

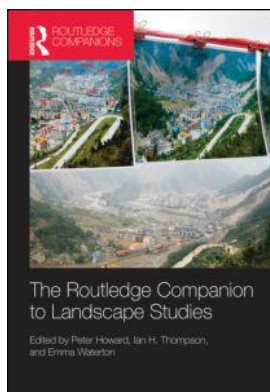
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Constructing spaces, representing places: the role of landscape in open-air museum sites

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How might we imagine a museum in the open air? How might we conceptualize the importance of space in such a museum? The conventional museum conjures up images of a highly ordered and differentiated space, with the passage of time and history classified behind glass cases and inside buildings of often imposing architecture. Museums are seen as cultural forms for 'showing and telling' in an attempt to communicate certain cultural meanings and values while they transmit experience to the visitor through movement as 'organized walking'. Artefacts are arranged to create a particular narrative which reveals the dominant role of the institution, as represented by the curators. In open-air museums, these narratives are translated into secluded landscapes which have many characteristics in common with public open spaces and parks. Therefore, open-air museums are hybrids, fusing elements of conventional museums which are aiming to collect, preserve and display artefacts, and of open spaces which are constructed so as to create a sense of place. This dual identity of combining museum concepts and practices with landscape design gives them their complex and unique character.

Based on research on five open-air museums in England, this chapter investigates how museum languages interact with landscape to produce representations of the geographical heritage of places, and how selected slices of the cultural geography of places can be rapidly replicated within a strictly defined landscape. Space analysis ideas are considered in order to identify and compare the spatial structure of the museums, whilst qualitative and quantitative methods from museum and landscape research have been combined to explore the social implications of this structure.

The past in the present

The majority of open-air museums were founded by groups of people responding to the destruction of vernacular buildings or the changing ways of life in their localities. Initially, these groups were dedicated to their goals which were far removed from making immediate profit. However, in order to survive, the museums have had to become commercial operations and, in most of them, management boards have taken over to maximize the financial security of the

museums by exploiting changing patterns of leisure. The museums are now increasingly engaged in a commodification process which is expressed in increasing numbers and types of visitor attractions, living history displays and new interpretation techniques.

The five sites discussed in this chapter, which cover the main characteristics of the contemporary open-air museum are:

- Chiltern Open Air Museum in Buckinghamshire;
- Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings in Worcestershire;
- Weald and Downland Open Air Museum in West Sussex;
- Blists Hill Victorian Town (part of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum) in Shropshire; and
- Black Country Living Museum in West Midlands.

These museums fall into two categories based partly on their contents but mainly on their approach and interpretation policies. Avoncroft, Chiltern, and Weald and Downland, which can be called ‘museums of buildings’, have been developed in response to the destruction of vernacular buildings and are more concerned with the history of architecture and construction methods. They started purely as a collection of threatened buildings which were moved to the museum site to escape demolition. Blists Hill and Black Country, which can be called ‘museums of ways of life’, have an industrial basis and represent the way of life of a particular region. Their focus is on aspects of social history, and reconstructed or replica buildings are used as shells for the illustration of selected aspects of everyday life in the geographical region as it was understood to have been in a particular historical era. The crucial issue for these museums is to be able to emphasize the sense of place of the locality, embodied in the industrial, commercial and domestic settings. Having established these two types of open-air museum, the next section will examine how conventional museum functions and practices can be translated into the open space.

Museum practices and landscape functions

In museum studies there is a considerable amount of discussion about the basis on which objects are classified and whether they provide evidence of what they represent. Collecting reveals the power of the curator who makes decisions based on certain presumptions and pre-established principles. Collections attempt to provide an adequate representation of the world by removing things from specific contexts and then presenting them as ‘abstract wholes’ (Stewart 1984). Open-air museums consist of collections of structures and artefacts arranged by curators in a meaningful display through the operation of a classificatory system.

In the three ‘museums of buildings’, the objects are displayed by classificatory criteria alone, and the aim is to present the history of buildings and their construction over time. This reveals the intention of the curators in these museums to present ‘a gallery without roof’ (Lowe 1972). Each building, which need not be structurally or historically related to the others, can stand in its own right presenting a certain part of architectural history, and is not necessarily associated visually with the rest of the buildings on site.

