

# TOTAL DISPLACEMENT: EXHIBITING FOLKLORE AND THE BOUNDARIES OF MUSEUM SPACE

## Folklor Nesnesini Sergilemek ve Müze Mekanının Sınırları

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### ABSTRACT

For the establishment of an open-air folklore museum there seems to be two possible methods. The material in display can be displaced from their original environments and relocated on a constructed site; or they can be kept at their original places to be converted into "museum objects". It is the claim of this paper that the method applied would change neither the end product nor its interpretations. The total displacement of an object from its "original context" is not only a necessity, but also an inherited characteristic for the exhibitions of folklore museums. In the context of an open-air folklore museum, where the "environment" becomes the actual space of museum, the demarcation line between the door and the display case, the furniture and the building, and the landscape and the museum space becomes obscure. The redefinition of objects in museums as context-free, autonomous artefacts is an inevitable condition of their institutionalization – this autonomy being required for their displacement and relocation to different museum settings. A redefinition and de-contextualization process can be used as a tool to shift attention from the ideological significance of cultural objects to their material and documentary qualities.

### Key Words

Exhibition Design, Autonomy, Reproduction, Displacement, Museology

### ÖZ

Açık hava halkbilimi müzelerinin mimari oluşumlarında başlıca iki yöntem uygulanmaktadır. Birinci yöntem nesnelere özgün yerlerinden alınarak veya özgün nitelikleri ile yeniden üretilerek müze mekanı olarak çatkılanmış alana taşınması; ikinci yöntem ise seçilmiş nesnelere yerlerinde korunup, çevreleri ile birlikte müzeye dönüştürülmesidir. Burada önerilen tez, uygulanan yöntemin son ürünü ve onun yorumlarını değiştirmeyeceğidir. Müzebilimi açısından, "yerinden edilmiş" halk kültürü nesnel ürünlerinin fiziksel ve kavramsal "özerkliği" ve yeniden üretilebilirliği salt zorunluluk değil aynı zamanda, içselleştirilmiş niteliklerdir. Türkiye'de yıllardır çalışmaları süren birçok müzenin gerçekleştirilememesinin başlıca nedeni kuramsal tartışmaların eylemsel beklentilerin gölgesinde kalmasıdır. "Yerinden etmek", "özerklik" ve "yeniden üretilebilirlik" gibi müze mekanı tasarımı ile doğrudan ilişkili sözcükler kavramsallaştırılmadığı ve müze mekânının tasarlanabilmesi için gerekli bilimsel ortam yaratılmadığı sürece, kapsamlı bir halkbilimi müzesini oluşturma çabaları sonuçsuz kalacaktır. Halkbilimi müzelerinin kurulması, kuramsal tartışmaların yeniden başlatılması ile mümkündür.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Sergi Tasarımı, Özerklik, Yeniden Üretim, Yerinden etmek, Müzebilimi

### Total Displacement:

In the mid-eighties, two symposia were organized in Turkey to assess the conceptual and physical possibilities of establishing open-air folklore museums in the country. The general framework of the symposia was drawn up in 1982 during the weekly meetings of the First National Culture Council of the Government. During these meetings the members of the council discussed issues relating to the administration of folklore museums. Starting with the definition

of the term "folklore", the meetings covered common discussion topics, ranging from "nationalism" to "field management", and from the reinterpretation of the term "authentic" to the semiological discrepancies that existed in the terms "conservation" and "preservation". By the 1980s these matters had been the subject of discussions for almost thirty years, during which some of the rarest examples of vernacular architecture in Turkey had experienced rapid deterioration. This compelled the Ministry of

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Culture to put an end to the discussion processes and finally develop solid application strategies.

During the 1985 Symposium, representatives from the Ministry of Culture made it clear that the symposium participants should concentrate their efforts only on pragmatic aspects rather than theoretical propositions and academic debates. Thus, the organizers asked explicitly for concrete suggestions on a broad range of issues, namely institutional models, functional programs, project management strategies, internal and external sources for financial support and site location procedures (Türkiye’de Bölge Açık hava Müzeleri, 1985). As a result, the outcome of the parallel discussions was a well-defined, concrete proposition. With the support of the Ministry of Culture, and in collaboration with the related academic departments under the leadership of the Faculty of Architecture, and including the Faculty of Science and Literature and the Faculty of Education, an “Open-air Folklore Museum” was decided to be established within the premises of Middle East Technical University (METU), Ankara (Folklor Açık hava Müzelerinin Türkiye’de Kurulma İmkanları, 1985). The museum was to be developed in the forested area of the university around Eymir Lake, and was to be both a cultural and recreational centre. Within the interdisciplinary academic environment of the university, a comprehensive museum project was completed in 1988.

