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SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM CULTURE IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CITY: CASE STUDY OF SKOPJE

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ABSTRACT: The pandemic of COVID-19 affected social life and life in general in many ways. Human habits and living in the city that seemed to work for decades are being questioned in order to uncover a novel approach to using resources in times of social restrictions. City functions like transportation, workplace and services were quickly adapted to new circumstances, while others like culture and leisure remained entirely frozen. The aim of the paper is to review culture and the potentials in time of social restrictions through the case study of the city of Skopje. The focus of the paper is museum culture, a field that is also stagnant for decades and has the traditional museum building as its main representation. The need for a more sustainable museum model beyond the museum building is now more evident than ever. While European museological discourses in the last half-century widely accepted the models of open-air museums, the state of interpreting open-air heritage through a museological paradigm is generally absent on the territory of the city of Skopje. Open-air museums aim at open-air interpretation of heritage, while understanding heritage not as a protected status-quo, but as a resource that has an intrinsic role in society at present. The advantage of open-air museums is in the active use of heritage resources, in promoting living heritage and culture, mediating authentic experience and the immediate relation to visitors.

The paper will investigate the potentials of heritage resources on the territory of Skopje. The case study on sustainable museum culture in Skopje will focus on mapping heritage resources, review of the state of protection and readability of heritage, accessibility and capacity of heritage for open-air museum use, the potentials for applying the concept of open-air museology through programmatic and spatial interventions, etc.

KEYWORDS: *open-air museum, Skopje, new museology, sustainable, museum culture, heritage*

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the important shift in museum definition from the traditional domain where it was defined through its collections and its permanency as a building, to the contemporaneity that understands the broader role of museum as defined through heritage, which greatly differs in context, character and scale. This definition shift is underestimated in the architectural context, and it is exactly one of the reasons why the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on culture and leisure, represented mainly by the museum institutions, worldly and especially in the Macedonian context, was strikingly big.

How can museum institutions adapt to the new conditions? How can they meet the needs of visitors for safety, but also for new content and experiences different from the accustomed museum experiences?

The digital technologies showed to be a dominant alternative to what we lived as pre-COVID-19 museum field. But they also brought to the attention that a large number of the population do not have access to digital technologies, which indicates the need to promote access to culture for all. New technologies, especially the Internet, on the other hand, can reduce the emotional content and attractiveness of the live museum experience.

This paper looks back to the historical concept of an open-air museum and discusses its relevance for today. What can we understand as the concept of an open-air museum today? What are the postulates it can be based upon as different from the traditional ones? And how can we apply this re-opened field of knowledge on the example of the city of Skopje?

The open-air museums can be very attractive today not just because of their safety, but also due to the combination of

tangible and intangible heritage, culture and nature, past and present, education and recreation. The precise selection of the site for the establishment / formation of an open-air museum is of exceptional importance. The open-air museums today are inseparable from the exact sites and are based upon in-situ protection of heritage understood as an integrated category (cultural and natural, tangible and intangible, etc.) as base for authentic museum experience. Open-air museums of today open many opportunities for cultural experience in the post-pandemic world, but they also face great challenges in terms of the responsible and holistic approaches they seek to sustain the living heritage (at risk). This paper is just an introduction to a possible interdisciplinary standpoint and base for further research.

MUSEUM REDEFINITION IN RELATION TO HERITAGE

At its very start in 1946, the International Council of Museums [ICOM] defined only the word museum that “includes all collections open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material...” (ICOM Constitution, 1946). This first definition of the museum that defined the museum solely through its collections was changed to museum as a permanent establishment and institution in 1961 (ICOM Statutes, 1951; 1961). It was in 1974 that it was further broadened to a “non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment” (ICOM Statutes, 1974). All of these re-definitions went hand in hand with an ever-growing list of what can be recognized as museum, from conservation institutes, exhibition galleries, libraries, archive centers, natural, arche-

ological, ethnographic monuments and sites, historical monuments and sites of a museum nature, institutions displaying live specimens, nature reserves, science centers and planetariums and so on. In 2001, this list has been updated with “cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity)” (ICOM Statutes, 2001), leading to the most current definition of the museum that directly relates museum to heritage: “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” (ICOM Statutes, 2007).

Therefore, if the traditional museum was defined through its collections and permanency, the new museum is defined through heritage, which differs in context, character and scale.

These museum re-definitions go in parallel with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] definitions of heritage. It started with the UNESCO *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972, that separately defined cultural heritage as including monuments, groups of buildings and sites, and natural heritage as including natural features, geological and physiographical formations, and natural sites, but contributed towards their linking in the protection of a valuable territory (UNESCO, 1972).

