On the Special Preconditions for Open Air Museums in Times of the Sustainability Agenda*.

I presupposti speciali per i Musei all'aperto in tempi dell'Agenda per la sostenibilità.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Mi piacciono i musei e soprattutto i musei all'aperto. Questo interesse è legato alla mia esperienza lavorativa che per vari anni mi ha visto operare in un museo del genere. Spesso ripenso alle soddisfazioni e a quanto ho potuto apprendere grazie a questa esperienza, alle potenzialità del museo all'aperto nonostante possa apparire più difficile – o meno possibile – da realizzare rispetto ai tradizionali musei, indipendentemente dal fatto che si tratti di musei d'arte, storia culturale, archeologia, tecnologia o scienza. Ovviamente, tutti i musei hanno le loro caratteristiche e potenzialità, ma per i musei all'aperto i presupposti sono molto speciali. È stato un grande momento della mia vita professionale: ro vicino a credere che avremmo potuto cambiare il mondo e la squadra con cui stavo lavorando poteva "camminare sull'acqua"! E' tuttavia con il massimo rispetto e ammirazione per i musei a cielo aperto, che oggi mi rendo conto che forse ero un po' ingenuo, solo un po'. Forse, c'è una passione che accomuna coloro che hanno esperienza di musei a cielo aperto. Credo sia necessario, però, collocare la fascinazione che sicuramente possono avere in prospettiva più ampia e, quindi ,anche in una prospettiva critica. Pertanto, il contributo intende affrontare alcune caratteristiche, anche a lungo termine, legate allo sviluppo dei musei all'aperto e come queste in qualche modo si colleghino a un più ampio sviluppo di politica museale.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

I like museums and I am especially fund of open-air museums. I can say with certainty, that this love is work-life related as a result of my years working in such a museum. I often look back on the many happy days when I learned so much from the open-air museum about possibilities and potentials which are much harder – or not possible at all – to realise in indoor museums – regardless of it is museums of art, cultural history, archaeology, technology, or science. Of course, other museums have their special preconditions and potential, but it is clear to me that the preconditions in open-air museums are very special. It was a great time, and the memories are my treasures. The best days I was close to believe that we could change the world and the team I was working with could walk on water. It is with the greatest respect and admiration for open-air museums that I today realise that maybe I was a little naïve – just a little. Maybe, there is a tendency of this which apply to all of us with work experience in open air museums. Being serious I think it is necessary to place our fascination of the open-air museums in longer perspective and thereby also in a critical perspective. Therefore, I would like in the following to look closer on some characteristics in the long-term trends in museum development and how that somehow fits in to a broader political development.

The power of the open-air museum

Let us revisit the beginning of the first era of open-air museums. At the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century many countries in Europe experienced in

daily life the consequences of industrialisation, automatization, and urbanisation. At the same time the social and economic development was faster than the political development. The mass movements were slowly organising themselves in associations, unions, and political parties but still without major political influence. The masses were moving within the countries from rural landscapes to urban life in the towns. Many were bewildered as they experienced to feel rootless. Thousands of these people chose emigration out of Europe.

The open-air museums were an expansion of the experience made not least by the big panoramas in many major cities. It was a success in the capacity to reach enormous crowds of people (1).

At that time the invention of open-air museums was very appropriate. They presented narratives in the atmosphere of arts and crafts, rural roots, and nationalism. The work methodology of the museums proved to be a recipe for success. We know little about visitor numbers in museums in general in older times, but my impression from newspapers at the time, is that the visitor numbers were very high in the first generation of open-air museums. When the first wave was over the very high visitor numbers was over. The need was not acute, and the role of the open-air museums changed in many cases to focus more on the academic aspects on the cost of the popular. That may not have been the case in all open-air museums but in many this was the reality from the 1930ies to the 1970ies. The acute need for the open-air museums ended when the first mission was accomplished. The situation had changed after the end of the Great War – the First World War – and the political, economic, and social situation had changed dramatically and with a relatively swift in Europe. Emperors, kings, and other princes were out or had lost political power. Election rights were broadened, and parliamentarian democracies were strengthened across Europe. This happened in close partnership with the weakening of private capital influence over the state and with a growth of public authority under democratic control. In some countries the changes came sooner and in others a little later, and in some fascism and communism interrupted the democratic progress.

