

# The Concept of Vernacular Architecture in Contemporary Museum Education in Romania

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**ABSTRACT:** The subject of this research paper, the open-air museum, we consider that especially in contemporaneity it becomes a main actor on the cultural scene, and through the current study we aim to create extensions of this type of exhibition, extensions that meet the needs of the general public. Moreover, through this paper we aim to systematize the fundamental pillars of vernacular architecture and heritage, but this time, not treating the subject in an exhaustive way, but pointing out its key elements through a series of projects that are currently work in progress. Although through this study we aimed to interrogate only a certain type of exhibition, in this case the open-air museum, in reality we came to new interrogations involving actors from new areas of expertise, areas that we did not anticipate very clearly at the beginning of our research. Thus, we can say that at this moment, the research includes three pillars of work, pillars that we have built based on a methodology for investigating a type of architecture, perspectives based on which we try to build the body of this research. Of course, they are in a process of transformation, based on examples and certain typologies, so that we can answer questions and, why not, launch new questions.

**KEYWORDS:** vernacular, architecture, museum education

## Introduction

The village is the “main form of settlement” of the Romanians (Ionescu 1971, 11), and centuries of evidence can still prove it. For example, “statistics from 1930 show that in Romania there were 14,163 villages compared to 175 urban centers, the inhabitants of the villages representing 81% of the total population of the country (...) On June 1, 1967, although low in number after the intense urbanization process carried out in Socialist Romania, the rural population still represented the majority: 61.3%, the number of villages being relatively the same: 14,203” (Ionescu 1971, 11).

For today’s architects, the concept used was generally used “to designate popular constructions, made by people whose main activity is not necessarily in the field of constructions” (Romanian vernacular architecture 2021, Arhimania.ro). It is based on an empirical knowledge of materials, gained over time, through repeated trials (and failures). Knowledge that is transmitted from generation to generation, orally (Romanian vernacular architecture 2021, Arhimania.ro). The concept of vernacular architecture developed gradually, but in the museum area no emphasis was placed on it, except in certain types of exhibitions, such as open-air or ethnographic museums. Therefore, we cannot say that a museum education has been developed to promote vernacular architecture in all museums, but rather in specific ones.

## Extensions of museum education

*Stricto sensu*, we consider that it should be noted that this term has become much more clearly defined over time. Basically, if before it designated both the type of architecture in rural and urban areas, nowadays, this term is used mainly for the first case, in this case, for rural areas (Vernacular architecture 2021, Scribd.com)

*Lato sensu*, regarding the open-air museum and vernacular heritage, we note that “UNESCO, ICOM and other organizations seek to encourage the patrimonialization of knowledge and the ability to produce traditional crafts” (Nițulescu 2019, 7), and this can only make us happy, because by promoting these values, the open-air museum can be a living space.

According to specialists, “in the mountain regions there are villages with scattered households; in the hilly regions and along the wide valleys, especially in the last century, the village with scattered households, with a half-pastoral, half-agricultural character, was conquered, while in the plain regions, as well as in narrow meadows or bottoms the village with houses and households gathered developed within the valleys” (Ionescu 1971, 11).

Also, if in the 19th century monuments were an attraction reason for a relatively small group of initiates, the interest of society grew rapidly, until their identification with one of the purposes of modern tourism. At the same time, there has been a diversification of the way of reporting to the monument, which also includes its treatment as a museum exhibit, mainly related to educational purposes and conservation considerations. On the other hand, the recognition of architectural production as a field belonging to the great family of arts, par excellence protected in museums, in turn favored the inclusion of monuments in museums” (Roșiu 2002, 128-129).

Another important element to discuss is the fact that “the Romanian people have created their own architecture, synthesis of possibilities, reflection of tastes and sensibilities. In all its manifestations, in all these palpable testimonies of culture, we feel the permanence and presence of man, as seeds of thought” (Lăzărescu, Cristea and Lăzărescu 1972, 9).

We agree with the statement made by Prof. Augustin Ioan, in the work “khora” (Ioan 1998, 1977, 31), according to which “in the process, of course, a critique of comparativism will have to be produced”, or in the case of the present paper, the question arises what we can understand by this type of criticism, since its methods can bring ample debates. Or how, in our context, we will invoke this process as a preliminary stage of the 3 practical projects, and realized in the mirror, which we started, as we only aim to further promote their sustainable development by comparison and development.

Examples of good practices can be perceived as a model both in terms of housing and architectural as well. Basically, the exposure of the village becomes a fair one, from the moment it is based not only on the use of the standard object, but also on certain common laws brought back to life.

Taking into account that “on the territory of our country, archeological excavations identify numerous human settlements dating back to the Neolithic period, some of them constituted as simple agglomerations, others with an obvious preoccupation of organization” (Pănoiu 1977), we will remember that there are several types of authentic settlements.

At the same time, “the immense mantle of the forests that cover the Romanian land was the main source of raw material of the local architecture. However, it would be wrong to believe that the architecture on our territory was exclusively wooden, being enough to think about the vast ensembles of stone architecture of the local architecture” (Petrescu 1974).

Following the drawing of these guidelines on the concept of vernacular architecture, we can only include this concept within the idea of museum education.

