information can also be gathered from ethnographic films, advertisements, propaganda films.

I also analyzed the different aspects of collecting objects for the museum, examining the collection of objects, which had been purchased for the Northern Hungarian Village in the past. In open air museology special principles apply for collecting objects, these I totally took into consideration during my work. Nevertheless, there are factors to be considered in this area, such as the attention we must pay to objects, belonging to folk customs. As parts of folklore appear more and more often in interiors, appropriate objects are needed for the representation, this leads to object-based folklore research. Another difficulty is to acquire everyday clothes and exhibit them in the buildings. I also paid attention to stories, the importance of storytelling and the research of stories can be found in the chapter. An interesting way of acquisition is the question of donations, which can come from intellectuals, museums, or private collections. There are lots of ethnographical objects which can be collected with difficulty and we cannot let the remaining objects formulate the ethnographic concept. Apart from the applied traditional collecting methods, I also used new ones: such as throwaways, teletext etc. in the given settlement. I collected from antique dealers, antique markets, auction houses and websites. In connection with collecting lots of factors turn up, e. g. authenticity, group of objects, the demands of local collections, the age of objects, the question of folk applied art, the significance of team work with restorers, the defining of prices, collecting determined by object quality, reconstructions, copies, museum loans, objects from Hungarian territories beyond the border, the importance of object security.

After analysing ethnographic research work, the issue of creating interiors follows complemented with the presentation of the region’s furniture centres, object types and customs of interior furnishing. The most significant part is the setting of the exhibition time. Since the preparation for the Upland Market Town regional unit, the method of modelling the interiors beforehand in a huge store has been emphasised (It takes place in the Ethnographical Study Collection, where folding screens provide the walls of the dwelling; the interior is created long before it is transported into the actual house, which makes the professional discussion more efficient and the moving easier.) The topic of specific and general is elaborated in this chapter.

The most crucial part of the dissertation is about interpretation and the utilization of the exhibition unit. For institutions in Hungary and abroad reform is more and more
important. Why do we need these new presentation techniques? Answers can be boredom, arising in the “outsider”, namely the visitor after encountering similar interiors, one after the other; the demand for representing varied topics, or the situation of museums nowadays, necessitating openness and active dialogue between visitor and museum. It is crucial to reflect upon the dissimilarities between historic and museum reality, it is important to highlight the educational function of interiors, which can be complemented with tools of interpretation; the low number of guards, which hinders information flow and finally the desire to increase the number of visitors, with the help of an interactive, enjoyable exhibitions. Applying different methods of interpretation must be based on visitor survey; their planning must be the result of teamwork, paying attention to the topics designated by the curator, paired with the most appropriate interpretation technique, in the most interactive way.

The interiors of the Northern Hungarian Village exhibition constitute the case study, after their short description I also present the interpretation techniques in general: the permanent exhibition, situation, alternative interior, indoor exhibitions (Methodological Exhibition, Photo Gallery, Cinema, “We are Alone” temporary indoor exhibition, Memory Room, granary, stable from Imola), living museum (interpreting person, living interpretation, museum theatre), the application of multimedia and other technical equipment. Other possible methods of interpretations are audio materials, films, hands on objects, publications, boards, inscriptions, pageants, mini-exhibitions, artificial food. Detailed interiors help the interpretation, smells, lighting or dummies (to enhance the imagined presence of people) can also have the same aim. Programs, museum education events, guides, thematic guides also strengthen interpretation. Naturally all these tools of interpretation raise the methodological considerations in connection with authentic building structure, duration and route of visit, museum visit of handicapped people.