In 2002, another symposium was held focusing on the same issue, but this time to discuss the “Problems in the Museology of Folklore in Turkey”. The present state of the issue was declared as a problem, as after the completion of the architectural proposal for the Turkish Open-air Folklore Museum at Lake Eymir the project had been put on hold

for an undefined period of time. Moreover, other attempts to establish folklore museums in different locations in Turkey had failed to come up to initial expectations. The reasons behind these interruptions and drawbacks were sought again in the pragmatic aspects; but in fact it was not unusual for cultural projects to be postponed in Turkey as a result of economic restrictions or political instabilities. The re-launching of such a project in 2002, however, required a more profound inquiry. The reasons for the latest call for the establishment of open-air folklore museums in the country were based on the growing need to conserve and preserve the vanishing assets and values of folk culture. This inescapable situation had been explained as being an aftermath of nineteenth century industrialization, particularly in Europe, and the perishing of traditional production processes under the affects of the external cultural imperialism in the Far East, but none of these could be blamed as the real reason behind the rapid environmental transformations in Turkey. Slightly exposed to the Industrial Revolution and influenced only by the marginally by the effects of the globalization, Turkey had to find its own reasons for this new sensibility towards the uncontrolled erosion of the traditional material culture. Rather than searching for pragmatic reasons, therefore, a more focused inquiry needed to be conducted to understand the influence of the operative theories on the subject (Skougaard, 1995:23-32). In other words, the theoretical discussions that had been postponed until the reintroduction and the redefinition of the same issue as a “problem” in 2002 had to be revisited.

It is the intention of this paper to re-start the process following this delay, or in better terms, to urge the removal of

the apparent “theoretical blockade”. The main argument will be that the museology of folk culture in Turkey should not overlook the conceptual and “academic” aspects of the subject. Until all theoretical processes have been fully explored and the existence of the ideological powers has been acknowledged, the establishment of such a facility in Turkey will be impossible; while a development of theories would reveal the need for the advancement of a meta-language based on interdisciplinary explorations and a rethinking of processes for the museology of folklore. In other words, it is only through the promotion of scientific knowledge and its implementations that these institutions can be established and become repositories of knowledge and representations of folk culture in the country.

It is the claim of this paper that, rather than through external discourse, the above-mentioned theoretical processes could find their material existence in various museum practices. Collecting, exhibiting, preserving, cataloguing and publishing, while conceived as pragmatic activities, may generate a series of intellectual procedures. To collect for a folklore museum, for instance, is to decide what falls within the folks’ province. Any systematic and institutional procedure of collecting undoubtedly implies that a collection is more than the manifestation of personal sensibility. The selection and acquisition of objects for museums is a matter of institutional decisions; and preservation, by the same token, involves an intricate process. This complex procedure requires reinterpretation, as it changes depending on whether the object to be preserved is a carpet, or a building, village or town in the case of an open-air museum. Contemporary museological attempts at preservation devel-

oped in parallel to the changing attitudes towards the conservation of historic, and particularly ancient, monuments in Turkey. The concept of preservation had always been restricted to the assigned meaning of “restoration”, being greatly influenced by the nineteenth-century distinctions between protection, restoration and conservation (Ruskin, 1849, Viollet-le-Duc, 1854-68). As products of collaborative efforts and interdisciplinary research, cataloguing procedures in museums require another institutional consensus regarding the classification methods of museum objects. The applied data collection methods inevitably reflect the priorities, value judgments and general approaches of each particular institution.

