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Constructing Architectural History at the Open-Air Museum

The Highland Village Museum of Nova Scotia and the Highland Folk Museum of Scotland

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Though not the most common location to seek out and analyse architectural history, the open-air museum, a type of institution which typically has folk-culture, agriculture or early industrial change as its focus, exhibits architectural history in the form of numerous and closely arranged buildings selected for their ability to represent an era, structural use or innovation. One of the primary challenges experienced by museum managers is to ensure a collection of architectural exemplars that adequately represents the culture or time period the museum has as its focus, and to organise these buildings in the landscape in a way that visitors can understand. There is more than one type of visitor to the open-air museum, however—aside from the typically under-informed tourist, these museums support and indeed are supported by a community, often of a specific cultural background. This paper will focus on two museums, the Highland Folk Museum in Scotland and the Highland Village Museum in Nova Scotia, and the ways that their associated Highland Gaelic communities engage with and authenticate the architectural history exhibited at the museums. This paper will suggest that despite being moderated by the often academic approaches of the museum management, as the buildings included on site are used for accessing memories and traditions by their related communities in the present-day it is this community authority which dictates the inclusion, appearance and use of the buildings. As such, this paper will conclude that open-air museums, which have faced criticism in the past from architectural historians and heritage conservationists as being locations of fakery and fiction, can in some instances be genuine sites of cultural and community response and as such provide architectural historians with the



opportunity to examine an altogether more modern history – that of the selection of and interaction with architectural history by communities for the purpose of extending cultural memory.

At two open-air museums in two countries separated by the Atlantic Ocean, a very specific history and culture is on the display, that of the Highland Scot from the seventeenth- to early-twentieth centuries. These museums—one in the Highlands of Scotland, the Highland Folk Museum, and the other in an isolated part of Nova Scotia in Canada, the Highland Village Museum—were established by separate communities and two decades apart in the first half of the twentieth century, yet their stated purpose is essentially the same. Through the use of architectural exemplars, artefacts and performance, the museums attempt to preserve, promote and support the Highland culture which the communities that surround them descend from. Given the relative rarity of open-air museums in the much larger array of museums and cultural institutions internationally, the existence of two open-air museums with the same focus, yet situated in different countries and established from divergent community histories, is fortuitous.

In addressing these two specific open-air museum examples, this paper draws conclusions directed primarily at those open-air museums which are not based around a largely *in situ* collection of buildings, such as Colonial Williamsburg in the United States; instead the emphasis is on those museums where buildings have had to be relocated, reconstructed from reclaimed period-appropriate materials, or even replicated completely with modern construction techniques. In making this distinction the paper directs attention to the motivations behind the acquisition and construction of the architectural artefacts. Importantly, at these types of open-air museums the management, and the communities that these museums are associated with, have made choices to include specific buildings rather than inheriting them through many eras of human occupation on site. The various processes of obtaining buildings for the museums, the interpretation of these buildings once they are put in place, and the issue of “authenticity” with regards to the expectations of the general visitor, the architectural historian, and the cultural community for which the museums act as mastheads for, can thus be considered. While superficially these open-air museums may appear to have the preservation of rare architectural examples at their heart, in fact the material authenticity of these buildings—that is, whether they are actually intact artefacts from the period they claim to represent—is not of primary focus. Cultural preservation and celebration, and the ability for the community to access and commune with a collective memory, is of greater importance. As architectural historians we may therefore be, at least initially, dissuaded from calling on these open-air museums as sources of historical data because the buildings may be in some way be regarded as being “inauthentic”—when in fact they can tell us about a different kind of history: a modern response, through architectural

exhibition, to industrialisation and a fear of cultural decline. While perhaps a material, heritage-discipline “authenticity” might elude us at these museums, the community-driven experiential “authenticity” may abound.

In order to consider the role of architectural history at the Highland Folk Museum in the north of Scotland and Highland Village Museum in Nova Scotia, Canada (and indeed the role of architectural history in open-air museums around the world), it would first be pertinent to briefly outline exactly what an “open-air museum” is for the purpose of defining the scope of this discussion. When we think about open-air museums, we probably conjure up one of a few different sites—Skansen, in Sweden, which is suggested to be the original “outdoor” museum and which focused on the preservation of local folk culture, or perhaps something more akin to Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria—a site intended to provide what Michael Stratton referred to as “edutainment.”¹ Open-air museums have spread around the world since the late nineteenth century, and it would be far beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to encapsulate their many nuances and specialities. Their development and their increasingly numerous areas of focus have been addressed elsewhere, and do not need to be repeated here.² What has been less considered is whether we, as architectural historians, have a clear idea of what to expect from open-air museums, and furthermore, how to best engage with them. In 1986 Edward Chappell suggested that open-air museums could be utilised as sites for understanding generational processes of restoration and renovation, as well as providing a cross-section of buildings that demonstrated the different types of architectural styles and forms available to various socio-economic groups.³ This is certainly true, but there is additional value in this type of museum which as yet appears to have gone unacknowledged—that the histories of these institutions, the decisions that have founded and developed their architectural collections, and the way these buildings-as-artefacts are authenticated (and by whom) provide insight into the relationship between architectural history and community memory and cultural celebration.