In the two ‘museums of ways of life’, the arrangement attempts to transmit a certain theme and buildings of similar period and style are used for this purpose. Representative buildings of the turn of the nineteenth century are used in Blists Hill in an attempt to simulate ‘a late Victorian working town’. Similarly in the Black Country Living Museum typical buildings are set up to ‘represent a cross-section of the social and industrial history of the Black Country’ (see Figure 15.1) (Hudson 1987). In these museums, buildings are combined in order to portray a



Figure 15.1 Representation of a Victorian high street in the Black Country Living Museum.

story of 'ways of life'. Every building needs the others in order to present a coherent whole. Although none of the museums replicates a historically exact layout of a particular settlement, the structure of space attempts to convey a sense of settlement, reproducing the most obvious features such as a linear high street with shops or a specific type of industrial area. In reality, there is more of a concentration of uses than would often be found in an exact reproduction of a geographical settlement.

In conventional museums, the relationship between the building and its collection is influenced by the changes in architectural ideologies and the principles of exhibition design, and can be described as two distinct typologies. The older types of museum building have been described as 'well lit warehouses' which can be 'dissociated from their contents and usable for any type of object in any sequence' (Marcus 1993: 171). By contrast in many contemporary museum buildings the intention of the architecture is to establish a dialogue between architectural design and the museum contents by integrating the building with its collections.

Similarly, in open-air museums where the functions of the museum building are performed by the landscape, these typologies can be observed and translated into landscape terms. There is a strong relationship between landscape and artefacts in the open-air museums. A significant function of the landscape is to create and organize space for viewing the artefacts and in this, its role can be seen as similar to architectural space within conventional museums. The layout of a museum building structures the way that visitors explore the exhibitions and the building itself. Museum design can also create an architectural spectacle which is experienced by visitors not only in the galleries but in other public spaces (Psarra 2005). In museum exhibitions the collections are spatially classified according to principles imposed by the curators, and the

exhibition layout reflects these principles. Some artefacts are arranged in close proximity in order to encourage comparison, while others are separated to be viewed individually. In open-air museums, to a certain extent, this arranging of artefacts is undertaken by the landscape. Planting and topography have been used to manipulate visibility within the site in a similar way that partition walls define exhibition layout in conventional museums. Landscape has become a design tool to serve the intentions of the curators regarding presentation of the exhibits. The research comparing these five sites linked conventional museum studies with open space studies, testing the extent to which museum practices can be translated into landscape when showcases are replaced by large artefacts.

Bridging disciplines: a research strategy

Academic studies have paid little attention to open-air museums as a spatial phenomenon. The majority provide theoretical analyses of museum philosophy and practice, and focus on themes which are often connected to wider issues of cultural representation and participation (Walsh 1992). Open-air museums have been subject to critical studies of their role in representing an idealized, nostalgic and apolitical version of the past, as well as more supportive accounts of their contribution to our understanding of the lives and places of previous generations (West, 1988; Bennett 1995; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Harris 1993). They have also been included as examples to complement studies on other heritage attractions (Shafermich 1993; Young 2006). There have been few studies which deal with the contemporary growth of open-air museums as a geographical phenomenon in which landscape and place are as important as collecting policies (Cross and Walton 2005), although examples of open-air museums have been discussed in a framework, 'the heritagescape', proposed for the analysis of spatial properties of all types of heritage sites (Garden 2006).

This research on how spatial properties influence the ways that people experience open-air museum sites, aims to explore the ways in which landscape is brought into the spatial layout of the exhibits and how visitors experience these unique qualities of the museum. But what kind of methodology would be appropriate for studying the spatial properties in open-air museums? Methodologies commonly used in studying the spatial properties of conventional museums have their limitations when referring to open space. Whilst valuable, the nature of conventional museum space, enclosed in a building where the audience is also captured, makes the sole use of these methodologies inadequate for the study of open-air museums. Landscape research, on the other hand, has not been seen from a museological perspective. In looking at the properties of open-air museums a cross-disciplinary approach of methodologies used in both landscape research/techniques and museum studies was developed.

