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ECOMUSEUMS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF PLACE

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1. INTRODUCTION. – In the modern world museums were regarded as places where the authority, knowledge and status of museum professionals were rarely challenged. The implications of such authority are that museums provide ‘true’ stories in their exhibitions, interpretations and activities. In other words the suggestion is that curators and exhibition designers can describe historical events and individual’s lives with certainty; accurately present place and capture local distinctiveness; and truthfully represent communities and local people. Postmodern approaches have led to significant changes in museum practices (see, for example, Knell, McLeod and Watson, 2007; Witcombe, 2003) and question whether museums can achieve all of these goals. Museums – by selecting specimens, artifacts and documentary evidence, and then using interpretive approaches and a variety of media - construct a version of truth for consumption by museum audiences. This process is especially pertinent when considering the geographical localities that museums represent, the ‘place identities’ that they construct. Museum curators may carefully choose specimens and fragments of material culture from their collections to create a narrative about a locality, its landscape, histories and peoples, but place itself lies outside the museum and needs to be experienced to begin to be fully understood.

Museums can convey facts about objects of course – the scientific name of a reptile, the date of manufacture and origin of a piece of porcelain or the name of the maker of a telescope – but when curators step beyond these facts into the interpretation of place, historic events or current cultural life then the discourse becomes more problematical. Museums will attempt to represent objective views based on the best possible evidence, but there are always going to be areas of uncertainty, and especially so when attempting to capture the past. In their exhibitions traditional museums repeat the elements found in the novel, namely place, time period, characters and key personalities, themes and narratives, beginning and end (the routes and patterns of visitor flow), and they have titles and ‘authors’ (exhibit developers – curators, designers, educationalists, technicians). However, in comparison to the novel, in museum exhibitions imagination is held in check, the curator must use available information to convey a version of truth following the careful evaluation of evidence, delivering information with authenticity, honesty and objectivity. Yet, as Lowenthal (1996) and Hewison (1987) have argued, the potential for creating fiction remains,

Despite this danger most local museums see themselves as ‘representing’ a group of people or a place, providing a locality with an identity. McLean (2008, p. 283) identifies three discrete ‘layers’ in identity-building in the museum, namely ‘the identities of those encoding the representations; the identities of those decoding the representations and the identities of those being represented’. In the case of a small local museum these

layers would be interpreted as its museum personnel, visitors and local inhabitants. Because encoding has traditionally been the responsibility of museum professionals – who have been predominately, up until recently, male, white, and middle-class – representing places and communities through the narratives of exhibitions has always been problematical. Museums in developed countries have recognized that this is a major issue and are attempting to diversify their staff – particularly in terms of ethnicity and gender – as they reach for a more inclusive approach to encoding their narratives. Recent attempts have been made by several museums to overcome the bias of the ‘curatorial voice’ by engaging with communities, seeking their opinions and knowledge in order to better reflect their shared identities. However, these approaches, especially in relation to the ways that communities ‘remember’ or ‘imagine’ the past, have also proved difficult and somewhat controversial (Watson, 2007).

Interestingly, the celebrated geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, p. 194) regarded museums as poor channels to communicate place because ‘[t]he museum, after all, consists wholly of displaced objects’ and ‘[t]he effort to evoke a sense of place and of the past is often deliberate and conscious’ (*ibid.*, p. 198). Tuan simply rejects the creation of a sense of place using artifacts and artificial situations. Similarly Corsane *et al.* (in press) have suggested that the complexity of place and what it represents to individuals and communities means that the traditional museum can never capture its elusive qualities.

These views suggest that a different museum model is required to try to represent and celebrate places. Place theory – discussed later – indicates that individuals and communities attach deep significance to their place and particular sites within it and a variety of organisations exist to conserve the sites or artefacts that possess special significance. These protection measures occur at every level from the World Heritage Site to the local nature reserve. In England, for example, the preservation and interpretation activities of the National Trust, English Heritage and Natural England have helped to proclaim the significance of heritage sites, adding visitor centres, guided trails, labels, signposts and supporting documentation in a process that has led to the ‘musealisation’ of place. The ‘meanings’ of these sites have largely been constructed by ‘experts’, not the local people or visitors who experience them; until recently only rarely have local needs or interests been considered. These ‘top-down’ processes can mean that the heritage features of the immediate environment that local people value most may not be protected, and even where they are that the associated histories or stories told are too ‘academic’, irrelevant or take no heed of local understanding and local sympathies.

Consequently any new museological approach demands that local voices need to be heard, that community empowerment is taken seriously. One philosophical approach that recognised this need is ecomuseology, which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Davis, 1999). Ecomuseums provide local people with an inclusive process for rescuing fragments of heritage – such as a vernacular building, a redundant factory, a woodland habitat or an intangible heritage - from loss or destruction, and ultimately lead to the development of a tangible expression of their sense of place, a means of celebrating their heritage.

2. ECOMUSEUMS. – Ecomuseum development has been linked to the phenomenon of ‘new museology’ (Davis, 2008), which in its postmodern form has seen a shift from the ‘museum of objects’ to the ‘museum of ideas’, a move to interdisciplinary working, to

wider engagement with society, a desire to provoke audiences and a willingness to accept criticism. Van Mensch (1995) quotes the view of Dierdre Stam that ‘Theorists of the new museology, who regard museums as social institutions with political agendas because of inherent shared biases and assumptions, advocate integrating museums more closely with the multicultural social groups which these critics believe they should represent and serve. The new museology specifically questions traditional museum approaches to issues of value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity.’ This desire to challenge preconceptions about meaning, control and authority, coupled with a perceived need to conserve places and their material culture *in-situ* were important factors in the development of new paradigms for museums.

