

Visiting the Past: Creating the Visitor Experience at Open-Air Museums

Mary-Catherine E. Garden

School of Law and Social Sciences Glasgow Caledonian University Glasgow, UK.

Abstract: Open-air museums have long been part of the cultural scene and for over a century have been one of the many different experiences available for tourists. Created around a tangible landscape of heritage, open-air museums offer their visitors a chance to 'step back' in time and experience 'the past' in an interactive and accessible manner. Open-air museums are complex social spaces that operate as a significant medium to portray 'the past' but which remain imperfectly understood. This omission, it is suggested, has a direct impact upon our ability to understand and evaluate the visitor experience offered at such places. Research undertaken to date has failed to offer a coherent, flexible and replicable means of analysis. This paper advocates a new, overarching methodology - the heritagescape - as a way to begin to understand the specific qualities of open-air museums and how they work within the broader context of heritage sites. At the same time, this method will enable researchers to gain a better understanding of the visitor experience as it relates to the landscape of heritage on offer at open-air museums and other heritage sites.

Keywords: Open-air museum, visitor experience, heritage sites, heritagescape, landscape.

Introduction

"Then, you step back in time through the portal of living history . . . The history depicted here is more than that something you'll observe and hear. You'll touch it. Smell it. Even try your hand at some of it . . . You may have a sense you were actually there."

Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation (April 2001)

At one point in their travels most people will have visited an open-air museum or living history site. These places, which come in a number of different shapes and sizes, are found throughout the world. Open-air museums are unique social spaces that portray the past by using a combination of old structures, the spaces in between - gardens, fields, streets and paths - and sometimes even people in strange dress engaged in unfamiliar activities to create a place of 'the past'. Here, rather than viewing 'the past' at a distance (as at 'traditional' museums) visitors to open-air museums and other living history sites are offered the opportunity to interact with the past, to walk into another time and to hear, touch and smell 'the past'.

Open-air museums and living history sites have long been part of the cultural scene and, for over a century, have been one of the many different experiences on offer to tourists. They provide their visitors with a vivid and interactive encounter with 'the past' and since 1891 when the Swedish museum, Skansen, opened its doors as the world's first open-air museum, visitors have been drawn

to these places. Although open-air museums go by a variety of names (including folk museum, living history museum, eco museum)¹ they all share the characteristic of "utilising a combination of buildings, objects and open space to communicate their message to the public" (Matelic, 1988: 79). The 'message' for open-air museums is portraying 'the past'. The focus of this paper will be to investigate how open-air museums communicate that message to visitors and, in doing so, how they create a sense of place and offer visitors an experience of 'the past' that is engaging and appears credible.

Open-Air Museums

Before turning to these critical questions it is important to look first at some of the characteristics of open-air museums. Next, in order to understand how they 'work' in their larger context of heritage sites and to begin to understand how they operate as distinct social spaces, it is essential to review some of the research that has already taken place.

Open-air museums offer one of the most common, accessible and tangible manifestations of the larger group 'heritage'. Found all over the world, they come in any number of different forms, portray a vast array of pasts and cover a wide variety of time periods. Open-air museums - along with a number of other places - have as their primary mandate, a brief to portray 'the past'. Like heritage sites in general, open-air museums tend to be widely acknowledged as places where individuals can identify with the past and locate themselves in it (Ashworth, 1998; Devine-Wright and Lyons, 1997: 33; Piccini, 1999; Teather and Chow, 2003; Walsh, 1992: 103). Furthermore, the material components of these sites are accepted to be key mechanisms in the creation and development of personal narratives (including identity) that may arise out of such places (e.g. Handler and Gable, 1996; Lowenthal, 1985, 1998; Uzzell, 1998: 22). The buildings, the streets and paths, the properties and even individual objects or artefacts offer a tangible hook on which individuals may hang their own stories of history, identity and membership in the larger group past. What is particularly remarkable about open-air museums is that even when the past that is being portraved is unfamiliar visitors nonetheless appear to be able to consistently engage - physically and emotionally - with these sites.