One of the major goals in the application of the above-mentioned museum procedures is to make not only the objects, but also information on each object, available to researchers and visitors. Researchers, experts and scholars all benefit from museum facilities; however their benefit is limited by the amount of information made available to them. Their inherent intention is to share their findings on the contents of museums; and as such any decisions related to institutional procedures will have an influence on their perception, which is a matter that has been discussed extensively over the last thirty years (Bann 1984:77-92, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, Crimp 1993, Bennet 1995). It is necessary to underline here that while their effect on the research of experts and scholars may be extensive, acquisition policies, conservation methods or classification systems may not have an immediate impact on the perception of the ordinary museum-goer. In contrast, exhibitions, as an acknowledged museum procedure, do have a direct influence on regular visitors; and

it is within the limits of the exhibition space that the objects and information become available to them. Exhibitions, as a specific museum procedure, are emphasized here not to undermine the role of museum publications in the dissemination of information, nor to underestimate the scholarly impacts of museum research, but to single out the significance of exhibition space specifically for the case of open-air folklore museums. A thorough analysis of museum space, particularly of exhibitions, will provide the necessary framework for a discussion into the reasons behind the hesitations in the establishment of an open-air folklore museum in Turkey.

### **Exhibition Space:**

Exhibiting products of folk culture presents an inconsistency in the constructed space of a museum that is directly related with the nature of its objects and the paradoxical formation of the museum space. The collections of an open-air folk museum are generally objects of daily life. When a fountain, a door handle or a wedding dress are displayed in a museum their relation to daily life is transformed; and the same goes for when the existing space of a traditional house is transformed into a museum space. Hence, it is only when there is recognition that this transformation, or in better terms “conceptual shift”, has taken place that an open-air folk museum becomes possible.

The participants of the 1985 Symposium suggested the establishment of a number of folklore museums in selected regions of the country, and the general consensus was that due to the diversity in the scale and nature of exhibits, the most suitable format in Turkey was the open-air museum layout. The list of potential museums, which was accepted

without hesitation, included not only examples of vernacular architecture, bridges, mills, wells, cisterns, barns, olive groves, wineries, ovens, hearths, coffee shops and stores, but also carpets, *kilims*, furniture, cloths, ceremonial items and tools. If the financial and technical problems could have been solved, all these artefacts were to have been exhibited in a single building. The participants of the symposium introduced a number of examples of traditional houses being exhibited in museum halls. Even for temporary exhibitions, museum exhibition halls are reorganized to display houses or other large-scale structures. The proposals at the end, however, did not favour the design of a single building for the open-air folk museum, but rather recommend the establishment of a “total environment”.

Such an environment may be achieved in two ways: The conversion of an existing historical site or sites into museums; or the creation of a new site to house selected objects of folk culture. The supporters of the first proposal introduced a list of small Anatolian towns that still carried the “basic values of a preservation site”. Although these basic values were not explicitly identified, a comprehensive list of existing environments that included Göreme, Şirince, Beypazarı, Mudurnu, Taraklı and Abant received general consent. The only issues remaining were which of these hundreds of sites would be prioritised for conversion into a museum; and how would the Ministry know where to start selecting the priorities? This raised a number of related and important questions: Who would draw the borders of an open-air folklore museum on an existing site? How would the residents react? Would they become the natural inhabitants of the converted environment, or would

they be relocated? Which of the defined local municipalities of the selected historical towns were ready for such a transformation, economically, socially, and of course politically? Who would provide the physical and financial sustainability?

While the first group, who favoured the transformation of the existing historical environments into museums, was searching for possible answers to these questions and legitimizing their proposals through references to existing examples in the world, the second group was focusing on two different methods of creating a total environment from scratch. In the first method, folkloric objects were to be transported from their "original" environments to a selected site; while in the second method they would be "reconstructed" on a new museum site. Once again, starting with the visual qualities of the selected landscapes, every issue related with the climatic conditions, originality of materials, construction techniques and craftsmanship skills became issues that needed to be resolved; and consensus was sought even on the contemporary museological definition of the term "reconstruction" – Reconstructing to what extent? Reconstructing with original materials or with contemporary imitations? What would be the period of reconstruction?

