

■ You are lucky, the farmer has just returned!

The role of the open-air museum in interpreting life of individuals as opposed to the history of architecture *

15

Adriaan de Jong

Netherlands Open-Air Museum, Arnhem

Résumé

Les musées de plein-air conservent des édifices sans leurs habitants. Pourtant, même si l'architecture reste l'élément prédominant, ces musées d'ethnologie considèrent toujours les maisons comme des souvenirs de leurs occupants. Actuellement, la recherche ethnologique ne se fonde plus sur l'objet mais se tourne essentiellement vers l'être humain. Les visiteurs eux-mêmes privilégient l'histoire aux faits. Les musées de plein-air doivent réagir et prendre en compte ces tendances et ces changements d'intérêt. Pour satisfaire ces besoins, l'analyse muséographique, le récit à la première personne et la participation du visiteur s'avèrent efficaces. Cependant, gardons-nous d'une utilisation excessive de ces moyens, qui pourraient transformer la collection en simple décor tandis que les activités deviendraient l'essentiel.

Interpreting the life of the people who lived in the houses belonging to open-air museums is quite a job. The museum where I work contains about eighty historical buildings, but of course we don't possess any inhabitants from the past! All of them are dead and I missed the opportunity of asking them about their lives, as I was not yet born when they were alive. I can show you their cupboard beds, but I don't know if they slept well or if they snored like me. I can show you their window-shutters, but I don't know if they found them as pretty as I do. I can show you the construction of their farmhouses, but I don't know if they were proud of them and looked every evening with a great feeling of satisfaction at the timber framing and the wattle and daub. Why then should we try to interpret the life of past occupants rather than the architecture? Why should we make our task so difficult when we possess so many beautiful houses to look at?

First of all it is necessary to remember that ethnological open-air museums have never seen houses solely as elements of the history of architecture. They have always seen them as records of their occupants as well. This was true for the ethnological villages at universal exhibitions as well for the first open-air museums like Skansen in Stockholm¹. To show houses with their furniture and sometimes with attendants in national costume meant an ethnological approach and not a purely architectural one. In the 1960s, the director of the Netherlands Open-Air Museum, Professor A. J. Bernet Kempers, had already made a study titled *Who lived in our buildings?* He tried to give the buildings their own story in a period when the emphasis was more to create in our museum a typology of farmhouses rather than individual buildings².

From the beginning the role of open-air museums has also differed from that of organizations involved in the preservation of monuments, where the building itself comes first and foremost. These organizations are very content to save a farmhouse by getting a commuter as its occupant, whereas an open-air museum wants to transfer the farmhouse as a farmhouse, and wants to exhibit it as if the farmer had just gone out to work in the fields. Nevertheless there are good reasons for dealing with this subject now. Although most ethnological open-air museums will agree that houses are records of their occupants, they may differ in their emphasis. Very roughly speaking, one might say there are two approaches. In the first, the building tradition is the starting point. In the second, living and working in the house is the starting point. One could say that the first approach is orientated towards the building of houses, and the second to their use. In recent years we have seen the latter approach gaining ground.

I will now explain why in ethnological open-air museums, interpreting the life of former occupants deserves more attention than giving lessons in beams and frames. I will then treat the question of *how* we can interpret the life of former occupants of our buildings. I will finish with the question of *the extent to which* the interpretation of life is desirable. One further remark: this article is about ethnological open-air museums, the vast majority of open-air museums. A few open-air museums, like the Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings (England), focus on the development of building constructions. They have never had an ethnological background, but are dealing with architecture as such. I think these museums have very good reasons for sticking to architecture and its history.

WHY INTERPRET LIFE RATHER THAN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE?

Ethnological research

First of all we have to look at the developments in ethnological research. The Dutch ethnologist Gerard Rooijakkers notes that ethnologists are becoming more and more interested in the man behind the objects. He compares this change to the archaeologists whose interest shifted from bones and potsherds to the people who used them. Modern ethnological research is not interested in objects as such, but in the specific role they play in the behaviour of people. In order to trace the meaning of objects it is essential to try to reconstruct the social, economic, religious and cultural contexts in which they functioned³.

This is not only a shift from an object-orientated to a man-orientated approach, it is also a shift from the question of how the object was made or produced to the question of how the object was used. Studying how an object is made and by whom, comes much closer to the art historian's or the technician's point of view. Early ethnologists were rather familiar with this approach, and objects that were beautifully made were considered as folk art. Nowadays ethnology has freed itself from these aesthetic values to leave them for art historians. Ethnologists give a larger place to the people who used the objects and to the meaning they gave to the objects. For instance, it is important to know their function for what Bourdieu calls the "distinction sociale" (social distinction) or to know their symbolic meaning. Were they representative of a special group, did they give the user a feeling of social standing?