As a form of heritage site, open-air museums are distinguished by their use of combination of buildings, objects and properties to (re)create a landscape of the past. While some open-air museums have been constructed in-situ and on their original site (e.g. Colonial Williamsburg in the United States), many more have emerged out of a set of buildings that have been removed from their original location(s) to a new and unrelated site. This means that from the outset open-air museums must create a sense of place. A sense of place is a key ingredient in producing a space that appears natural and distinct yet is also integrated with its surroundings - visitors to the site must be able to recognise

that they are somewhere else. For open-air museums this sense of place is complicated by the fact that they must also successfully achieve a sense of the site as a place of 'the past'.

For visitors the allure of open-air museums may be found in a number of factors. First, the past that is on offer at an open-air museum has a particular quality that often allows an individual a closer relationship or greater familiarity with a past which may, in turn, offer an opportunity for visitors to buy into a national heritage. Alternately, the draw may lie in that as a learning experience, openair museums offer an experience that is less tedious than that found at 'traditional', display-based museums. In sharp contrast to these latter places, open-air museums are almost entirely experiential places where the past not only appears close at hand but it is often presented in a friendly and accessible style. There is an innate appeal to these sites.

Like other tourist sites and attractions, open-air museums are dependant on visitors, thus, these sites must develop strategies for marketing the site to the public by offering a valuable, enticing and enjoyable experience (Yale, 1998: 3). In the instance of open-air museums people are, for a variety of reasons, seeking out an experience of 'the past'. Open-air museums, as we have seen above, do however have another job and that is to create a distinct place apart, a place 'of the past', that will allow visitors to 'step back' and to engage with a place and a time that is significantly different to that in which they live. In essence, open-air museums must both create and maintain an illusion of 'the past'. What this means in practical terms is that along with the amenities and in addition to the health and safety measures that all sites must provide for their visitors, open-air museums must undertake to supply these same features within the context of a 'past' landscape. As we shall see, out of these circumstances particular issues arise.

Open-air Museums as Heritage Sites

Heritage sites are complicated and complex entities. Besides open-air museums they come in a variety of different forms: from roadside stop to stately home and from open-air museum to ancient monument, the variation amongst heritage sites is enormous. As yet, despite considerable effort, researchers have failed to come to agreement on just what a heritage site may, or may not, be and how these unique social spaces 'work'.

Over the past twenty years that heritage has been studied as a formal discipline (e.g. Fowler, 1992; Hewison, 1987) heritage sites and open-air museums have come under considerable scrutiny. Despite this there has been a failure to develop a replicable and flexible means of analysing heritage sites. At first glance this may appear a long way away from our consideration of the visitor experience at open-air museums. However, this author suggests this is because

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we have not yet fully grasped what it is that characterises heritage sites. We have an imperfect sense of how these places 'work' as unique social spaces and as a medium for conveying experiences of 'the past', thus we are unable to comprehend fully the impact and interaction of visitors with the site. Further, this lack of an articulated and standardised methodology has seriously impeded our ability to understand how heritage sites are recognised and perceived. Both of these are key elements in comprehending, and indeed providing for, the visitor experience.

Extending this another step, this failure (to develop a methodology) has also resulted in an inability to distinguish between different sorts of encounters with the past. Not only are we unable to determine this between *different* types of site (i.e. open-air museums and theme parks), nor are we able to distinguish between different experiences at the *same* sort of site. As result we neither have the means nor the vocabulary to mark the differences between individual places. Given the enormous variation among open-air museums this is a critical omission.

There are two other trends which have emerged out of the way that heritage (as a cultural phenomenon and as discipline) has been approached. Both of these trends have had considerable impact on the way that open-air museums have been viewed and investigated previously. The first of these centres on the issue of knowledge exchange.

Over time, within the discipline of heritage studies several splits have developed. One of the most prominent is a divide between the practitioners (e.g. site managers or policy makers) and the academy. The former tends to be almost exclusively located in practical applications whilst the latter tends to locate itself in analyses of the processes underlying heritage as a social construct. Unfortunately, because the transfer of knowledge between these two groups is not always efficient or sustained this means that there is a tendency for work to fall into the category of *either* management/policy *or* theory. Academy and practitioner have not been fully integrated.

In the end this means that because, in general, management decisions, whether daily or long-term, do not seem to be linked to the theoretical developments and because the knowledge gained in one part of the sector does not feed into the other parts, two things occur. First, management decisions - while thoughtful - are not always linked to underlying and universal processes. In some cases this may mean that the predictive qualities of those decisions could be impeded. Second, the lack of regular, consistent and coherent transfer of knowledge may lead to the syndrome of 'reinventing the wheel'. Instead of developing an overarching methodology that offers a coherent, consistent and transparent means of investigating open-air museums and other heritage sites, the trend has been for many researchers to resort to using different language and methods for each new site (or sites) that they analyse.