In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference was dedicated to the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, defined as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills - as well as the

instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. It is important that this intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is crucial to the sense of identity and continuity, and thus can be regulated by existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2003)

The gradual and growing awareness of the totality, indivisibility of heritage and its role for sustainable development based on the needs of the local community as a whole, from the 1970s onward, produced many museum concepts and models.

One such example is the open-air museum.

OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS TODAY

Tracing the relevance of the concept of open-air museums today as models of sustainable museum culture in the post-pandemic city, we are operating in the field of new museum models beyond the traditional museum building. The field of new museology hasn't got its clear position in the context of architecture yet (Batakoja, 2019). New museology emerges as a reaction to the traditional museology, questioning the traditional museum concepts and tracing a path towards new museum culture.

In the compilation of texts titled *The New Museology*, Peter Vergo (1989) presents new museological approaches and new museum culture. In the introduction to the book, one of the main tasks that the new museology should address is the museum's purpose. This postulates new aspects of museology and museums.

The idea of an open-air museum, like all ideas, does not come into being all at once and evolve over time. Historically, it is linked to world exhibitions, heimat museums and traditional open-air museums close to what we today understand as eco-museums, world exhibitions and theme parks. But the research interest of this paper is what its relevance in today's culture is? Can we squeeze out the contemporary significance of the concept of open-air culture through these historical predecessors? What is the future of this revolutionary idea?

World exhibitions brought innovations in that they initiated new museum culture in terms of museum space beyond museum building, extended public instead of a limited museum-educated public, new museological fields beyond museum's high art. World exhibitions presented the world through collections of the vernacular and the popular. Important for this paper is the open-air character of exhibitions, in terms of scale and spatiality of exhibitions and popularization and accessibility of the open-air museum space.

The German heimat museums date back to the late 19th century, with a period of expansion and popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. Heimat museums are actually "homeland museums" or "museums of local cultures". As Barbara Knorpp (2009) says, "the Heimat movement was not only concerned with the preservation of local traditions and historical artefacts, but also with the preservation of landscapes and buildings, and thus can now be seen as being formative in the development of the rise of ecological consciousness and the environmental movement in the twentieth century". Heimat museums are probably the first concept in the museological field in which distinctions between the social and natural spheres are actively effaced and conservation of buildings, preservation of building techniques, conservation

of landscapes and protection of arts and crafts, native flora and fauna and customs and traditions were all integrally implemented.

The idea of existing outdoor exhibitions composed of relocated (dislocated) pieces of pre-modern folk architecture with fully equipped interiors and reconstructed landscape elements was first implemented in 1891 when Arthur Hazelius's *Skansen open-air museum* opened in Stockholm, Sweden. This open-air museum uses the idea of "relocation" as part of the method of conserving monuments and presents the idea of a "living museum" in which real people represent / act on the old ways of life. Actually, the value of open-air museums where dozens of dislocated pieces of folk architecture in danger were being removed from their original environment and reconstructed in suitable scene away from the original context, compared to theme parks for example, is the fact that they preserve (and at the same time re-use) the authentic materiality of historic buildings (Bukowiecki, 2018). But the reconstructed authenticity, the thematization for visitors' pleasure and entertainment and the commodification of a common feeling (like nostalgia for the past), makes them conceptually similar.

All of these historical predecessors that promoted open-air culture throughout the 20th century can be understood through the broadest concept of eco-museum that aims at showing a new and different understanding of the reality of heritage. Eco-museums at their conceptual core have the identity of the community in a certain area that is endangered (in any way) and therefore requires a certain (re)action. It is an activist and pro-active form. Eco-museums explore, support, present and interpret that endangered area in order to bring it back to life and make it available to the community once again. René Rivard gives us one

of the most understandable definitions of an eco-museum by analogy with a traditional museum. He says that the traditional museum consists of a *building + collections + experts + public*, while the eco museum consists of *territory + heritage + memory + community / population*. This leads us to the conclusion that eco-museums are replacing the building(s) with the comprehensiveness of the territory. The museum collection is replaced by the totality of heritage in a given territory, and the experts and the educated audience are replaced by the memory of the community(s). That is, one of the common characteristics of eco-museums, numerous and diverse as they are, is the representation of the very place where they are located and the different means through which they express the spirit of that place. (Babić, 2009a; Батакоја, 2019)

This broadest definition of the concept of eco-museum brings us closest to the discussion of open-air culture and open-air museums today as similar but yet significantly different from their historical predecessors:

- In-situ protection of heritage understood as integrated category (cultural and natural, tangible and intangible, etc.) and the authentic museum experience as dominantly extracted from the totality of heritage on a given territory;
- Open-air museums' user-experience of the travel-in-time effect (spiritual journey through time as Chausidis says) is not exclusively oriented towards the past, but more to the present; (Чаусидис, 2012)
- New techniques of responsible interdisciplinary and holistic interpretation and communication of heritage (in-situ musealization or eco-musealization, living museum model, digital museum model and other creative means);

- Empowerment of the local community – by involving the local population in museum activities and in creating their cultural identity. (Babić, 2009b)

From this knowledge, we extract the criteria for evaluation of the chosen localities on the territory of the city of Skopje.