Previous studies of museum buildings are based on 'space syntax', a computer-aided method which describes patterns of relationships in terms of connections between spaces (Choi, 1999; Psarra 2005; Hillier and Tzortzi 2006). Although as a method alone, or combined with other spatial techniques, space syntax enables the social encounter of visitors to be taken into consideration, the analysis remains mainly dependent upon the quantitative nature of the technique. In this research, methods of spatial analysis were considered, to examine the construction of space of the open-air museum sites individually and comparatively in terms of their spatial properties and organizational principles. The spatial configuration in each site was described with the use of isovists, variables calculating visibility from certain points to the rest of the site. This technique was introduced by Benedikt (1979) and also used by Choi (1999) and Psarra (2005) in comparing layouts of art museums. The use of the isovist technique in the analysis has a double aim. The first is to examine to what extent the layout of the paths in the museums

dictate the visitors' pattern of exploration, based on the assumption that visibility affects the decision on route selection. The second is to discover the extent to which the degree of visibility from given points frames space and therefore contributes to the spatial perception of the museum. This latter usage of isovists was combined with photographic representation taken by visitors. Analysis of the photographs indicates whether the spatial structure of the museum affects the way that people frame it, although it is possible that the selection of shots may well be influenced by other cultural and social factors not relevant to the construction of space. The purpose of this method is to explore ways of walking, looking and framing and to see how these practices are influenced by the construction of space.

The role of the landscape

In open-air museums, the role of the landscape is powerful in translating the functions of the conventional museum into the open air. Landscape has been deployed as a framing device, which brings artefacts into view. It replaces the gallery, where buildings are arranged according to principles imposed by the museum interpretation strategy. Not only does the landscape play a central role in the production of space and the embedding of buildings into 'places' but it also undertakes the role of walls and dividers for the setting up of exhibitions.

It also becomes a spectacle in its own right by reconstructing stereotypical images of heritage landscapes. At the same time, it becomes a leisure landscape for visitors to enjoy walking around, playing with their children and picnicking on the sites.

Landscape as visual experience

Landscape in open-air museums is used as a stage for the production of stereotypical images of other landscapes in a condensed form. Space is constructed by melding representative elements of particular cultural landscapes. These landscapes are supposed to be reproduced in the museum and they are widely recognized as part of stereotypical images of urban/rural landscape and countryside.

How do visitors experience the landscape in the open air museums? Does landscape come to be regarded as a channel directing people towards the exhibits, or is it appreciated in its own right? In other words which is the way that people explore the museum site? Do they walk with determination to the next exhibit or do they enjoy the itinerary? In each museum the landscape was treated in different ways. In some museums, visitors appreciated only the beautified landscape, especially when it spoke to them of the English pastoral.

Hudson (1987: 127) pointed out: '[t]he site had to be chosen with great care. It had to be in a pleasant country – the public, on the whole, does not enjoy spending its leisure time in ugly and depressing surroundings'. This is a perceptive comment. In the Black Country Living Museum, only a few visitors were able to appreciate the intentional dereliction and untidiness of the mining and industrial areas. At Blists Hill, the director commented on visitors' perceptions of museum sites: 'they expect it all to be immaculate, totally manicured, perfect like a National Trust stately home, lawn everywhere. They can't understand our intended woodland and derelict canal.' It is suggested that when the landscape plays a subordinate role within the design of the site as a whole, if it does not figure as a major element of the original design, it is often not appreciated by visitors, unless by chance (see Figure 15.2).

A common feature in all the museums is the attempt physically to isolate the sites from their contemporary surroundings, and most sites have well-defined physical borders. This is visually reinforced with trees and shrubs to create an impenetrable screen. The separation of the sites



Figure 15.2 The canal and the industrial area in Blists Hill.

attempts to create a place isolated from the contemporary world. ‘We planted deliberately around the boundaries to hide ourselves from the twentieth century,’ said the director of the Black Country Living Museum. All the sites are enclosed by these green borders with the intention that the past becomes literally another world as these very particular cultural landscapes are disconnected from the present. Separating the site from the outside area with trees and vegetation was a common nineteenth-century park design strategy and remains usual practice in archaeological sites.