How to Identify the Visitor Experience

What has become clear over the course of the preceding discussion is that open-air museums and heritage sites both tend to be intuitively recognised but poorly comprehended. Without this critical understanding and without developing an overarching and replicable method to investigate these places, any future investigations will be hampered and will no doubt fall into the same patterns as the previous analyses. Without a common language and a common methodology we will be unable to move research forward.

Clearly the lack of a comprehensive understanding of open-air museums and other heritage sites lies in the way of moving research forward. It is suggested here that the best way of circumventing this is to consider the sites as landscapes. This has the benefit of providing a methodology that can take into account their unique role as socially constructed and highly experiential places. Thus, a new method of analysis, the *heritagescape* (Garden, 2004) provides a coherent means by which sites may be evaluated. The heritagescape is predicated first on the understanding that all heritage sites are made up of a landscape and second, that there are universal processes which may be found at these sites. Critically, the heritagescape is made up of a set of 'guiding principles' that allow features at an individual site to be assessed against a constant rather than against each other. Instead of imposing a set of criteria, the individual personality of a particular site is allowed to emerge and we are able to begin to discern those universal features that make heritage sites 'work'.

In practical terms this means that sites will be evaluated on their material components (e.g. buildings, signs, objects, etc.) that will be assessed against the guiding principles. Concentrating our efforts on the 'furniture' that makes up a site means that our attention is drawn to the individual components. This means that not only are the underlying processes (notably change) that accompany a site over time highlighted, we are also able to start to the identifying the elements that work together to create a place of 'the past'. Ultimately, this will allow us to gain a better understanding of how visitors experience, perceive and react to a site as it changes and develops.

There are a couple of critical points about the heritagescape and the guiding principles that need to be elaborated before continuing. The heritagescape is a very specific form of landscape that relates wholly to heritage sites. It defines a particular space that is distinct from but, at the same time, related to the larger landscape (environment) in which it is located. In turn, the guiding principles are the means by which the heritagescape may be identified and analysed. Each of the guiding principles has a specific role within the analysis and is based upon ideas of *boundaries*, *cohesion* and *visibility*. It is critical to the understanding of the heritagescape to recognise that not only must all three of the guiding principles always be present, it is also the interplay of the three of them together that will create the heritagescape and will, in turn, determine the way the heritagescape is manifested at different sites. It is this aspect that relates directly to the quality and the nature of a particular encounter with the past. It is the resonance of the heritagescape that contributes to the final appearance and operation of the site and it is this quality that is directly related to the overall visitor experience.

The following pages will analyse the visitor experience that is offered at four open-air museums, within the specific context of the three questions asked in the introduction: (1) how do open air museums communicate the past to their visitors? and, in doing so; (2) how do they create a sense of place and of 'the past'? allowing them to; (3) offer an experience of the past that is engaging and credible. The author will use the concept of the heritagescape to explore how these places manage to present an engaging and credible past (or pasts) and, at the same time, satisfy visitor needs, accommodate health and safety provisions and incorporate other modern elements into the tangible landscape of heritage that is on offer at these sites. All of this will be wrapped in larger ideas of place and the way that open-air museums 'work' as distinct, social spaces. Along the way we will begin to respond to Bella Dicks, as she ponders the idea of a 'historical place-identity' and asks "What place do they [the visitors] imagine they have visited as they passed back out through the turnstiles?" (2000: 195).

Case Studies: England, Denmark, USA and Sweden

Turning now to the case studies, we can now directly apply this idea of the heritagescape in order to begin to answer some of the questions that are critical to this paper. The process begins with visits to sites. The physical components of the site: the fences that define the edge of the space, the gates and buildings that provide the means to enter the site; and, the signs and maps that direct us through the site are just some of the ordinary and omnipresent features that come under scrutiny. Applying these individual elements against each of the guiding principles means that we will begin to understand how the landscape of the site is made up and how it works to create both an experience of 'the past' and to exist as a place apart that engages visitors.