### **Re-Authentication:**

The possible answers to all these questions were plagued and limited by the definitions and interpretations of the term "authenticity". In museology, the terms "original" and "authentic" have been subjected to continuous reinterpretation, perhaps since the establishment of the first museums in the early nineteenth century (Bendix 1997, Phillips 1997). In a museum, the process of

authentication or the declaration of the originality of an object begins with the identification of its producer and production place. It is the thorough research into the production place and the era of an object that is at the heart of the scientific approach in a museum. Labels attached to museum objects are required to provide information such as the name of the producer and the date and place of production, along with information on the medium, material properties and the dimensions of the object. This identification process, particularly the signature of the producer or the author, confirms the archival value of the objects; and only after this authentication process can such objects be institutionalized as museum property.

It is not, however, common practice to look for a signature on an object to be preserved and displayed in a folklore museum. By definition, objects of folk culture are anonymous, and besides anonymity, reproducibility is another inherited characteristic of the same items. Like in most legal applications, conventional intellectual and artistic property systems, particularly in museums, investigate the copyright, authorship and ownership rights of the producer, who is thus generally presumed to be the sole author of the work. The conventional discourse that has developed on museology looks for the originality of a museum object in the name of its producer; however objects of folk culture are often products of a collective endeavour. Unlike in art museums, as stated in legal propositions, "the appreciation of folkloric works is not simply based on their aesthetic qualities, but more fundamentally on the ability of the anonymous authors to reflect the culture and the local values of their daily practices in the folklore. It is considered to be precious, not

as an object, but for its life-sustaining qualities” (Githaiga, 1998). The expressive agents it uses – symbols, materials, techniques, colours and motives, may all be information necessary for the interpretation of daily life value systems. The binary opposition of the “original” is presented as an “imitation” in museum procedures, and the term “imitation” in this context is loaded with negative connotations, implying forgery. Even the best reproduction cannot replace an original in a museum, as imitations can never acquire the same value as the original. In contrast, if traditional production techniques are strictly applied, a replica of work of folk culture is also worth cherishing. Production methods in folk culture are perfected as they pass from one generation to another, from master to apprentice. For the aesthetic values of these works to be appreciated over generations their reproducibility is essential. As such, the originality and artistic value of objects in a folklore museum require a new definition that is detached from their producers and the era of production. Works of folk culture have to be conceived as timeless; their production processes are “traditional” and thus they acquire value. In other words, these anonymous objects, by their very nature are meant to be valuable in all times, but this value is not necessarily inherited from their originality. For this reason another criteria needs to be developed to measure the value of a folk object in a museum context that places importance not in the actual producer or the exact date of production, but in the technique, the workmanship, the material excellence and the production process of an object.

### **Re-Productibility:**

A closer reading reveals that objects

in a folklore museum are indeed reproducible, not obviously in a mechanical or technical sense like in photography, but in another condition in which the concepts of “authentic” and “reproduction”, and “original” and “copy” can no longer be set apart. As indicated previously, the development and the sustainability of folk culture is based on the repetition and the reproducibility of its products. Craftsmanship, like in calligraphy, depends on the perfection of techniques of imitation and the success of the apprentice over the master. When the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to production, “reproduction”, by definition, gains authority. The reproducibility of folk objects rejects the position of “author as producer” (Benjamin, 1934), and it is the museological value of the objects remains at the core of this interpretation.

This can be illustrated using a very local example in Ankara, the famous “*bağ evleri*” (orchard houses) (Savaş, 2010). Figure 1 shows an “original vine house” located 10 miles from Ankara’s historic city centre that dates back to the early 1900s. The photograph depicts the building prior to restoration in an empty setting, where once it was surrounded by a vineyard. The second photograph illustrates the same vine house in its contemporary condition, having been restored to accommodate a charitable foundation. Now squeezed into an urban setting and surrounded by apartment blocks, it adjusts itself to its new function and to its new environment. The migration from rural areas to city centres over the last twenty years in Turkey has transformed the vineyard into a very dense urban settlement; and although it is still located in its original place, a displacement has occurred with the transformation of its surroundings. The third photograph shows a similar orchard house that has

been reconstructed at the open-air museum site at Eymir Lake. Surrounded by a planted forest, the house now functions as a restaurant on the shore of the lake and within a totally different environment, where it now enjoys its existence as a “traditional vine house”.