An exception to this is the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum which forms part of a nineteenth-century estate (see Figure 15.3). The park and the museum merge into each other with no visible transition. Unlike the other museums which attempt to isolate themselves from the present, the Weald and Downland offers spectacular views and visual connection with the surrounding landscape. There was a clear intention to draw the internal and external features together as a key part of the museum design and, in this regard, the museum may be judged the most successful in landscape terms.

Landscape as a design tool

From the analysis of the five museums, it is argued that the configuration of space in each museum complies with two parallel modes of structure. First, the spatial arrangement of exhibits describes the distribution of buildings and objects around the site and their grouping according to general classificatory principles set by curators; second, the spatial structure of the layout describes the way that these classifications are arranged in relation to each other, in order to communicate the museum narrative.

In all five museums the spatial arrangement of exhibits is independent of the museum interpretation strategy; rather it is related to the way that the site has been developing over time.



Figure 15.3 Weald and Downland Open Air Museum. The surrounding landscape and the museum merge into each other.

This can be compared with positioning gallery rooms in a museum building ready to host various exhibitions. In sites with ad hoc development, the location of the first buildings/artefacts has dictated the layout of the site, in the sense that buildings came first and footpaths followed.

The spatial structure of the layout conveys the message that exhibitions are intended to communicate. In the three ‘museums of buildings’, Avoncroft, Weald and Downland, and Chiltern, the objects are displayed by classificatory criteria alone. Each building, not being related to the others, can stand in its own right presenting a certain part of architectural history and it is not necessarily associated visually with the rest of the buildings on site. Nevertheless, the underlying idea of the museum presentation is based on issues of building conservation and on notions of an idealized pastoral past. Each building is presented in a sanitized and idealized form. The main function of the layout is to expose buildings to visitors through circulation.

In the two ‘museums of ways of life’ the structure of the layout attempts to transmit a certain theme and buildings of a similar style are used for this purpose. Each building needs the others to create a coherent whole and to convey a sense of place. These groups of buildings can tell a story of ‘ways of life’.

Exploring the ways that conventional museum strategies are physically translated into landscape, a useful parallel could be drawn between the display strategies of conventional and open-air museums. Traditionally, there are two approaches to exhibition design: taxonomic and thematic. In the taxonomic, objects are displayed only by classification criteria which allow the public to draw their own conclusions and make comparisons. Thematic design entails the development of a theme which evolves through the exhibition. This thematic strategy can be presented in linear form, or mosaic form, or a combination of both types. The first type is the simple linear narrative approach, whereas the mosaic type consists of a broad theme presented in separated displays (Miles et al. 1988). Taxonomic design is used in the ‘museums of

buildings' where artefacts are arranged according to classificatory criteria alone, and thematic design is used in the 'museums of ways of life' where emphasis is placed on the relationship of buildings and the creation of a sense of place.

Using this approach based on display strategies to define the museums' spatial structure of layout, and to clarify spatial differences and similarities among the five museums, two parameters are important: the location of exhibits in relation both to each other and to the whole site, and the organization of visitor circulation. In terms of visual appearance, layout pattern and form three basic types can be distinguished: clustered, dispersed and linear. Layouts in the Black Country, Chiltern and Weald and Downland are clustered, in Blists Hill linear and in Avoncroft dispersed.

There has been no intentional imitation of any specific settlement pattern in any of the museums, but a stereotypical spatial representation of cultural landscapes can be identified. For example, one could argue that the pattern in Weald and Downland follows the simple model of some rural settlement patterns represented by a village – a clustered central location and many dispersed farmsteads within the farmland. Blists Hill bears a passing resemblance to a so-called 'street' village. Although this similarity is based on the ad hoc development and location factors such as the position of a canal, the existing buildings and road, it may also remind visitors of European planned linear villages established along streams and restricted by topography.