There were many major changes in the 20th century and there were many complexed processes which were necessary for bringing about the great changes. One such process was the creation of narratives in which people could relate and a key player for that in parts of Europe were the open-air museums. There have been many attempts to answer the question why open-air museums became such a smart and efficient tool for the new popular narrative. Here, I will just mention how the open-air museums as full-scale three-dimensional structures with a claimed authenticity provide experiences which have few demands on preconditional competences from the visitor. As has been said, the open-air museums tell ordinary stories about ordinary people of the past for ordinary people of today (). It is actually that simple.

Creating a sense of belonging through sharing narratives which visitors could relate to was what open-air museums were about in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century.

If we look critically on these narratives, we can see some characteristics which I believe are shared by most of the open-air museums in Europe.

The first such characteristic is the connection to the place in which the museum operates. This fosters a tendency – in some cases a strong such one – to stimulate national or regional pride almost to the sense of chauvinism. The pioneers who took initiative to the creation of the open-air museums are very often to blame here. Their drive to establish the museums were exactly the pride of their region or country parred with the recognition of the change which they experienced.

The second characteristic is the tendency to romanticise the past as a side effect of the necessary simplification of things for creating a story which can be visualised in the museum. This is a side effect which is difficult to neutralise because a very detailed story telling most often make the point the museum want to tell disappear altogether.

The third characteristic I will mention here is the temptation to show and tell stories which provide visitors with a conviction that things in general are developing from primitive to more advanced, from worse to better, and that the society – being a country or mankind as such – has been making progress all the time until now and therefore can be expected to continue to advance and to make progress.

These characteristics may be more or less clearly visible in individual open-air museums, but I am convinced that they are there. I am also convinced that these characteristics have been important for the success of the museums to reach many people, to be tools in the socio-political development, and as a result of success of course also to attract funding. Museums of all kinds are naturally players in the time they act. And of course, they arrange their choices of what is important, their interpretation of available sources, and their story telling according to what the prevailing needs at any time may be. If the museums don't, they will not be successful, and the open-air museums are successful, so of course their managers and staff are aware of the mentioned mechanisms.

My concern and primary question here is however if such characteristics with potential support for nationalism, romanticism as methodology and progressive determinism for humanity will be particularly smart or desirable for open-air museums in the 21st century.

The New Wave of things and the challenge for Open-Air Museums

The 21st century is so far very different from what the world was like when the first generations of open-air museums were established.

The world has become much smaller as it meets challenges such as climate and environmental crisis, growing migration, and threats towards democracy. The challenges in one place are related clearly to challenges in other places. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals can be seen as an illustration of how challenges as different as climate, democracy, and migration are interlinked and global.

Museums are still trusted by our visitors. Different studies have shown that people place museums on the same top level of confidence as medical doctors and natural scientists. At the other end of the scale, we find journalists, lawyers, and real estate agents. In the middle of the scale people place for example schoolteachers. The trust of the public in museums is remarkable and, in my view, probably our finest and most precious asset. It has been said many times that our successes in museums are based on solid knowledge which we make accessible and understandable, and our fear has been that one single

failure based on false knowledge could bring immense damage to our reputation. I belong to the crowd which still believe that is so.

The open-air museums have been successful in adjusting to developments so far. That also includes political developments and changes in values. When we visit an open-air museum in Europe today, we will see environments which are supposed to give us impressions of life as it was before. Today we can in many open-air museums visit environments which brings us back to any period of time from the 16th up to the 20th century.