Although these two houses have never been used as museums, they are now considered to be unique examples of vernacular architecture in Ankara. The meticulous documentation of the first orchard house in the form of reports and drawings prepared for its restoration proves that the approach of the restoration experts was very scientific and captured all the material details. Similarly, the reconstruction project of the house at Eymir Lake was considered as an admirable work of reconstruction. When the function, construction materials and surroundings of these houses are considered, any talk of their “originality” becomes redundant. Today, they both provide the rare documentation of architectural history. Key words such as: in-fill construction techniques, traditional plan layout, cantilever types, and the material details of vernacular culture are all thought to be illustrated in these small structures. Ironically enough, it was not the “original orchard house” but its reconstruction that aided the development of this intellectual discourse. Through “reconstruction”, its structural system, plan organization, material preference and constructional details became historical sources for research. These two houses were conceived as symbols of vernacular architecture in Anatolia not due to their originality, but because of their accuracy. As the goal was the documentation and dissemination of information, the originality of the building became insignificant in that its value lay not in its originality, but in its

capacity to carry accurate information.

In an open-air folklore museum, the conversion of an existing site into a museum space institutionalizes a new process of reproduction. By the same token, the reconstruction of an entire museum collection on a “constructed site” would not interfere with this conceptualization. Thus, the same museum space can be attained either through the transformation of an “original” village or the reconstruction of an “artificial” environment. Objects may be displaced from their original environments and relocated to a constructed site; or they can be retained in their original locations and converted into museum objects; and from this perspective the choice of method applied in the formation of an open-air folklore museum would change neither the end product nor its interpretation. For folklore museums, the total displacement of an object from its “original context” is not only a necessity, but also an inherent characteristic.

### **The Architecture of Open-Air Folklore Museums:**

In the context of an open-air folklore museum, the terms “environment” and “museum space” overlap; as both the physical and the conceptual borders of a folklore museum expand to include a variety of objects; but what if the environment were to be conceived as the space of exhibition itself? Would this ease matters?

Apparently, museum experts and directors know what to expect from the architecture of their establishments. They know the difficulties faced in converting an already-existing building into a museum, and are aware of the complexity of designing and constructing a custom-made building. There are certain standards established for the design of

a “conventional” museum space that have developed according to the material specifications of museum collections the world over, and these standards ensure the necessary infrastructure is in place to provide appropriate environmental conditions, as well as lighting and security. Over the last decade, belated as it may seem, there has been an extensive improvement in museographical and museological applications in Turkey. Even the legal status of museums has been re-evaluated and backed up with appropriate articles in law. Perhaps not for all museological procedures, but at least for exhibition spaces, the minimum standards have been established, and for this reason it is today relatively easier to design an exhibition space for a particular museum collection. If the dimensions, physical properties and material specifications of objects are known, they can be used as the main guide for designers in the design process; and thus designing a building or a building complex has become less problematic. The expansion of collections in time and the continuation of acquisitions require a certain flexibility in terms of space, not only for storage, but also exhibition space and even display cases. For growing museum collections the major challenge for the designer is to juxtapose spatial flexibility with the technical infrastructure. If an exhibition space has been designed taking into account the physical characteristics of a static museum collection, re-designing the museum to accommodate an unknown collection becomes a very creative venture. When architects are asked to design a single building or a building complex as a museum, and when the type or specialization of the museum is known, the archival space, the storage areas and the exhibition halls can be designed to provide the op-

timum environment. But what happens when architects are asked to design an environment? What will be the architectural program when the museum space is forced to expand its borders to include over-sized objects, including buildings and other habitable constructions? Instead of a single museum building, if an environment were to be named after a museum, would it require a new perception in the design and the desired flexibility of the exhibition space?

Contemporary open-air museums the world over have been initiated under the revelations of these questions. Although experts in different fields raise different concerns, there have been no major discrepancies in the general definition and the mission of open-air folklore museums. Such museums have been defined as “physical environments where rural life is represented in an appropriate landscape, inhabited with regional architectural elements and furnished with daily life objects carrying similar regional characteristics and functions” (Laenen, 1982:125-240). However, as in the case of the Turkish example, when the term museum refers to a constructed environment, the limits of the exhibition space have to be conceived according to the site and the objects on display.