The first site, *Beamish, the North of England Open-Air Museum*, is located in the North-East of England near Durham. Opened in 1970 this site has consistently attracted high numbers of visitors - including many repeats - and has garnered a number of visitor and sector awards (e.g. Best UK Attraction for Group Visits 2002) and is an English Tourism Council 'Quality Assured' Visitor Attraction. Yet Beamish has also come under considerable scrutiny. Figuring in both Robert Hewison's 'Heritage Industry' (1987) and later in Shanks and Tilley's treatment of various means of portraying the past in their 1992 book 'Reconstructing Archaeology' this site has come under criticism for soft-focus nostalgia and for removing this past from the larger historical context.

Beamish is made up of four thematic areas: the Town; the Colliery Village (with Drift Mine); Home Farm and Pockerley Manor; and, the Waggon Way. Each of these areas offers a slightly different encounter with the past. Most of the interpretative areas offer a strong sense of being 'in' the past and among these the Colliery Village is particularly resonant. Here, the stage-setting devices are strong. The gardens with their ramshackle sheds, the dusty road and the pithead building all contribute to the experience of this area. As well, the view outwards to a wooded area helps to define this area as a distinct space. Yet, the village is not free of modern intrusions. There is ample evidence of security systems and other modern devices. Many of the pit cottages are blocked off to visitors and the drift mine must provide all of its visitors with red plastic hardhats. The 'Town' with only a very few exceptions, *overall* is able to sustain a sense of the past which is remarkably intense in the outside spaces along the High Street. Post boxes, a 'To Let' sign and window dressing all contribute to the illusion.

This vivid sense of the past is not as strong in the two remaining areas. Pockerley Manor and Home Farm are also, in varying degrees, quite resonant spaces but in both instances the farmyards and outside areas are empty and, in the case of Pockerley Manor, weed-filled. This feeling of abandonment or inactivity stands in high contrast to the actively interpreted interiors. Home Farm in particular suffers because it is separated from the rest of the site by a road and is located on the side of the site that has a weaker interpretative focus. The fact that it is itself made up of a combination of modern barns and pens and historic structures - some of which house the tearoom and toilets - gives the Home Farm area a very 'mixed' feel. It is not surprising that the site identifies this area as one of its most poorly visited spaces (Woolley, 2003).

Another problem at Beamish, as at so many very large sites, is that the space between the areas is vast and it is hard to maintain the experience and the sense of the site. In terms of the guiding principles, it is clear that each of them is quite strong and together the three operate at roughly the same sort of level/ strength. Beamish tends, on the whole, to be both a distinct space and, at the same time, well-integrated into its larger surroundings. The problem is that there are areas (the Town and the Colliery Village) within the larger site which seem almost to be sites within a site and it is little wonder that museum staff identify these two places as the most visited of all the areas at Beamish. It could be argued that these areas seem to have their own individual heritagescapes that often threaten to overwhelm that of Beamish as a whole.

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Den Gamle By, located in Århus, Denmark, is composed of buildings of different ages and from a variety of places which are sent around a pond. The job of creating a place 'apart' and of 'the past' is particularly difficult as Den Gamle By is located within an urban environment at a busy city intersection. Nonetheless, this site has managed to create a very strong sense of being 'elsewhere' within a larger landscape. As the museum considers that "the streets are rooms too" (Kjær, 2001) the outside spaces become much more than the means to move from one place to another. As one moves through the site one can see and recognise the layout of town squares, city streets and even miniature neighbourhoods, all of which work together to create cohesion. Critically, at Dem Gamle By one tends to remain within the past. The guiding principles are all very strong at Den Gamle By and one has a very strong sense of the experience of being in the past and, as such, the site as an entity is recognised.

All of the above would seem to suggest that the landscape of Den Gamle By is very 'clean' with few modern intrusions. In fact, this site has chosen to mark each of the buildings with blue and white signs which offer, in three languages, the name of the structure and its original location and function. Furthermore, some buildings have an extra brass sign marking a corporate sponsor. While neither of these signs is large, they are quite visible. However, these elements, whilst visible and present on the landscape, do not dominate. The author suggests that this is because the site as a cohesive unit and, as a place, creates a strong heritagescape meaning that the experience of the past and of the place are enough to carry over and include these modern elements.