OPEN-AIR HERITAGE RESOURCES ON THE TERRITORY OF THE CITY OF SKOPJE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM MODELS

Skopje, as a micro-location with significant cultural and historical past, offers rich opportunities for open-air museum sites that could cover many aspects of presentation. The cultural values of a given site should not be understood only as a place with strict protection regimes, but as a place where visitors will be offered quality of experience, surrounded by the past and the present translated through the realization of the overall traditional values as living heritage. The attractiveness of these sites is usually due to the combination of natural, archaeological, ethnographic and social aspects that, when presented, can open new dimensions in understanding the past, present and transmission of values for future generations.

In addition, the creation of open-air museums is increasingly supported by the interest of museum visitors for new attractive museum concepts and experiences. The interest of the visitors for this type of museum has contributed to the increase of the number of archeological sites that are included in the map of the archeological tourism as a specialized sub-branch of the cultural tourism.

We have decided, for the purpose of this paper, to map the archeological sites of Skopje as the priority sites for applying the concept of open-air museums, as a starting point from where the sustainable museum story should begin.

Archaeological sites stand out with their attractiveness. They open a possibility for presentation of archeological activities and findings, reconstructions, workshops and exhibitions, in a form of open-air museum as a new way of learning about the culture, history and archeology of the region and time. They represent confirmed value in terms of cultural heritage, but should be reexamined in terms of heritage understood as an integrated category (cultural and natural, tangible and intangible, etc.), i.e. as part of the totality of heritage on a given territory. The presentation of history should be renewed through new techniques of interpretation and communication of heritage. And the forms of community participation should also be put high on the list of sustainable museum approaches.

Six extraordinarily important archaeological and historical sites of Skopje are listed with short descriptions and further discussed in the context of an open-air museum as a possible sustainable museum model.

1/ Prehistoric settlement “Tumba-Madzari”

The prehistoric settlement “Tumba-Madzari” is a multi-layered settlement with three cultural horizons from the Middle Neolithic period (8000 years ago). It is a locality that is considered as one of the settlements with the first organized life or agricultural agglomeration in Skopje. There are three dwellings with authentic materials, furniture, dishes and various objects that have been reconstructed, depicting life in the Middle Neolithic. (Stojanova Kanzurova, 2017) Through the complete ambient reconstruction of several houses, it is a rare example of a settlement that offers data not only on the character and peculiarities of residential architecture, material and spiritual culture, but also on the very organization of life and activities in the settlement. Through the educational and

tourist activities of the contents offered by this complex, this locality is popularized but also the values of the Neolithic culture and its development phases in the Skopje region are pointed out.

2/ Archaeological site “Skupi”

The archaeological site “Skupi” is located not far from the city center in the immediate vicinity of the village Zlokukjani. Formed on a large military camp - castrum, the city in the early Roman period was the largest ancient city on the territory of Macedonia. The remains discovered so far - theater (from the early 2nd century), civil basilica (4th century), Christian basilica (5-6th century), city villa (second half of the 4th century), bath and street, but also the eastern and western necropolis, offer opportunity for presentation of a certain period of time through interpretation of cultural traditions and architectural achievements in a wider time frame.

3/ The Skopje fortress “Kale”

“Kale” is another attractive destination with historical layers confirmed by archaeological excavations. The planned museums of prehistory, the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period built in the walls of the fortress, will only complement the impression that visitors will get by moving and experiencing the original archaeological architectural remains from the period of 5th, 3rd and 2nd millennium BC to the Ottoman period (15th century).

4/ Old Skopje Bazaar

“Old Skopje Bazaar” is in itself an open-air museum of vibrant living heritage. Although in recent decades it is increasingly losing its authenticity, there are still possibilities to start the process of musealization with an emphasis put on revitalizing the old crafts, the guild, the monuments of the Ottoman architectural treasury and the current museum infrastructure. The Skopje Bazaar was the

leading economic force of Skopje. At the same time, it was the main social space, the heart of the city, where the entire public life took place. The old buildings which form special ambient units, the numerous religious buildings, shopping malls (hans and bezistens) as the origins of the Bazaar, confirm the cultural and historical significance and value of this urban core. A walk through history offers the opportunity to follow the history of the crafts, which also reflects the development of crafts and trade in the past and the magic of learning about craft skills.