Going back to the outcomes of the 1985 Symposium, which was held to look into the “possibilities of an open-air folklore museum in Turkey”, historians and restoration experts presented a list of architectural types that they recommended for preservation or reconstruction on the museum site, basing their opinion on concrete information; while the proposals regarding the environment in which traditional houses, fountains, bridges and smaller objects would be set were based on the knowledge of the related disciplines. The term “folkloric elements”



included a variety of objects, including fountains, garden walls and fences, lampposts, street furniture, and flora and fauna. Local production techniques, which differ from region to region, become sources of information for folklore researchers; and it is for this particular reason that regional and geographical specifications had played a major role in the selection processes of the experts. Therefore, it is not single standing objects but an environment in its cultural totality that would be converted into a museum, and in this way the “site” itself becomes an object to be exhibited in the museum. “A beautiful tea garden”, “a little pond”, “a restaurant serving local food”, “a little delicatessen”, “a souvenir shop”, and “a café” – all of these elements could be identified both as the site and the object of exhibition, playing a paradoxical role in the museum space; and like in any museum space, this situation is open to further interpretations of the term “reconstruction”.

When a house is dismantled it is not only its structural elements that are exposed, as certain architectural details also come to light as autonomous entities. Original pieces such as door handles and locks; and ornamentation such as ceiling and wall decorations or light fittings, become “freed” from the house and can be identified as objects in their own right. Therefore, similar to the deconstruction and reconstruction processes of larger architectural pieces like houses, bridges or fountains, the reconstruction and replacement of smaller architectural details should be subject to similar conceptual procedures. For instance, a door handle, when transformed into its artificial museum environment, can be displayed either in a display case or in its “original” location on the door. Similar to a house in an artificial museum site, the

door itself assumes the traits of an exhibition environment; and by the same token the door can also be conceived as an object of display. The complexity of this dual condition increases when same door is exhibited attached to a house that is also a reconstructed object/environment in a museum.

Needless to say, the placement of furniture also requires interpretation, as there are different possible options for their display. They can be exhibited in display cases, in their “original” locations in the house, with other furniture collected from the same geographical region or they could be displayed in a collection of furniture collected from across the country in thematic order.

No matter how meticulous the designers and planners, the creation of an appropriate landscape for every building gathered from the different parts of the country would be an impossible task; as the relation of the buildings to their immediate environments, the authenticity of the landscape and endemic flora, and their orientation and relation to the sun, water and wind all need to be considered. Even if the intention is to display these structures in their “original” settings, the climatic conditions and the geomorphic formation of the selected site may prove to be prohibitive. As such, the authenticity of the environment would be sacrificed to diversity, which makes it inevitable that the new site for the buildings and other objects will be “artificial”.

#### **To Conclude:**

There are two ways in which such diverse material can be displayed: The first is through the preservation and/or restoration of sample structures in their “natural”, “man made” environments, requiring the selection of appropriate locations in the country and the transfor-

mation of these existing environments to accommodate their new function. The second method is the transformation of an “artificial” site into a museum space through the “reconstruction” of selected buildings and objects. For a house to be reconstructed on a museum site, in-situ studies by architects, restoration experts and scholars of folklore and related fields would be necessary to identify certain buildings and building types. Only after the completion of surveys and restitutions may reconstruction in the new locations begin. In the case of the Turkish Open-air Museum, variations in methods would not change the significance of the end product. The environment, however, is a more delicate issue.

In the context of an open-air folklore museum, where the “environment” becomes the actual space of museum, the demarcation line between the door and the display case, the furniture and the building, and the landscape and the museum space becomes obscure. The redefinition of objects in museums as context-free, autonomous artefacts is an inevitable condition of their institutionalization – this autonomy being required for their displacement and relocation to different museum settings. A redefinition and de-contextualization process can be used as a tool to shift attention from the ideological significance of cultural objects to their material and documentary qualities.

Unless theoretical methods are explored and acknowledged, it will never be possible to complete the formation processes of an open-air folklore museum in Turkey. It is only through the promotion of scientific knowledge and its implementations that these institutions could become repositories of knowledge and representations of folk culture in the country; and make the transforma-

tion from ideological organizations into research-based public institutions.

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