Den Gamle By also offers a chance to examine the role of change and the impact that this process may have upon a site and the individuals who interact with it. Beginning in 1998 the Mintmaster's Residence, a very large and imposing structure, was added into the central Town Square area. This necessitated the removal of a significant portion of the hillside (which formed one of the boundaries of the site) as well as the relocation of two other buildings. As this is a familiar landscape to Den Gamle By's many visitors, it would be logical to assume that an intrusion like this into the centre of the site and into one of their central interpretative areas would have quite serious ramifications. Critically, it appears that this was accomplished without taking away from the essential identity of the site, the boundaries changed but the site did not. Both visibility and the marked, physical boundaries were altered, yet the site seems to have remained a cohesive entity and this new element has been assimilated into the landscape of the past at Den Gamle By. Because Den Gamle By, as a site, is able both to achieve a strong sense of place and to be fully integrated into its larger environment, change has been subsumed by the strong identity of the site. Here, each of the three guiding principles is very robust and the site has a strong and vibrant heritagescape offering an experience of the past that is vivid and sustained.

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The heritagescape at *Henry Ford's Greenfield Village* in Dearborn, Michigan appears quite different to the above two sites. Made up of a variety of structures (original and recreated) the site celebrates American Invention and is an homage to Ford's idol, Thomas Edison (inventor of the light bulb). Most of the buildings at Greenfield Village come with a pedigree. All in one place visitors can see Thomas Edison's workshop, the bicycle shop owned by the Wright brothers before their historic Kitty Hawk flight and a seventeenth-century Cotswold cottage. Around all of this runs a boundary, which in the area of the site closest to the entrance and most apparent to visitors, is marked by a very visible, very solid red brick wall.

Using the guiding principles to identify the visitor experience at this site allows us to see almost immediately that cohesion has a much-reduced role. The spaces between the buildings are just that - spaces - there are few street signs or other stage setting devices that create a sense of the past. The signage does nothing to improve this situation. There is a huge variety of signs and the only 'standard' one is a green sign found in front of the buildings that offers the name, date, original location and sometimes a brief social history of the structure. These signs tend to feel like giant labels on display cases. Because the cohesion is so weak it is difficult to identify (visibly or otherwise) what is or is not the site. As a result, when one regularly glimpses the Ford plants situated beyond the limits of the site the apparently strong, physical boundaries tend to fade and the site as a discrete entity tends to blur. The lack of cohesion may also have arisen out of the emphasis on the individual building rather than the site as a whole. While it is a hallmark of this institution it may also be that it is a strong factor standing in the way of an experience of 'the past'. This also means that Greenfield Village becomes more of a 'museum of buildings' and less of a place. What one sees at Greenfield Village is that all three of the guiding principles are quite weak which, in turn, means that the site does not stand strongly as either a place apart or of the past and, in the end, the experience is much more display-oriented. Finally, because the site is so firmly set as a sort of a tableau it appears that it would be virtually impossible to accommodate any kind of sustained change seen at a site (like Den Gamle By) and that would not impact the overall identity of the site.

As the final site example we will turn to the world's oldest and perhaps bestknown open-air museum: *Skansen*. Located on the Djurgården, an island in the Stockholm archipelago, this site has long been used as both a template and exemplar and, over time, it has become a sort of shorthand for all open-air museums. It might, therefore, reasonably be expected that Skansen would have a strong heritagescape. Locating itself within its environment, Skansen incorporates the immediate topography and vegetation into the site and has created a natural-looking environment. In several places, including the entrance building, the site appears to deliberately draw the view outwards to modern skyline of Stockholm.

Inside Skansen there are very 'strong' areas where an encounter with the past is particularly vivid. Yet on the whole, partly because of the size of the site and partly because of the variety of different roles that Skansen as a place performs, the site does not hold together very well. The spaces between the interpretative areas are not always well thought out and often visitors lose track of 'the past', despite the fact that in the farmsteads and around some of the interpretative areas there is considerable stage setting. As a result of its great size the visual clues need to be strong and in many cases not only are they weak, they are absent. Furthermore, several of the areas at Skansen have been given over to modern functions so that as a visitor one is constantly moving in and out of the past. One minute the site appears like a public park, the next like a fair and the next like something of 'the past'. Simply put, Skansen fulfils too many different roles to be a cohesive and defined place of the past. Although Skansen occupies a strong role in the hearts and minds of Swedes and acts a cultural and folk icon (Wikander, 2003), in fact, on the ground it melts into its surroundings and takes on the appearance of just one more among the many attractions on the Djurgården.