When we look critically on these environments as historians, it is clear to that the museums have made not only selections of what to show but the museums have also edited the stories and removed things which could disturb the atmosphere or sentiment. Of course, it has to be like that. Of course, the museums need to edit their stories in order to have clear messages, and of course museums are the sole responsible editors and should be free to tell their stories. Of course, the museums make the editing in such a way that the public confidence in the museum remain unchallenged. But, when such editorial decisions are made, they anyway have a cost attached.

I will here just address a few examples of such decisions in open-air museums which may be challenging or less fortunate for telling stories related to the SDGs. I should underline that I here refer to open-air museums in general based on my observations, but not only that. To make my point I ask you please to forgive me as I talk about open-air museums very much on the level of depth understanding which you also meet in the many people who think that if they have seen one open-air museum, they have somehow seen them all. This level of simplification is necessary to make the point I want to make, and please remember that most people are not historians or curators. When I talk about the open-air museums' storytelling, I refer to the stories presented, told, or performed regardless of the chosen method. It can be signs, guided turs, re-enactment, living history in first or third person or something else. There are probably museums who will not feel that I talk about them, and I congratulate them. I personally do not think they are many, but for the open-air museums which recognise themselves in some of my observations, I want to apologize in advance. I promise you that I have no intention to insult anybody.

The open-air museum, the climate, migration, and human rights

Very few if anybody in the 19th or the first two thirds of the 20th centuries saw problems in using coal, oil, or gas as primary energy source for heating and electricity. Back in the 17th and 18th century similarly very few knew anything about potential climate problems when using firewood or peat. The watermills were far from always constructed in a way which allowed fishes to pass, and the windmills probably disturbed bird life.

How do we address such issues in the open-air museums? Should we address such challenges? I don't think many open-air museums make a point of things in the past being on the wrong side of history in the old farms, the mills, or other environments in the museum. Foresting in open-air museums is most often shown as a craft, and naturally manual foresting is impressive to see, but where do we show the problems which arose

from the intensive foresting up to the 19th century, and the industrialised foresting in the 20th century with the problems raised by changing the natural diversity of trees in the forests to the monocrop plantations?

The same goes for the open-air museums who show historical mining life. They are normally focusing on the social life of the miners and their families, less on the mining itself and the extracting of non-renewable energy sources.

Most open-air museums have rural life in older times and therefore also farming as their central and traditional story telling. There are many problems with animal welfare in traditional farming before the industrialisation and it certainly became no better during most of the 20th century.

Do we have to address such issues? Well, if the open-air museums are to be recognised as interesting in the efforts to realise the SDGs, I think we cannot ignore core issues here. My impression from many visits to open-air museums is that there especially in the many exposed environments is a tendency to tell or show a story dominated by harmony between man and nature. Maybe museums should question if there for example is any simple relation between more primitive farming and respect for sustainable nature. Just because older historical farming does not use chemical or technological means it is not necessarily sustainable. Agricultural historians are aware of many agricultural crises in history in different parts of Europe, and some of these crises were probably caused by farming methods as much as social, economic, or political circumstances. To put the point here a little more provocative maybe the open air museums should be more honest and open about environmental problems in the past instead of harmonising. As visitors become more aware about the issues it will be imperative for museums to keep up with the visitors if museums should preserve their position as trustworthy.

In recent decades open-air museums have been looking into ways through which they can address specific migrant stories. I think one of the first I saw was the Moluccan barracks from the 1950ies in the open-air museum in Arnhem. In the open-air museums in Århus and in Oslo I have seen appartements depicting labour immigrants from Pakistan and Turkey in the 1970ies and 1980ies. There are today a growing number of such examples in European open-air museums. It is not new for open-air museums to have environments – typically houses – where life conditions of a specific ethnic group are shown. A number of open-air museums have Jewish houses or appartements and some show other ethnic minorities such as the Sami people at a given period in history.

It can be claimed that the open-air museums this way give a message that there have always been ethnic minority groups in the region or country they otherwise present, and thereby making diversity "normal". This way of exhibiting the exotic minority cultures was already an integrated method used in the first generation of open air museums around 1900. They were not alone on this but actually copied what was already done in some of the first World Exhibitions and in amusement parks such as Inuit igloos at Tivoli in Copenhagen. But maybe this method is a simplification which defies xenophobia less than one might hope.