It must also be acknowledged at this point that the open-air museum model has been criticised by architectural historians and conservationists, in part because of issues with material authenticity and in part because of the blurring of roles between the provision of information and the need to attract and entertain visitors.⁴ Generally, because open-air museums rely on a collection

1. Michael Stratton, “Open-air and Industrial Museums: Windows on to a Lost World or Graveyards for Unloved Buildings?” in *Preserving the Past: The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain*, ed. Michael Hunter (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1996), 156.

2. See, for instance, Jay Anderson, “Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 290-306; Thomas Angotti, “Planning the Open-Air Museum and Teaching Urban History: The United States in the World Context,” *Museum International* 34, no. 3 (2009): 179-88; Edward A. Chappell, “Open-Air Museums: Architectural History for the Masses,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999/2000): 334-41; Linda Young, “Villages That Never Were: The Museum Village as a Heritage Centre,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 321-38.

3. Edward A. Chappell, “Architectural Recording and the Open-Air Museum: A View from the Field,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986), 25-26.

4. See, for instance, Paul Oliver, “Representing and Re-Presenting the Vernacular: The Open-Air Museum,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Working Paper Series* 118 (1998): 1-16; Colin Sorensen, “Theme Parks and Time Museums,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 60-73; Stratton, “Open-air and Industrial Museums,” 156-76; Young, “Villages That Never Were,” 321-38.



of buildings for their form and display of information—buildings that through their inclusion infer an authentic portrayal of a time or culture gone by—visitors expect that these buildings are “real”: that is, that they actually were built in the time they claim to represent. If the buildings are replicas, visitors expect to be told this; if not overtly, at least in signage or guidance notes so that the experience of being “transported back in time” is not suddenly interrupted by the realisation that they have been duped by a false artefact without explanation. As architectural historians or conservationists, we have similar expectations of the buildings on display in open-air museums, but these expectations extend further into the realm of accuracy, chronological clarity and stylistic purity. While for the average visitor these buildings would be thought sufficiently authentic if they *looked* authentic and if the museum—as an unchallenged educational authority—presented them as authentic; as historians we might want to delve deeper. Were these buildings *in situ*, original to the site prior to the area becoming an open-air museum? If not, how did they come to be on site—were they relocated in their entirety, or disassembled part by part in order to be reassembled faithfully at the museum? Are the buildings what we might term “representations” of a style or type of structure, perhaps constructed on site from reclaimed parts of different buildings of the original period in order to produce a single exemplar structure? Or are these buildings modern replicas, made to look “period” but using modern materials and construction techniques? And since appearing on site, have the museum staff stripped back any non-period-appropriate layers or additions, “re-interpreting” them in order to freeze them at a moment in history? These are all important questions, and should certainly be given more consideration by architectural historians and conservationists alike, but for the moment it will be sufficient to acknowledge that these issues exist and that, at least when it comes to the ideal of “material” authenticity (which for the sake of this discussion will be understood to mean period-appropriate and untainted structures), open-air museums certainly fall into in a grey area.

When open-air museums originally began to appear in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they grew from the perceived need by communities to save cultures—and the traditional buildings that served as physical markers of these cultures—from encroaching modernity and industrialisation. From the beginning these museums were founded with the aim of preserving a way of life, and buildings played an important part in this. The buildings put on display demonstrated traditional skills in their construction, design responses to local climates and material availability, and the social patterns of the communities which these buildings housed. How the communities used the structures, and the nuances of these structures’ designs, were important not just for the culture to which they related, but to the anthropologists, historians and architects who studied them. But the buildings—though by far the most obvious and physically apparent element of these open-air museums—reflected only part of the aim of the museums.