Circulation

The second parameter for the distinction of spatial structure is the organization of visitor circulation. Circulation is an important characteristic of the museum experience for it reflects the freedom of route selection within the site or, in other words, the level of control imposed by the museum over visitors' movements. Circulation is central to conventional museum design and there has long been an argument about the relative value of two opposing models: selective or free circulation versus coercive or exhaustive circulation. The purpose of an exhibition layout is to display objects to the public in a meaningful way and according to principles imposed by the museum creators. Meanings are created through movement as circulation imposes a viewing order and sequence. An important aim of museum design is to tell stories through movement in space. Circulation design should enable visitors to visit certain parts of the museum without passing by all the other parts. In the open-air museums, this has been achieved best via a circular or ring movement. Individual parts of the site are linked together in such a way that visitors are able to select which parts of the site to visit first, or not to visit at all.

The museums' layouts can be described as rings, linear, grid or mixed (see Figure 15.4). Circulation in Avoncroft is based on a grid. The contours of a canal and the main road dictate a linear pattern in Blists Hill. In the Black Country circulation is arranged in three rings which link with each other, while in Weald and Downland (not shown in Figure 15.4) two main rings organize movement. Finally, in Chiltern a ring connected to a linear axis defines a mixed organization.

Landscape as a pedagogic tool

A study by Peponis and Hedin (1983), on the layout changes in the Natural History Museum in London, addresses how classification becomes a spatial issue and the way that space reflects classificatory principles imposed by museum curators. In open-air museums, the concept of intentional landscape manipulation for exhibition purposes can be described theoretically with ideas drawn from work on the social structure of pedagogy. In his work, 'Class, Codes and Control', Bernstein (1975) argues that the relationship between different elements (contents) of

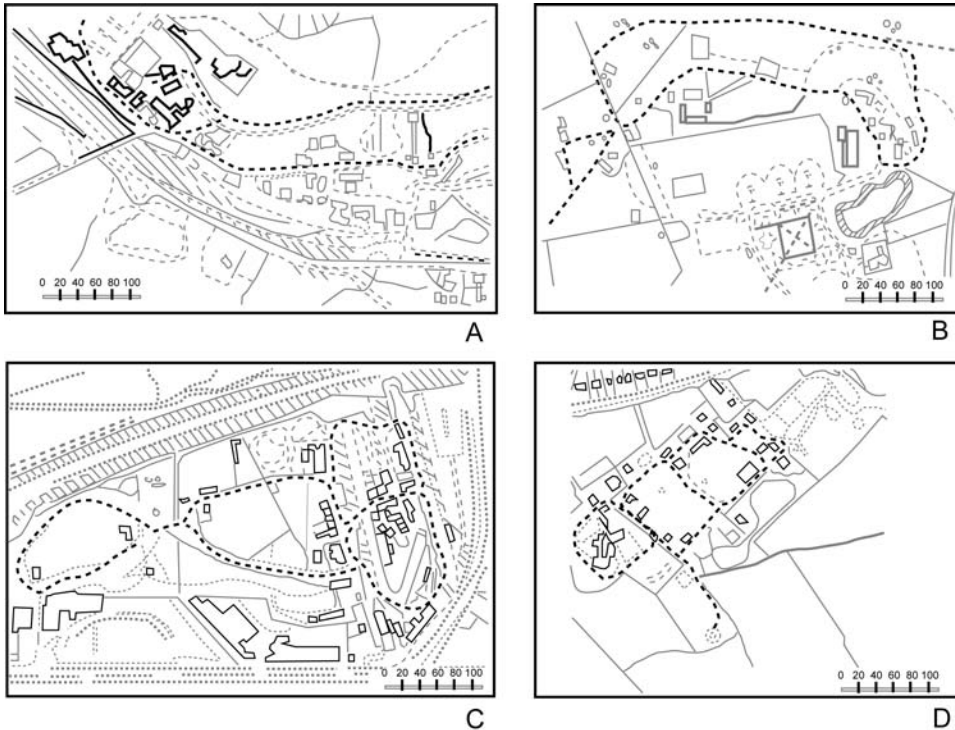


Figure 15.4 Examples of circulation patterns and movement in open air museums: A) Blists Hill, B) Chiltern, C) Black Country, D) Avoncroft.