When showing the minority culture this way there is a risk that the museum thereby sends a message that this is different from the "normal" – the majority culture – whatever

that is. If the not-minority culture is not depicted in many different varieties, it strengthens the impression of minority cultures as the not-normal and will thereby risk to be counterproductive in stimulating respect and understanding for cultural diversity.

The visitor to a 18th or 19th century historical farm environment in the traditional open-air museum may not realise at all that there are details in the farm which are based on knowledge, inventions, and culture from far away, maybe even another country or even continent. Such an experience without recognition of cultural diversity does not stimulate openness to diversity but may instead foster an image which overestimate the local, regional, or national homogeneity. If the experience is leaving an impression for the visitor of this is how our ancestors lived before it may actually work the opposite way. In our time globalism is growing and everybody experience this. Therefor it is also normal to think that influences from outside was much smaller before, and naturally much, much smaller in our ancestor's days. If open air museums support a false image of homogeneity, it may well be unaware that it also thereby tends to support mistrust in globalism and stimulating xenophobia (3).

People in older days were not behaving as we do today. I think open air museums have been good at capturing materialised traces of beliefs and knowledge in older times. That is however not the same as showing how people behaved. The social patterns were different and not only as social class differences which were more distinct. The differences in behaviour – expected and real behaviour – were clear between the sexes, generations in the family and age groups as such.

Thing which we consider wrong today were normal and generally accepted in older times. Do we understand that when we are invited to visit a historical environment – a 19th century farm or a late 19th century working class housing quarter? I am not sure that the visitor understands how for example domestic violence, the gender inequality and pure racist beliefs were integrated elements in those days. It is undermining the credibility of the open-air museum when it does not capture such human values and perceptions in historical times which are in conflict with mainstream beliefs of today.

Physical violence played a different role and was very visible in older times. Not only was capital punishment and very long prison sentences normal, but for ordinary people – the people about which the open air museums tell stories for ordinary people of today – there would for many also be violence in daily life. As part of fostering children physical punishment was considered not only normal but was often recommended and not before the second half of the 20th century, we see a substantial decline and even legislation.

I have visited open air museums which depicts public meetings and demonstrations for salaries and women voting rights etc. at the end of the 19th century. That is great and certainly interesting and important stories to tell, but where are the police or soldiers with sabres? Where do we see that such gatherings and demonstrators were often met with a brutality that caused blood spill and often death?

By not telling the stories of the violence which met the pioneers for human rights I think museums smoothen the history of human rights to a degree that may make the guests belief that the big historical changes have evolved by natural forces with little opposition.

That impression with the guests does not stimulate continued fight for and defence for human rights.

The open air museums are wonderful and efficient places for social learning – learning together – as the threshold is low. The confidence in what open air museums tell is generally high. That should give the open air museums the best possible preconditions for playing an important role in realisation of the SDGs.

What I have been trying to express above is however some considerations about some obstacles which are embedded in the way the open air museums are choosing to tell stories today – or rather which parts they choose to tell and which parts they erase in their storytelling.

I hope I have offended none or very few, and if I have, I ask for forgiveness, but I will not apologise.

Note

(1) Bjarne Stoklund; "International Exebitions and the New Museum Concept in the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century", in *"Ethnologia Scandinavica"*, Lund 1993.
(2) John William Davies; "Now Our History is Your History: The Challenge of Relevance for Open-Air Museums", pp 115-123 "Folk Life – Journal of Ethnological Studies", volume 47, 2009, issue 1.
(3) Henrik Zipsane; "A museum for real people instead for the selected few", in Giovanna Del Gobbo, Glenda Galeotti, Valeria Pica and Valentina Zucci (ed.) "*Museums & Society – Sguardi interdisciplinary sul museo*", Pacini Editore Srl - Pisa 2019

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