In Scotland, Isobel Grant founded the Highland Folk Museum in 1935 by initiating a region-wide search for artefacts, focusing particularly on agricultural equipment, traditional crafts and domestic utensils. She was driven, she wrote in 1949, by “the realisation that if much of the old setting of our daily life was to be saved, there was little time to delay,” and thus she founded a museum which she initially named The Shelter—“because it was to shelter homely ancient Highland things from destruction.”⁵ She catalogued regional variations of artefacts, saving, for instance, many different types of ploughs that originated from communities all over the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Her museum began in a more traditional format, but quickly developed into a site which used buildings as both artefacts and areas for display. By the 1950s she had contracted traditionally-trained craftsmen to build three different region-specific houses, using only traditional methods and period-appropriate materials. These buildings acted as storage spaces for the artefacts she had collected over the preceding twenty years, but were faithful replicas of vernacular architecture in their own right.⁶

5. I. F. Grant, *Am Fasgadh: The Highland Museum at Kingussie: Inverness-Shire* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1949), 3.

6. I. F. Grant, *The Making of Am Fasgadh* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), 180-83.

In Nova Scotia, the Highland Village Museum was also established out of the pressing need to collect and preserve artefacts and the Highland culture, though in this case it was the culture of the Scottish diaspora in a region of Canada. Having departed from their “homeland” of Scotland as a result of the Highland Clearances which began in the early eighteenth century, the Nova Scotian Scottish community had thus left behind many of the tangible elements of their homeland’s culture, producing as a result a regional-Scottish hybrid which was subsequently placed under increasing pressure by industrialisation in the nineteenth century. The urgency to maintain a link to this Nova Scotian-Scottish culture through intangible practices (the Gaelic language and traditional music and crafts, for instance) was keenly felt.⁷ Though the intention to acquire and use buildings at the Highland Village Museum site was stated from the point of its founding in 1955, once land was secured for the Museum the first order of business was to fundraise, and the most efficient way of achieving this was to hold an annual day of traditional Highland dance, music and other traditions. Attendees at the inaugural 1962 event remarked that the Museum’s site—at the time marked only by a hastily assembled stage for the festivities—was ideal as its landscape had all the hallmarks of “home”—the Scottish Highlands.⁸

7. Ian McKay has discussed the region-wide concern to preserve the traditional culture of the Highland Scots, along with other folk cultures, in his works *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994) and (with Robin Bates) *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

8. Nova Scotia Highland Village Society, *Highland Village Day (1962-1986)* (Iona, Nova Scotia: Highland Village Society, 1986), 4.



In the intervening decades between the foundation of both Highland museums and now, acquisition of buildings have been one of several priorities. In Scotland at the Highland Folk Museum, the development of buildings began slowly, but this changed dramatically with the acquisition of and subsequent relocation to a much larger plot of land. Replication plays a significant role at the Highland Folk Museum: situated at the far end of the eighty acre site, through a wooded glen that marks an unspoken division between it and the remainder of the Museum, is an early eighteenth century village, “Baile Glen,” which was built with period-appropriate skills and materials (see fig. 1). The creation of Baile Glen was reliant on experimental archaeological techniques, built largely to the plan of a nearby village—long since absent from the landscape—which was surveyed in the 1990s. Baile Glen’s landscaping, layout and setting, as well as the very materials used in its construction, give the visitor the experience of being completely cut-off from modern life. A staff member, well versed in the intricacies of the buildings’ research, development and construction, is on hand to explain the workings of the village, and further information is provided on the experimental approach to the reconstruction in the Museum’s guidebook.⁹ That Baile Glen is a modern replication is—though not overtly stated to visitors—certainly not denied either, and in fact it continues as a site of experimental archaeology, with several structures in obvious stages of construction using different techniques. In this sense, the Museum provides a practical and scientific way of allowing both visitors and descendants of the Highland community to peel back the layers of architectural history—seeing not just the end result of replication (and thus enjoying the time-travelling experience this encourages), but also the modern-day research and construction efforts too.

The Highland Folk Museum has a further two sections which are markedly different in design and approach to the reconstructed

9. Highland Folk Museum, *Highland Folk Museum: Newtonmore Visitor Guide* (Newtonmore, Inverness-shire: Highland Folk Museum, 2011), 35-37.



