

Removing the Fences from the Fields and Building Museums

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La The need to write a place's history. The need for permanence. The need for everything to remain as it is, not to be lost; the need to rest our gaze upon a here and now that is truly significant. The wish to stop time, and that everything made sense. Sense.

The local writer, the collector, the photographer, the painter, the poet, the historian. The gatherers. Places are defined by the characters dwelling in them, but some are more relevant than others. Their role may be somewhat inconspicuous, and yet essential within the narrative as a whole. Let us envision reality as a narrative construct, an almost literary becoming. Full of sense. Any place that's worth anything needs someone in charge of remembering the past, and channelling a history that dignifies the present. Having a history means not having to start from scratch. When a place has a history, a culture, that means that it has a certain value; that loving that place is only logical, and that the pride and satisfaction it elicits are quite reasonable.

The people in charge of making sense of the past, of turning history into objects and words, are driven by a special energy. Quite often, they do not feel they are working at all. The heroes of local culture are often motivated by the pursuit of hobbies, responsibilities assumed as part of free time, understood in a sense that alters the meaning of existence. Everything may begin with desires stemming from one's own biography: after all, there is a logical evolution linking the collections that children make to the tasks involved in keeping a place's past alive. One goes from collecting stones or butterflies to gathering every significant item defining a certain location, trying to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the area, to preserve everything that exists, so that nothing is lost. Take, for instance, the photographer who records folk dancing in traditional celebrations year after year, taking an interest in local traditional costumes. Starting from an entirely subjective approach, they may develop their methodology to the point where the boundary between photography and scientific documentation is blurred. Or the painter who depicts winter, springtime, summer or fall, recording the passing of time as signalled by trees whose growth we can almost see happening before our eyes, in forests changing gradually, in parks that kindly welcome visitors in picture after picture, in church-bell towers where the afterglow of beauty and tradition manages to outshine every negative aspect in our society's current state of affairs.

The tools we employ to define the past found their present form in the 19th century. The museum was one of them. The museum was the perfect vehicle for small stories to become enshrined in the temple of truth. The museum appeared as an intersection between scientific rigour and popular taste; it was something rather serious and important but at the same time street-smart. A museum enhances both the value of its own exhibits, and that of the place where it is located. As a new institution shaped by the accumulation of different traditions, and seeming to have existed since time immemorial, the museum was meant to create a civic spirit. The museum educates us as citizens, and makes us aware of our condition as denizens of modernity; it shows us that the place where we live is rightfully ours. The museum preserves things, saves the items selected by the new specialists from the ravages of time so they can endure in a

perpetual present, and become reference points for our existence. The museum makes us proud. Almost magically, it transforms collections of butterflies and stones into valuable scientific knowledge, paintings into important art works, people into audiences, full of respect and admiration. And then there follows rigour.

But what about Nature? Aren't museums supposed to belong within cities? What happens when it is Nature that defines the quintessence of a place? What happens when it is mountains and forests that make us proud? How can that gaze be incarnated in an institution? In the early 1970s a new term hinted at a solution: *ecomuseum*. With this notion, Hugues de Varine opened the possibility of the museum becoming a landscape. Paintings were replaced by trees and mills and cows and stones. Just like that. The ecomuseum was nature's museum; a civilised gaze directed at our surroundings- seen with other eyes, the eyes of culture. The concept of the ecomuseum turned the environment into museum-material, interesting enough to be preserved forever in the ever-present of exhibition halls... But there are no halls at the ecomuseum; the ecomuseum takes in the air and the rain, sometimes holding its breath and channelling the streams, hardly noticeably. And it does not require much else besides; it certainly does not need to fictionalise the environment, incorporating traditions or people disguised as other people from other periods. Fictional reconstructions of whole countries precede the ecomuseum: the first open-air museums appeared in Scandinavia at the end of the 19th century, showcasing small-scale reproductions of entire regions in past epochs, fully equipped with landscapes, animals, traditional crafts and the costumes ordinary people were supposed to wear. Everything was on display outdoors- as if life in the past were like that, like an overhasty journey where everything is put together in a hurry. That's a bear in the corner over there; that's a lady weaving.

Long before that, though, nature and landscapes had already occupied the museum building, which they had accessed through painting and sculpture. And at the beginning of the 19th century- the century that very much created our world-, dioramas entered history museums. So, in chronological order, the sequence leads from dioramas, then to open-air museums, and finally to ecomuseums.

Dioramas are static re-enactments of a fully functional world; a sort of stuffed model of a miniature microcosm as interpreted by scientific knowledge. Dioramas are displayed indoors, under carefully controlled illumination conditions, to be viewed from a predetermined angle. Everything about them is carefully managed; everything is static; everything is where it is supposed to be. Next to each diorama there is another one depicting another setting, another period, another aspect of nature.

In open-air museums you can walk through the exhibits, along paths that take you back to the entrance, but otherwise everything is also quite well organised, with carefully classified living materials, and sometimes even costumed interpreters and props from different regions in a given country. Sometimes objects are reproduced in small scale; sometimes it's simply a lumping together of different places and periods into a single space.

And then there is the ecomuseum, the place that gets paralysed. With their putative chaos, their cracks right under our gaze, trying to keep everything flowing but also under control. Nature needs no longer be tamed or incorporated into the museum. 'Museum' is just a name- or rather an adjective qualifying our approach to nature.

Controlled situations, attempts to explain who we are and where we come from. From the inside out; from order to reality. Generating souvenirs, offering smiles, disseminating knowledge. The place, its definition, and its past and present inhabitants. The idea of the museum as a guideline, with the aim of achieving important goals, something memorable and ever-lasting.

This brings us to the question of memory, the evanescence of past affect, and the difficulty of archiving emotion. We now see the people become museum material, in all rigour and seriousness. Children's games, oral traditions, folk dances, lost sports. Happiness. Towns. Contacts between people; family trees; old black and white photographs; negatives at grandma's place in a format there is no longer a market for; the first home movie cameras; hiking clubs; neighbourhood community associations; (yellowing secret) letters and (postmarked) stamps. Maps; food rationing books; unexploded ordnance from past conflicts occasionally found in unexpected places; documents at courthouses; brutal deaths no one talks about; and war, always war.

The need to record history and place in writing. The need for museums and definitions; for archives and what they preserve. A bird's eye view over the landscape, as opposed to a child's gaze, trying to understand the world. And in between one and the other, our entire life. It makes no difference whether it's messy or tidy, as long as it is compelled to become a reference, a sign that we are on the good guys' side, along those who will bear witness to a past that will propel the future. Past, present and future. And the museum as a method for the creation of a different temporality, one that stays here with us for ever.