According to the doctrine, “museum pedagogy has as object of interrogation the identification and validation of some strategies that would lead to the maximization of the formative virtues of the museum’s space, and as a goal it aims to stimulate the interaction on the educational line between the museum and the school, to train specialists, but also categories of public for the valorization of the educational potential brought by this cultural environment” (Cucoș 2014, [Tribunainvatamantului.ro](http://Tribunainvatamantului.ro)). At the same time, we add the fact that the educational and didactic values of the museum are:

- purchase;
- conservation;

- research;
- value (Cucoş 2014, Tribunainvatamantului.ro).

Beyond the typicality of a museum, museum education addresses a wide audience, although at first glance we might be tempted to believe that the educational programs designed are meant to require only the presence of a young and very young audience.

The museum educator has the role of realizing, implementing and programming the workshops meant to come to the aid of his public, programs that will really respond to the needs of the majority of them. For example, if a program is implemented for teenagers, in order to be complete, we will add annexes to help its completion, annexes for people with special abilities, as all activities should be designed to be inclusive.

Projects implemented by museum educators are often carried out over a determined period of time, but this is not beneficial, as it is not possible to talk about learning skills in a process useful to students and, at the same time, the information cannot really be fixed. Of course, for parents or guardians, a workshop organized from time to time is a very good solution, but not for young participants who may be left with truncated, incomplete information.

If some programs are free, for others, there are certain rates or even subscriptions that encourage active participation to a quality non-formal education. Also, some projects can be carried out in collaboration with various institutions, and thus the trainers can be not only museum educators, but also various actors of the contemporary cultural scene.

Most of the time, museum education is carried out within the museum, rarely talking about another setting of these events, as the museum educator often uses exhibits or concepts exhibited in the museum in his speech, to implement new projects regarding the museum education.

The challenge for the contemporary museum educator is to constantly find new ways to create a “text” that can be deciphered for the museum’s public which is diversified, and most of the time it is approached according to the age criterion. Basically, the museum educator becomes a translator of the exhibited works, of the curatorial discourse and, last but not least, of some programs that are specific to the typology of the museum in which it can be framed or not. Thus, we can say that it is often challenged to bring new nuances, new contrasts.

Also, another challenge is to retain the public, involving actors from various departments, such as:

- Programs;
- Conservation;
- Curatorate;
- PR, Marketing, Communication;
- Documentation Centers;
- Accounting;
- Logistics Service;
- Legal Department.

Therefore, a museum educator becomes an arbitrator, a mediator and between all the departments within a museum. In other words, he needs to know the involvement of other departments and, at the same time, bring them together to offer a package of sources for the public to help him become more familiar with the museum world, a world in which endless worlds of the past, present and, why not, from the future, intertwine.

In the conception of the general public, the museum is perceived as a place of the old, of the archaic, and this fact can help us to better implement museum education programs based on the concept of vernacular. Moreover, we believe that this vision can make real contributions to open-air museums.

We might wonder why man is tempted to perceive the concept of museum as synonymous with the past and, implicitly, history, and this fact we do not think is foreign to

any geographical space. Of course, a first aspect could be the fact that among the oldest museums there were certain spaces really full of history, but we must not forget that museums are of several typologies, and those in Romania, according to art. 14, paragraph (1) of the Law on Museums and Public Collections no. 311 of July 8, 2003, are “museums and public collections of national importance are museums and public collections of public or private law, who hold in their museum patrimony goods of exceptional value, significant at national level for:

- History;
- Archeology;
- Ethnology;
- Art;
- Archiving;
- Science;
- Technique;
- Literature;
- Cinematography;
- Numismatics;
- Philately;
- Heraldry;
- Bibliophilia;
- Cartography;
- Epigraphy.

Thus, although we are tempted to treat the idea of a museum as a machine of time, we must know that today we can find a multitude of museums, which are more or less unique. Thus, from the Banana Museum, we can reach the The Museum of Broken Relationships. Basically, there is a varied typology of exhibits that do not refer only to the idea of chronology.

The concept of vernacular architecture, on the other hand, can be used in contemporary museum education in Romania as a review of customs, rather than as an object of transposition into the past, as a spare part for an alternative to urban life, than as an utopian thing placed in the distant past. At the same time, it can be used as a catalyst for architects everywhere who want to adhere to a sustainable lifestyle for their clients.

## Conclusions

The open-air museum, along with other types of museums, has the mission of non-formal education, and, moreover, the open-air museum has a social component with an impact, perhaps much greater, and one of our proposals aims to organize unique cultural installations and events, such as media art, performance, etc., as we want the open-air museum to reflect a reality: the ephemeral life of the village vs. the components of the contemporary world specific to the urban environment.

We believe that the open-air museum is becoming a major player on the cultural scene, due to the positioning of the exhibits in a context that offers greater security in this period which is a real challenge.

Moreover, since we cannot deny the fact that many times, “when you enter the museum, the conventional or natural borders disappear and when we talk about civilization, an invitation is made to a huge round table of all the people of the planet” (Stoicescu 1983, 10), we would like to invite to reflection and, at the same time, to a future dialogue regarding the role of this type of museum, because as noted in the past, out of the desire to make known the museum heritage, we tried to “highlight the components and not only within the exhibitions” (Bovo-Drăgan 2007, 331).

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