Figure 1. (L) “Baile Glen” Township (replica 1700s township, constructed 1990s-ongoing) at Highland Folk Museum, Scotland, 2012. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. (Opposite)Aultlarie Farm Steading (early 1880s, in situ, at far left); temporary farming storage facilities under construction (2012, middle background), and Aultlarie Tin Cottage (c.1890s, in situ, at far right), Highland Folk Museum, Scotland, 2012. Photograph by the author.



village. The first of these sections, comprising a working farm named Aultlarie (see fig. 2), is complete with animals and seasonal crop, and includes the only *in situ* structures at the Museum (Aultlarie Farm Steading, early 1800s; Aultlarie Tin Cottage, c.1890s; Aultlarie Farmhouse mid-late 1800s; Cart Shed 1800s). Heritage listed in its own right, Aultlarie attempts to perform dual functions as both an operating agricultural business and an exhibition site for farming artefacts. Though the farm's buildings are authentic in the sense that they lie where they were originally constructed and have been deemed to have heritage significance, the years of continued occupation (and unavoidable alterations and additions) at the farm give it an air of haphazard purpose within the broader museum structure—particularly because other museum buildings have been inserted amongst the farm's landscape (for instance, a c.1928 garage, relocated to the Aultlarie farm site in 1999). Costumed museum staff place themselves around the Aultlarie, performing “traditional” skills, and this is necessary as a way of visually linking the farm section of the museum to the remaining parts of the site. Without these staff, visitors might assume the farm is in fact a private business or home, particularly because farm-workers are also on site undertaking modern agricultural tasks. Both Baile Glen replica village and Aultlarie Farm show visitors many layers of human occupation and subsequent elements of architectural history – but these parts of the Museum have contemporary uses too (scientific and academic on the one hand, and agricultural on the other).

It is the central section of the Highland Folk Museum (see fig. 3), and the area which gets the most foot fall through its location at the entrance of the site, which appears the most confusing chronologically and stylistically. Here a relocated 1950s post office and 1930s store (both attached to the heritage-listed nineteenth-century Aultlarie Farm House) are located metres from a relocated railway steading from 1863, and domestic buildings are situated within close proximity to industrial structures (such as a c.1900s “summerhouse” originally used for holidaying within view of a c.1900s joiner's workshop and c.1930s wind generator). These structures have been gathered through years of donations, acquisitions and replication projects. Though attempts are made





Figure 3. Daluiane Summerhouse (early 1900s, relocated 2009, at far left background); Shepherd's Bothy and Fank (early 1900s; relocated 2007, at far left foreground); Highland Cottage (replica 1890s house, constructed 2009-10, at middle foreground); Knockbain School (1925, relocated 1999, far right background); Telephone Kiosk (c.1930s; relocated, at far right foreground), Highland Folk Museum, Scotland, 2012. Photograph by the author.

at keeping to a vague chronological logic, the issue of space and previous placements of earlier acquisitions hamper such efforts. Manager Bob Powell has acknowledged that this is one of the central challenges of the open-air museum type—the attainment of buildings is often unpredictable, dependent on availability and funding, and even on the consistency of vision of the museum's evolving management team over time.¹⁰

The issue of situating buildings in a logical manner is also experienced at the forty-acre Highland Village Museum in Nova Scotia, though at this site the use of costumed, often Gaelic-speaking guides provides a prominent method of creating a site narrative in a way that the Highland Folk Museum in Scotland does not attempt. The Highland Village Museum uses landscaping and clear pathways to direct visitors around the site, ensuring the buildings are viewed in a loose chronological order. The first building visitors arrive at is a replica Black House (see fig. 4), one of the first structures constructed on the site in the early 1970s, and which was built from plans brought over from Scotland.¹¹ No signs explain the building's form or construction; instead a costumed guide—who greets approaching visitors in Gaelic and continues to converse in the language with followed English translations—is on hand to provide information. This technique is repeated around the Museum, and puts the control of the museum experience in the hands of the visitor: they might, for instance, be discouraged by the use of a foreign language in what is otherwise an English speaking region (though Canada is bilingual, French is not typically heard in Nova Scotia) and choose not to engage with the staff. They might use the opportunity to ask questions about the period-specific tasks the staff are carrying out as they converse with visitors. Or, and less likely, they might ask questions about the buildings themselves. The knowledge that the visitors gain depends on the questions

10. Bob Powell (Highland Folk Museum Principal Museums Officer), in conversation with author, 2012.

11. Nova Scotia Highland Village Society, *Highland Village Day (1962-1986)*, 15.

the visitors think to ask in the first place. At a small number of the buildings at the Museum informational leaflets are placed inconspicuously—such as in the entrance of the Malagawatch Church which was relocated to the Museum from across the Bras d’Or lake by barge in 2003, but otherwise it is up to the individual visitor to enquire about the buildings. Without asking such questions, visitors would be left uninformed of the buildings’ significance and origins.