the curriculum is essential for the social structure of pedagogy. Whether the boundaries between two elements/subjects are ‘clear-cut’ or ‘blurred’ is fundamental. Elements well separated from each other are said to be in a closed relationship, whereas reduced separation defines an open relationship. Bernstein uses two concepts, classification and framing, to analyze the structure of a message system during educational communications. It has to be emphasized that these two terms have not been used by Bernstein in the familiar way. Classification is concerned with the relationship between knowledge contents and not, as the term suggests, with the way that these contents are grouped into classified categories. This is about how rigid and well-insulated these contents are as subject areas. Framing deals with the structure system, that is, to the degree of control that students and teachers exercise over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of communication. Bernstein describes different types of pedagogy by means of combining different strengths of classification and framing. Strong classification and strong framing entail the collection-type, weak classification and weak framing the integrated-type. So the underlying rule of collection-type is ‘things must be kept apart’ and of integration-type ‘things must be put together’.

Comparing the museum sites, it is possible to show how Bernstein’s ideas about classification and framing can be spatially translated into museum terms and be applied to the relationship between exhibition layout and the ways that space is explored by visitors. Exhibits are spatially distributed and separated according to certain visual and thematic principles. This degree of separation would be described by Bernstein as classification which refers to the degree of spatial ‘boundary maintenance’ between exhibits or thematic categories or, in other words, describes

visibility between exhibits. Categories can be strongly or weakly insulated with respect to their visual links. Framing would refer to the layout of the site and the way that visitors move around and explore this layout. In museum terms, framing refers to the degree of control of circulation and visitors' movement, and thus of permeability between exhibits.

By examining the layout structure and the spatial subdivision in Avoncroft and Chiltern, for instance, strong classification and strong framing can be observed. The thematic categories are intentionally separated from each other and the circulation of visitors is rather tightly controlled via footpaths. This may suggest an indication of the collection type and this imposes a degree of restriction over comparisons between different exhibits. In the Weald and Downland Museum, by contrast, weaker classification and weaker framing would suggest an integration type which encourages comparisons between most of the exhibits.

Conclusion

Open-air museums employ established museum practices to construct narratives in the context of the cultural landscape of places. By assembling structures from different geographical areas, they attempt to recreate a micro-geography of particular places. By extracting elements of other cultural landscapes, open-air museums represent the geographical heritage of specific places in a condensed form. Landscape has been deployed as a framing device which brings artefacts into view. It replaces the gallery, where buildings are arranged according to principles imposed by the museum interpretation strategy. It also becomes a spectacle in its own right, by reconstructing stereotypical images for visual consumption. Thus landscape operates on two levels: the first, the 'foreground', stages representations, with the gaze being the main aim; the second, the 'background', entails production of space according to museological criteria.

Bachelard (1964) reminds us that what we see from the window belongs to the house. In this sense, visual access is very important in creating a sense of belonging. Visual access to the surrounding landscape acts to incorporate that landscape as a central part of the experience of the museum. Yet it is also apparent that when this link to the landscape as a whole is mitigated in the design process, the relationship is undermined. Of the five museums, the overall structure of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum aims visually to incorporate West Dean Park into the landscape design. There was a clear intention to draw the internal and external features together as a key part of the museum design and, in this regard, the museum may be judged the most successful in landscape terms.

The imposition of visually impenetrable boundaries breaks the functional integrity of the landscapes in which the museums are situated. This can be noticed in sites like Blists Hill and Black Country where the museum landscapes capture and portray an idealized version of the very landscapes which are beyond the perimeter hedges. Conventional boundaries between open-air museums and their wider cultural landscapes have been challenged with the development of the idea of the Ecomuseum (Howard 2002). The design of open-air museums should take the local landscape into account and include these qualities in the design of their site. With such a strategy, it may be possible to encourage visitors to look more critically at both cultural landscapes: the everyday world which often passes without notice, and the museum landscape which is, perhaps, too often accepted uncritically as a nostalgic appreciation of a 'lost world'.

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