Following the topic of interpretation I analyse the different aspects of communication; as before, we have applied traditional and new methods, latter were suggested both by the curator of the exhibition and the agency responsible for the exhibition’s communication. For this, we had to know precisely what aim we try to achieve, with which audience using what kind of strategy. As the curator of the regional unit I applied 3D video, computer game and banners besides the previously traditional essay-writing, lecture delivering and socializing with the mayors and the community of a settlement. The PR Agency suggested blog-writing, the tree of waiting and specialised guided tours besides the already known media campaign, internet promotion, participation in bigger exhibitions, open air advertisements, direct mail, throwaway, promotion, opening ceremony and the exploitation of the museum shop.
After this, the broadening of the exhibition documentation occurred to me: the importance of writing the history of the regional unit and its concept, the drafting of the new elements in the architectural and interior furnishing plans, creating an interpretation plan, compose a plan for future publications, write a selected bibliography, finally draw a detailed thematic plan and exhibition script for indoor exhibitions based on principles from foreign literature, as there are no guidelines in Hungarian papers. A time-table helps team work; conceptual designs are the responsibility of the exhibition designers. Ethnobotanic plans are significant and I have to mention architectural plans (survey, dismantling, plan for rebuilding) and post-documentation of the realised exhibition.

Reviewing all these aspects provides a complex picture about the circumstances of exhibition planning and realisation, the possible problems and the potential ways of reform. Applying methods of interpretation is a good solution, proved by the fact that the Northern Hungarian Village exhibition unit received the “Exhibition of the Year” title in 2010.

**Applied methods**

The methods, applied during the preparation, rebuilding and exhibition construction works of the Northern Hungarian Village regional unit, being the case study of the dissertation are analysed in separate chapters in the dissertation concerning ethnographical research and collecting of objects. During the years of preparation I carried out research work for several years in Nógrád, Heves and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Counties, spending 170 days with field work between 2004 and 2009. I focused on building selection and ethnographic research by making interviews with local inhabitants in the chosen settlements concerning folk architecture, interior furnishings and folk customs, characteristic in the given village, planned to be represented in the Hungarian Open Air Museum. Apart from getting to know the relevant selection of bibliography, I collected data about the regional unit from local and county archives and museum archives. I searched ecclesiastical documents for data about settlements and families and prepared films with the purpose of documentation and interpretation (with the help of Balázs Hugyecsek and Péter Rizmayer) in those villages where we found a building for relocation. I exploited maps, old photos, postcards, illustrations and catalogues of the age for information. I received help from ethnographers of the region and inhabitants of the villages; I studied local in situ and other museums and information on relevant websites.

I collected objects using traditional museum methods, focusing on the socio-economic status and the members of the represented family on the basis of genealogy, in the settlement
or in its proximity. I also exploited the methods of loudspeakers, throwaways and teletext; I contacted antique dealers and antique markets of the region, and studied objects for sale in different internet websites. Between 2004 and 2010 I collected 5900 objects, from which 2200 were placed in the exhibition.

Methodological questions are mainly based on the knowledge of specialised bibliography, on the professional experiences of conferences and study tours.

The listing of results

In the Northern Hungarian Village regional unit I used several interactive tools and methods of interpretation. The application of these in Hungarian open air museums is not widespread; however some elements have already appeared in foreign institutions. By using those visitors can understand the interiors, their message and meanings or the presented situations easier; the museum visit becomes more playful and enjoyable. This results in a stronger connection with the exhibition and the fact that visitors remember the visit more. This is useful, as the exhibition time nears to the present, more varied topics appear in the interiors and issues which are closer to the visitors. It may mean information visitors can even use at home, that is why it is important to remember them, thus the process strengthens sustainable development. The pleasurable visit may motivate people in a repeated visit. The interpretation techniques make it possible to represent a wider selection of elements of folk culture, providing a more colourful and complex picture about peasant life.

The research, necessary for the exhibition and the listing and analysing of questions of methodological nature arising during the realisation of the exhibition can be a lesson for those, responsible for future projects in the Hungarian Open Air Museum. The collection and analysis of interpretation methods can serve as starting point for in situ preserved monuments or for curators, working with interiors in the confines of indoor exhibitions.

Moreover, the summary of methods, characteristic in open air museums can be useful for those interested in open air museology, as there is no such work in Hungarian about the devices and sources applied during the realisation of such exhibitions.

Publications connected to the topic of the dissertation

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