5/ Village Cucer

As an important resource for the presentation of the ethnographic wealth, living heritage and cultural specifics, we single out the **village Cucer** on the slopes of Skopska Crna Gora in the immediate vicinity of Skopje. As an ethno village, Cucer has for the most part retained its authenticity and characteristic ambient spirit. Some of the buildings are fully preserved, while the rest can be adapted for tourism. Through the folk architecture with significant historical value that has been preserved to this day, opportunities are offered to get acquainted with the ethnic specifics, tradition and the overall material, spiritual and social culture of a region.

6/ Matka

Matka is an important site that needs balance between the protection of its unique natural and the outstanding values of the cultural heritage, the several monastic churches (St. Andrea from the 14th century, St. Nedela from the 13-14th century, St. Nikola Shishevski from the 14th century, etc.) and the assigning of site into the function of tourism.

Recognizing the sites for possible development of open-air museums is the first step towards mobilizing scientific thought. The availability of the chosen

locations, in terms of accessibility – infrastructure connectivity and infrastructure equipment, is however, the second most important aspect for these locations to become reachable spots on the cultural map of Skopje.

Although most of the sites are poorly equipped in terms of infrastructure, difficult to access, neglected, abused and without scenarios for visitors' attraction and authentic experience, their potentials in terms of interpretation and communication of heritage is unquestionable and therefore deserve the mobilization of every national effort for their proper conversion into museal sites.

Having in mind that the archeological open-air museums usually base their attractiveness on the reconstructed buildings, it is especially important to respect the strictest recognized scientific methods, protection measures and permitted activities that are usually provided by legislation. The authenticity of the materials and techniques used should be clearly taken into account as one of the fundamental values of the protection of cultural heritage.

We must note that the inheritance within these sites consists not only of visible real estate, but it also includes modest buildings with numerous everyday functions that are strongly related to the way of life of a community, the place and the tradition and equally important in the process of musealization.

We must underline the importance of a broad interdisciplinary approach that connects untamed and endangered natural and cultural aspects, tangible and intangible aspects, and other associative features that can contribute towards authentic museum experiences. An interdisciplinary approach is needed for balanced inclusion of sports and recreation and cultural tourism aspects that will not shadow the innovative interpretation and educational component of heritage.

There is an urgent need for finding out forms for empowerment of the local community and involving the local population in museum activities as a way to keep alive their cultural identity.

We strongly believe that the city of Skopje with its surroundings offers many more attractive locations that have significant opportunities and potentials for establishing sustainable museum models, but this is the most needed starting point of the open-air museums voyage.

CONCLUSION

The paper presents a theoretical sustainable museum model based on open-air heritage on the territory of the city of Skopje. The development and current state of the field of museology offers a prism through which heritage can be interpreted and presented as a museological model. The evolution of new museum concepts develops along the development of the concept of heritage and the aspects of its protection. The review of the concept of open-air museum shows that it is flexible and in constant transformation in search for new forms of presentation of heritage in the open. It is also a concept that is both site and community specific and therefore operates in-situ.

We have presented several sites on the territory of the city of Skopje that can be re-thought as contemporary open-air museums. Presented sites include settlements, historical structures, urban conglomerations, and mixed cultural and natural sites.

A common standard is the availability and accessibility of sites in terms of infrastructure connectivity and infrastructure equipment. Then there is the readability of sites in terms of heritage, when each site separately approaches the qualities and program based on its history and narrative.

Then there is the aspect of the treatment of cultural heritage that should respect the strictest recognized scientific methods and techniques, protection measures and permitted activities that are usually provided by legislation. A great challenge is to finally grasp the aspect of the intangible heritage both in terms of everyday life and functions, but more in the terms of responsible perception of other associative features that can render authentic museum experiences. An interdisciplinary approach is needed for balancing all of the above-mentioned and also the inclusion of sports and recreation and cultural tourism aspects that will not shadow the innovative interpretation and educational component of heritage.

Finding out forms for empowerment of the local community and their active participation in the open-air heritage interpretation is also crucial for sustainable museum models.

The idea for revising the open-air museum concept as a sustainable museum model for today, seems more urgent in this time of social restrictions. The paper was instigated by the current pandemic, the impact it had on the cultural sector and museums, and the clear need to step forward from the traditional museum based solely on the museum building.

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