Of course the study of vernacular architecture focuses very much on building traditions, construction of beams, and types of houses. Yet in this field too the ethnological aspect is gaining ground. The Netherlands Institute for Historical Farm Research, for instance, is paying more and more attention to the multidisciplinary research of farm houses. This includes the research of the former occupants and the way they lived in the farmhouse⁴. Former occupants have literally left plenty of traces in the building, like, for instance, worn-out floors, which give us information about their customs.

The changing interest of visitors

A second reason why more attention is being paid to the occupants of the houses than to building construction is the changing interest among visitors. A recent survey by Sonja Schurink of how different categories of visitors use and experience the Netherlands Open-Air Museum gives a lot of information about this. Respondents were

asked to write down which objects they had visited and in what order, how much time they spent at those objects and how they valued them. Personal interviews were also held with visitors to gain an insight into how they personally experienced the museum. From this survey we know more about what appeals to visitors and why certain objects are visited more frequently than others⁵.

Liveliness and variation are very much appreciated by visitors. The objects in a house where there are museum staff to give demonstrations or just talk to visitors about how people lived, are very popular. The farmhouses with a passive presentation are considered to be too alike. As one of the interviewed expressed it: *When you have seen one of them, you have seen six, because they are all the same*. A woman explained she liked a building that had a special story linked to it⁶. One of the conclusions of this survey is that visitors not only want to know how things work, but also the story behind the facts. When people give meaning to what they see in the Open-Air Museum, mostly they refer to their own memories, to the much more sober life in the past, or to other conditions of life and work. One could conclude that many visitors expect the museum to provide a lot of information about life in the past. A pure history of building constructions would leave many of their questions unanswered.

Role of the museum

A museum that wants to play a role in today's society cannot deny tendencies in the study of ethnology or the shifting interest on behalf of the public. We are becoming more and more aware that museums are not only institutes for collecting and researching but have a much more complex social function. They are intermediaries between the past and today's public. This means that the presentation has to take into account who the visitors are, what they are doing during their visit, and what they take away from their visit. The role of objects in today's ethnological museums is changing considerably. In the past these museums tried to collect as many varieties of objects as they could. They tried to classify them and to make typologies. Today's ethnological museums no longer make objects or buildings the starting points of their exhibitions. As the director of the Netherlands Open-Air Museum, Jan Vaessen, puts it: *they will primarily concentrate on the question of what the story they actually want to tell people is, and then reflect on how objects can be used as a means to tell the story*⁷. There is no reason to look at museum buildings in a different way. This museological change can be compared with the development of zoos: in the past they

tried to collect as many varieties of animals as possible, now many of them have a limited selection. However, they try to reconstruct as much as possible of the original biotope to show the behaviour of groups of animals.

HOW TO INTERPRET LIFE OF INDIVIDUALS

Human presence

As with many themes on life, if we do not possess the objects we have to revert to what is called by the French Canadian museologist Raymond Montpetit "la muséographie analogique" (analogical museography). This concerns the museographical devices which, as part of an exhibit, create images that refer to reality such as dioramas, scenes, and period rooms. Interiors, landscapes and streetscapes in open-air museums belong to this analogical museography⁸. They can bring the life of people in the past closer to us, and can function very well to give a context to the authentic objects from the past. The use of these elements indicates the will to reach ordinary people, because many things are then made clear to them. In a certain way you could interpret the use of analogical methods as a democratic approach to the public, because it demonstrates the willingness to bring the widest possible audience into the museum.

There are many varieties of methods to express human presence in our open-air museums⁹. Hazelius, the founder of Skansen, engaged living persons in national costume as attendants. Scenes with life-sized figures in costume in the interiors of the buildings were, and still are, very popular too. They are a good example of the use of analogical museography. It is also possible to create an illusion of human presence simply through clever details in the interior, which give the visitor the idea that the occupants have just left the room. This method now prevails in most European open-air museums. I found an excellent example in Nordiska Museet: not a table laid before dinner but a table as it looks after dinner.

First-person interpretation and visitor participation

In the 1970s some open-air museums in the USA started to employ actors to play the roles of the former inhabitants of the buildings. A number of open-air museums in Europe have also introduced this way of interpreting, for instance the Zuiderzeemuseum in the Netherlands. This manner of presentation, called "first-person interpretation", because the actors are speaking in the first-person, is a communication tech-

nique which tries to present the historical context as a whole, including human beings themselves. To obtain this interpretation not only material culture has to be investigated, but also the historical sources giving information about the behaviour, language, thoughts and religion of the people from the period presented.