At the Museum in Nova Scotia, even more so than at the Museum in Scotland, the emphasis is on engagement with what Museum staff and the local community believe to be authentic Highland Gaelic culture—albeit a culture altered by the divergence of the community upon migration to Nova Scotia. In fact, the legitimation of the “Highland” culture at the Highland Village Museum is so important to staff that some members of the Museum’s extended community are affectionately referred to as the “Gaelic Mafia”—perceived by some as a loose association of scholars and cultural leaders intent on ensuring adherence to what they believe are historically and regionally accurate cultural behaviours spearheaded by the use of the Gaelic language (see fig. 5).¹² The Museum also holds regular Highland dances, musical performances, traditional “codfish suppers” and the annual Highland Village Day, an event which has been a hallmark of the Museum since its founding.

12. Heather Sparling (Ethnomusicologist, Cape Breton University) in conversation with author, 2012; Terry Smith (Project Manager, Celtic Heart), in conversation with author, 2012.

The buildings at the Highland Village Museum, which include an operational blacksmiths and several period-specific houses, provide the venues for these cultural events and performances (see fig. 6). The kitchens within the houses bake shortbread for visitors, while the relocated Church – though deconsecrated—can be used for weddings and concerts. The importance of the buildings to the overarching operation of the Museum is undeniable, but if you are to enquire into the buildings’ origins, their place in regional Nova Scotian or Scottish architectural styles, or the processes that brought the buildings to the museum, the answers are often vague. Here the buildings provide a stage for the main role of the Museum—the provision of a “time-travelling” experience. Furthermore, and of clear importance especially at the Highland Village Museum, the buildings help the staff and surrounding Scottish diaspora members to validate and commemorate their notion of the “Highland” culture: a culture that lives on through the Museum, and at other sites in the surrounding region, such as the Gaelic College of Arts & Crafts.





Figure 4. (L)Black House (replica c. 1790s, constructed 1970s), Highland Village Museum, Nova Scotia, Canada, 2012. Photograph by the author.

Having outlined the forms and functions of the Highland Folk Museum and Highland Village Museum and the interpretation of these Museums' buildings, and discussed the contemporary use of these sites aside from that of the tourist trade, a number of observations can be made. Certainly the two Museums use buildings as fundamental elements of their structure and the museum staff are often motivated by the need to "save" buildings they regard as being culturally significant, but the purpose of these buildings being included on site is also clearly about the preservation of, and access to, a specific culture. The buildings are not intended to be kept in "glass-case" pristine condition, and are not always originals of the period they represent. Nor are the buildings necessarily laid out accurately with regards to chronological development or land-use patterns. As Linda Young pointed out, these open-air museums often *resemble* villages because space limitations and visitor enjoyment dictate a close grouping of structures, even if in reality these buildings may have been placed in different locales and at different distances to one another.¹³ The buildings themselves may be disregarded as modern replicas or compromised structures with diminished heritage significance due to relocation or alteration; while the museum sites might be criticized for presenting an unrealistic idea of the socio-economic land-use patterns of the culture they claim to display. We might be tempted to ignore these open-air museums altogether, in the belief that they are no more historically authentic or valuable than Disney World.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the importance of these museums lies not in the accuracy of their design or the authenticity of their buildings as genuine period structures,

Figure 5. (Opposite, Top) Sign reads "Tha ar cànan 's ar dùalchas beò 'nar measg chun an là an-diugh / Still today, our language and culture are fundamental to our identity." Displayed at Highland Village Museum, Nova Scotia, Canada, 2012. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. (Opposite, Bottom) Working blacksmith, with hand-forged nails being manufactured, at the Highland Village Museum, Nova Scotia, Canada, 2012. Photograph by the author.

13. Young, "Villages That Never Were," 328.

This cannot be said to be true of all open-air museums, particularly where the emphasis of the museum is more about entertainment and has little or no connection to a living culture or community. But for the Highland Museums outlined in this paper, and indeed for other examples of these open-air museums around the world (Skansen in Sweden, Norske Folkemuseum in Norway and Hida Minzoku Mura Folk Village in Japan, to name a few), the authenticity of the museums is driven and validated by the community it represents. These are repositories of culture—past and present—and the inclusion of architectural exemplars should instead be seen as a side-effect and, in some cases, a positive outcome for structures which might otherwise have been lost altogether. These are unquestionably sites of opportunity for architectural historians, for the examination of processes of recycling and reinterpreting architectural history by a community in order to ensure a version of what they believe is a true expression of their history and culture not only survives, but is engaged with in the present.