Conclusions

An important theme of this paper was to explore how the visitor experience was created at open-air museums. Along the way, it became apparent that without a better sense of open-air museums as places and without taking into account their unique qualities as highly experiential places that convey a message of 'the past', our understanding of these museums will remain static. The key to getting at the heart of the visitor experience was provided by the use of a new methodology - the heritagescape - that allowed a consistent and coherent means of analysis and that enabled us to view each site individually. Previously, the trend towards locating analyses outside the site meant that not only were the underlying processes and some of the more subtle changes being obscured, there was also a tendency for these sites to acquire a veneer of 'sameness' and to appear as largely homogeneous entities (Prentice, 1991).

The remit to portray the past means that open-air museums must achieve a balance between creating a convincing landscape of heritage and, at the same time, accommodate the many modern devices that will guarantee the safety of visitors and will ensure that their needs will be satisfied. The case studies demonstrated that open-air museums achieve this in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Den Gamle By was an example of a site that managed to carve out a distinct space of the past despite being located in the heart of a city. The new method of analysis revealed that this site managed to knit together the inside and outside spaces into a larger whole. This meant that visitors had

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an unbroken sense of 'the past'. On the other hand, Greenfield Village offered a look at an open-air museum that created a very different type of visitor experience. Here, the museum focused on the interior spaces that were much stronger than the generic and modern spaces outside. This, along with a mixed approach to the interiors and a lack of standardised signage, means that visitors are constantly walking in and out of the past. All this worked together to make Greenfield Village less a place of 'the past' and more a 'museum of buildings'.

What is important about this new means of analysis and about the new data that has emerged - giving us a broader and more complex view of the visitor experience at open-air museums - is that it is not a judgement on the quality or 'credibility' of a specific interaction with the past. This is one of the most important aspects of this investigation. Previously, researchers attempting to evaluate the visitor experiences at open-air museums have framed their investigations in terms of 'good/bad' or 'real/not real'. One of the most damaging consequences of this approach is that it has tended to polarise the view of the visitor experience. This also tended to obscure the underlying elements that actually contribute to the nature of the encounter with 'the past' that visitors will experience. Instead, considering the mechanics of the experience i.e. the 'how', allows us to explore the visitor experience in much greater depth. By looking at the means by which open-air museums manage to create a distinct place of the past not only can we assess these places on a site-by-site basis and compare one to another, we now also have the means to determine why within one particular place some areas of a site 'work' better and are more compelling to visitors than others.

This is a critical advance both for open-air museums and for heritage sites in general. As has been seen in the course of this paper, a comprehensive understanding of the open-air museum as a unique social space is tied directly to the visitor experience at that place. However, the lack of a consistent and coherent methodology meant that researchers were unable to move forward from the innate understandings that were driving research. Critically, this meant that for investigators trying to differentiate between the many kinds of sites that portrayed the past there were few alternatives but to rely on sets of fixed criteria (e.g. Stone and Planel, 1999: xix). Given that these standards are often shared by a number of very diverse places it was difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between them. At its simplest, this meant that we were unable to distinguish between an open-air museum and a theme park - despite the fact that often not only is the purpose of these places usually quite dissimilar - they also provide significantly different experience of 'the past'.

Looking at open-air museums from a new perspective and with a new approach has allowed us to begin to comprehend the many different ways that these complex places convey the message of the past to the public. A strength of this new method also lies in its ability to offer a means to bridge the gap between the academy and heritage practitioners. The heritagescape provides us with a means of analysis that is flexible, replicable and transparent and, in doing so, it gives us the words with which to describe these places. Our understanding of open-air museums and particularly of the experience of the past that they offer can only benefit from this.

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About the author

Dr Mary-Cate Garden is a Lecturer in Heritage Studies. She trained as an archaeologist and has spent many years working in museums, with government and with private heritage agencies in Canada and in the United States. Her recent research has examined open-air museums and living history sites.

¹ For the sake of clarity, the term 'open-air museum' will be used throughout this paper. It should be read in the broadest sense and taken, in this context, to include the many similar sites that portray the past.