A good example of first-person interpretation is Plimoth Plantation in Plymouth (Massachusetts), a reconstruction of the first settlement of a group of English puritans just as it was supposed to look in 1627. Supervised by the archaeologist James Deetz and the historian David Freeman, first-person interpretation has been set up there since 1978 in a particularly professional way¹⁰. Diaries of the inhabitants in the 17th century form the basis for the performance of the actors and are carefully studied by historians to that end. In nearly every building there are actors who play the role of the inhabitants in 1627. This means persons who really lived at Plymouth in that year in that building. In their contacts with the visitors the actors can say a lot about the religious motives that made the puritans leave England to build a new life in America. In this way actors can have an important function in an open-air museum when the museum wants to involve the life of the people who lived in the buildings in its presentation. In so far as it is possible to find out from historical sources how people behaved, what they thought, what their lifestyle was and how it differed from ours, this can be made clear to visitors in a direct conversation. First-person interpretation however is not absolutely undisputed. In Plimoth Plantation there are a number of favourable conditions, such as the availability of relevant sources, which are often lacking elsewhere. This way of presenting the past becomes questionable when it is based more on fantasy than on historical material. This may happen when a museum chooses first-person interpretation without making sure that the essential information is available. Another favourable condition in Plimoth is the budget that allows for professional actors who are able to resist the inclination to romanticize the past.

A further step is to make the visitors themselves act. This is what we see in many programmes for children, where they take part in role playing, being dressed up in old-fashioned clothes. Sometimes museums construct farmhouses on a small scale specially for children. In other museums visitors are allowed to play musical instruments or can learn something from the interpreters. These activities by the public are usually called "visitor participation". In Williamsburg (USA), actors play the role of judges at the



Plimoth Plantation, Massachusetts, USA; first person interpretation.

performance of a trial at the court of justice. The roles of the complaining party and the accused are played by volunteers from among the visitors, who get a piece of paper with the text they have to read. In this way the court of justice becomes more than an interesting piece of architecture.

The Netherlands Open-Air Museum

At Arnhem, we are trying to introduce a human presence more and more into our buildings. We agree with the ethnological point of view that human behaviour has to be given more emphasis. This means a transition from a passive presentation to a much more active presentation. The traditional way of presentation shows the houses as if their occupants had just left. Now we want to say the opposite to the visitor: *You are lucky, the farmer has just returned, he is home!*

We decided to try other methods than first-person interpretation. One of the main reasons we don't work with this method is that our museum is one of the oldest in Europe and is therefore a so-called "park type" and not a "village type" open-air museum. Because we have collected buildings from all over the Netherlands and from different periods, it is difficult to build up a living village community like Plimoth. Neighbours representing different periods and regions would be rather confusing. A second reason is that we do not possess as perfect an historical source for the occupants of our houses as the diaries at Plimoth. Besides, we believe that third-person interpretation is as good as first-person interpretation, because it also has a broad range of opportunities for giving information and

explaining the life of former occupants. In order to engage more staff for third-person interpretation we decided to convert a number of attendants into interpreters who are trained to receive visitors and to converse with them. In some cases they also have the function of evoking visitor participation, for instance in our historic laundry or in the ancient village school. Moreover, we have started using life-sized figures. Not, of course, the old fashioned figures used at the end of the 19th century, but figures with much more natural attitudes like those you can see more especially in Britain. The first time we used figures was in the renewed presentation of our brewery.

This year the museum started a second presentation with figures. In one of our farmhouses we like to show a special tradition from the village of Staphorst where the house comes from. It is about the nocturnal visit to the farmer's daughter by her boyfriend before there was any question of marriage. This tradition is rather common in rural districts, but the farmhouses in this village had a special small room for it, and the lover was supposed to enter unnoticed through the window of this room. We now present the living room of the farmhouse by night, when the family is asleep in the cupboard beds. The third-person interpreter brings the visitors in small groups into the room and explains the traditional visit of the boyfriend and the meaning of it in rural society. Then he opens the door of the small room and the visitors are able to see the scene of the young man just entering through the window, while the girl is expecting him. I can assure you that the task of

our interpreter has become much more exciting than explaining the roof construction of the farmhouse!

A third way, apart from introducing interpreters and life-sized figures, is to appeal to the visitor's broader range of perception. Until now a museum visit has been a visual discovery. Touching the objects has been forbidden and the farmhouses have smelt like museum objects rather than farmhouses. Sounds and smells, like the suffocating smoke in the farmhouses without a chimney, are completely missing. In our laundry, you can now smell the soap. It is clear that with objects from a more recent past, sounds and images can be sufficiently well recorded by advanced recording techniques. It should be possible to present houses from the 1960s onwards with a lot of sounds as long as the curator does not forget to make a tape recording together with the surveyor's drawing. Are we on the right track by stressing the life of the occupants rather than the construction and typology of houses? Is there not a danger of the museum collection becoming merely a decor, and the activities the essential part? I don't believe in fundamentalist and extreme solutions. I think that in today's society, paying more attention to the life of individuals is the right way forward from an ethnological point of view as well as from the visitors' point of view. However, I "only" think it is the right way if we consider it as a means of placing an emphasis, not if we think the other approach is completely wrong and that every house should be resounding with re-enactment activities.

