

Deindustrialization and Museumification: From Exhibited Memory to Forgotten History

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Background

The author's research is an attempt to study museums from an anthropological point of view. It is a meditation on the time we devote to exhibiting the past in order to forget it.

- He tries to determine why culture and history are fascinated by the loss of their frame of reference: the passing of time.
 - History becomes a memory through a process of reconstruction of the past, not through mere transmission.
 - The past is recalled to be forgotten and is studied by the author to understand how willful amnesia lies at the heart of so-called memorial sites such as in Le Creusot, France.
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Le Creusot

The town of Le Creusot was built by the Schneider family, industrial tycoons, who built their factories and then built the town around them.

- The Schneiders built everything including hospitals and schools, even the churches belonged to them.
 - The Schneiders' omnipotence also took the shape of a series of monuments around town – their home was a castle.
 - They also controlled the local political scene and held the government posts or filled them with friends or employees.
 - This system is defined as industrial paternalism.
 - Autonomous neighborhoods cropped up around the factories, each with its own infrastructure and public buildings.
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Ecomuseum

Upon the death of Charles Schneider, the last ironmaster, the management sold off the non-industrial assets to the town, and history was revealed for the first time as private space was unveiled.

- The castle was conserved to be turned into a museum of a new form called an "Ecomuseum," which would soon become the international symbol of this new form of community-based museography.
- The new museum was seen as a revolutionary weapon and a means of development for the population.
- The whole community forms a living museum with permanent visitors – the inhabitants.

- The museum project started distinguishing itself from an ordinary museum by making industry the object of its study and by confronting the world of labor with that of art.
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Revolution

If the new museum was to be a means of revolution, a revolution had to take place in the museum – the creation of a territorial museum without collections that is built around the population.

- This impossible museum was renamed an “Ecomuseum,” a word coined to describe the open-air ecological museums created in former farming areas transformed into nature reserves for tourists.
 - One of the issues to face was that due to the paternal and despotic nature of the Schneiders, locals, who were part of the Ecomuseum and were to be its visitors, were afraid to enter the castle – it had been off-limits previously.
 - The development of the Ecomuseum was based on substituting the preservation of nature for that of industry.
 1. There were endless meetings trying to define what the museum stood for.
 2. There was a permanent identity crisis.
 - Instead of collecting objects, the Ecomuseum collected people who were likely to bring relevant artifacts and talk about them – gradually satellite museums were created in the sixteen town districts.
 - A permanent exhibition was inaugurated at the castle telling the story of the entire region.
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Operations

The Ecomuseum was in a rather contradictory position. The castle was presented as part of the heritage industry because it used to be the Schneider’s residence, but the family’s plants were still operating.

- The factories were exhibited as a sign of a past that was still alive.
- Visitors were able to discover what was about to disappear as the industry went out of business piece by piece.
- The Ecomuseum became famous for criticizing the industrial world – its various events were perceived as revolutionary.
- All those who were involved in the running of the Ecomuseum and who were exhibited at conferences or in their offices gradually became actors in their own plays – talking objects instead of artifacts.

- Then history started repeating itself, reproducing the very paternalism that developed under the Schneiders.
 1. The director, Marcel Evrard, was able to unite all the different strands of opposition to paternalism, but paradoxically enough he also created a very paternalistic structure.
 2. As a result the Ministry of Culture removed Evrard and created a more conventional museum.
 3. At the same time the factories went bankrupt and they and paternalism disappeared at the same time.

Note: As museologist Kenneth Hudson would later put it, the Ecomuseum had become a “religion” with “its prophets, martyrs and reforms” that drew museologists from around the world.

A New Museum The reform of the Ecomuseum involved turning the castle into an ordinary museum.

- The Schneider family returned the furniture and objects they had taken with them and those pieces became the museum’s objects of display.
 - The Schneiders had become exhibits in a museum; objects symbolizing a past history which could now be disposed of.
 - Museums tell the story and so the past can become a memory.
 - The museum ended up being abandoned, leaving only the objects behind as sole keepers of the remains of history.
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Conclusion There is a tension in the link between memory and history.

- Memory, like museums, is not history regained and authenticated; instead it is a space filled with uncertainty that is oblivion.
- One can only remember because one has first forgotten; every memory implies a prior process of forgetting.
- The difference between a pacified memory and one that has been falsified lies at the heart of this problem involving memory.
- Beyond this lies the ethical and political issue of defining what characterizes a fair recollection or a fair memory: how does a society treat its past?
- In museums, memories are transformed into exhibited objects – what types of museums and what types of objects can tell the story of the past?
- Whether history can be reduced to an object or not, one must recognize that the historiographic process transforms absence into the past by separating experience from history.
- The history of the Ecomuseum of Le Creusot is the tale of the impossible return of the past, of the quest for an object that can neither be found nor exhibited: class war.

- The impossibility of reducing human experience to an object is the mirror image of the impossible reconciliation of discordant times: how can one say that the past is indeed past if one has not yet mourned its passing?
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