CONTRIBUTIONS OF OPEN AIR MUSEUMS IN PRESERVING HERITAGE BUILDINGS: STUDY OF OPEN-AIR MUSEUMS IN SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

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Abstract

Most open air museums were established to preserve and present a threatened aspect of regional or national culture and to help forge a sense of identity and achievement. Britain’s open air museums have aroused controversy among both museum professionals and building conservationists. They have been praised for spearheading innovative and vivacious approaches towards heritage interpretation and saving neglected buildings, while some have criticised them for inconsistent standards of conservation especially for taking buildings out of their original settings. Such architectural issues were strongly debated in the 1970s, while recent debates focus on popular approaches towards attracting the public to the past. This paper describes the evolution of open air museums in Britain, their contribution in conserving unloved buildings and how they have become an increasingly competitive tourist attraction. Observations and lessons learned from interviews and visits to two open air museums in South East England provides some insight about the importance of such museums. Operated as registered charity organisations, they have played significant roles not only in saving various buildings and structures from demolition but also in helping visitors to appreciate the rich heritage of these regions.

Keywords: Open Air Museums, Heritage, Conservation, Tourist Attraction

INTRODUCTION

Museums have played an important role in preserving and displaying heritage items. Started as an in-door activity, later expanded to the idea of out-door display areas commonly known an open air museums. As a phenomenon of the world’s repertoire of heritage (Young 2006) a majority of open air museums concentrate on the collection and re-erection of old buildings on large outdoor sites, usually in settings of re-created landscapes of the past. Even though buildings are generally considered as ‘too big and complex to acquire in the same way as objects’ (Young 2006), the range of building-like objects that have been included within the limit of museum collections is enormous and the strength of the collecting impulse is greater, despite cost and other difficulties. In this sense, the collection, past and present, of buildings into museums of buildings, is almost unavoidable (Fitch 1990). Most of these concepts may therefore be justly