I enjoyed the first-person interpretation of Plimoth Plantation, and I enjoyed the visitor participation in Williamsburg, but there is a small and quiet open-air museum in Louisiana (USA), which impressed me more. This museum, belonging to Louisiana State University, is one of the finest open-air museums I have ever visited. It is difficult to find because most guidebooks protect tourists from being confronted with the black pages of American history. If you succeed in finding the museum in the middle of the fields of the deep south of the United States, it will show you a settlement of authentic slave cabins, the overseer's house, a sick house, a schoolhouse and a church of former slaves working at the plantations circa 1835¹¹. Barren except for a bed, a few primitive chairs, a fireplace, and some worn cooking tools, the interiors of the slave quarters deeply impressed me. In the quiet morning they inspired me to fill them in with my own memory of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, read to me when I was a child. It was an emotional moment. Thank God there was not a programme, with at 10 o'clock a grand re-

enactment of a slave-market, at 11 o'clock a sensational performance of a cruel slave-driver and at 12 o'clock the most depressing return of the fatigued slaves from the fields. We are lucky when the farmer in our open-air museums returns to tell us about his life, but sometimes his silent material heritage may be much more affecting. ■

* Lecture held at the Baltic conference of the Association of European Open-Air Museums, 25 August - 1 September 1997. It will also be published in the Reports of The Association of European Open-Air Museums

1 Zippelius, A., "Der Mensch als lebendes Exponat", Jeggle, U., Korff, G., Scharfe, M. and Warneken, B. J. (ed.), *Volkskultur in der Moderne. Probleme und Perspektiven empirischer Kulturforschung*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1986, pp. 410-429, spec. pp. 416-424.

2 Bernet Kempers, A. J., "Wie hebben in onze gebouwen gewoond", *Bijdragen & Mededelingen van Het Nederlands Openluchtmuseum*, 31, 2, 1968, pp. 28-56. Bernet Kempers, A. J., "Nogmaals onze gebouwen en hun bewoners", *Bijdragen & Mededelingen van Het Nederlands Openluchtmuseum* 32, 1, 1969, pp. 14-21.

3 Rooijackers, G. W. J., "Mensen en dingen. Beschouwingen over materiële volkscultuur", Mooij, C. De, and Weijer, R. van de (ed.), *Rijke oogst van schrale grond. Een overzicht van de Zuidnederlandse materiële volkscultuur ca. 1700-1900*, Zwolle, 1991, pp. 8-21, spec. p. 8.

4 Rooijackers, G. W. J., "De software van het wonen. De arrangementen van anachronistische tijdgenote", *Jaarverslag Stichting Historisch Boerderij-onderzoek 1993*, Arnhem, Stichting Historisch Boerderij-onderzoek, 1994, pp. 54-66.

5 Schurink, S., "Een dagje terug in de tijd", *Jaarboek Nederlands Openluchtmuseum 1997*, Arnhem, 1997, pp. 152-185, spec. p. 159, (English summary pp. 512-513).

6 Schurink, S., "Een dagje terug in de tijd", *Jaarboek Nederlands Openluchtmuseum 1997*, Arnhem, 1997, pp. 165-165, (English summary pp. 512-513).

7 Vaessen, J. A. M. F., "Over context", *Jaarboek Nederlands Openluchtmuseum 1996*, Arnhem, 1996, pp. 10-20, spec. P. 22, (English summary p. 524).

8 Montpetit, R., « Une logique d'exposition populaire : les images de la muséographie analogique », Schiele, B. (ed.), *Les dioramas*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1996; *Publics et Musées*, 9, January-June 1996, pp. 55-103, spec. p. 58, (English summary p. 103).

9 Jong, A. A. M. de, "Voorwerp of voorstelling? Een historisch dilemma van openluchtmuse", *Jaarboek Nederlands Openluchtmuseum 1995*, Arnhem, 1995, pp. 58-70, (English summary p. 272).

10 Warren, L. and Piatt, M., "Living-History Museums", Warren, L., Rosenzweig, R. (Ed.), *History Museums in the United States. A Critical Assessment*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1989, pp. 64-97, spec. pp. 87-89.

11 *The LSU Rural Life Museum*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1993.