The suggestion is made above that the authoritative ‘traditional’ museum, trapped within its walls, with its objects carefully presented in glass cases and long-cherished curatorial attitudes and procedures, is not necessarily the ideal means of capturing local distinctiveness or the spirit of places, but that a new museum model that goes beyond the confines of the museum and empowers local communities might be advantageous. The ecomuseum is such a paradigm, whose origins, development and diversity has been described by Davis (1999). The differences between the ‘traditional’ museum and the ecomuseum have been illustrated by Rivard (1984, pp. 43-53; 1988, pp. 123-4), who states:

- *Traditional Museum = building + heritage + collections + expert staff + public visitors; and,*
- *Ecomuseum = territory + heritage + memory + population.*

More recently (2004) the ‘Long Network’ of ecomuseums developed in Europe provided a concise definition, namely that ‘An ecomuseum is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development. An ecomuseum is based on a community agreement’ (*Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop*, Trento, May 2004). Davis (2007, p. 119) further simplified the definition, stating that an ecomuseum is ‘a community-lead heritage or museum project that supports sustainable development’.

Ecomuseums demonstrate remarkable diversity, yet despite these variations Davis (1999) suggested a list of attributes. This list, and one proposed by Corsane and Holleman (1993) has recently been further developed and utilized to assess how far ecomuseums reach the tenets of the philosophy (Corsane *et al.* 2007a and 2007b). The essential features of ecomuseums are:

- The adoption of a territory that may be defined, for example, by landscape, dialect, a specific industry, or musical tradition.
- The identification of specific heritage resources within that territory, and the celebration of these ‘cultural touchstones’ using in-situ conservation and interpretation.
- The conservation and interpretation of individual sites within the territory is carried out via liaison and co-operation with other organisations.

- The empowerment of local communities – the ecomuseum is established and managed by local people. Local people decide what aspects of their ‘place’ are important to them.
- The local community benefits from the establishment of the ecomuseum. Benefits may be intangible, such as greater self-awareness or pride in place, tangible (the rescue of a fragment of local heritage, for example) or economic. There are often significant benefits for those individuals in the local community most closely associated with ecomuseum development (Corsane *et. al*, 2007a and 2007b).

These features indicate the strong connection between ecomuseums and specific geographical localities, with the latter two points demanding that ecomuseums embrace local empowerment and heed local voices. Because narratives are frequently developed jointly by local people they have the advantage of avoiding the bias of McLean’s (2008) ‘first layer’ because the encoders (local activists) may have a more in-depth understanding of the locality’s heritage features and a knowledge of what matters most to the community. Those ecomuseums that are introspective, – as they frequently are, serving local community needs rather than attracting tourists – also avoid the other two ‘identity layers’ to which McLean (2008) suggests traditional museums are prone. Here encoders, decoders and those represented are the same group of people from one discreet locality. Thus ecomuseum practice – with representation being the responsibility of local voices - suggests that ecomuseums may have the potential to get closer to ‘truth’ about places and better capture local identity. But is this really the case? Watson’s research in the coastal town of Great Yarmouth (Watson, 2007) suggests that local collective memories about place and history are not necessarily reliable instruments for exhibition-building and capturing place in a traditional museum. Hence if ecomuseums are also reliant on local opinion to construct a vision of place, they may be equally prone to these failings and accusations of bias. The assumption being made here is that any form of representation – museums and ecomuseums included – can actually reflect reality of place. Before exploring these ideas of place representation by a small sample of ecomuseums it is useful to reflect briefly on the theories that surround our understanding of place.

3. PLACE, AUTHENTICITY AND MEANING. – Terms such as ‘belonging’, ‘sense of place’, ‘identity’, and ‘community’ are entwined with ideas about place. Unsurprisingly, place, and the more elusive ‘sense of place’ have been a research focus in several disciplines, including anthropology, ecology, geography, psychology, sociology and (to a lesser extent) cultural and heritage studies. Place lies at the heart of human geography, with Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Anne Buttimer being regarded as pioneers in using experiential perspectives to reflect on place and ‘sense of place’ (Cresswell, 2004, p. 19; Hubbard *et al.*, 2004, p. 5). These three authors’ understanding of place puts people at the heart of the concept. Tuan (1977) reminds us that a sense of place goes beyond aesthetic appreciation – in other words places are not always comfortable or welcoming - while Relph (1976) demands that we examine the idea in terms of ‘authenticity’. The notion of ‘authenticity’ is itself a challenging notion, and one of particular relevance to museums, who prioritize the exhibition of authentic artefacts, but usually in recreated (unauthentic) settings distant from where they originated or were used. Buttimer (1980) argues that

place is something that must be experienced rather than described, a view that relates closely to ecomuseum philosophy. All three authors emphasize that place provides ‘a world of meaning’ (Hubbard *et al.*, 2004, p. 5); it might be argued that ecomuseums are a tool to enable visitors to get closer to what living in a particular locality means. Ecomuseums could answer questions such as ‘why did people settle here’?; ‘how did people survive here in the past – what was the local economy based on’?; ‘why does the cultural landscape look like this – how did people shape it’?; and ‘what do people do here now’?

By answering such questions ecomuseums are assigning attributes or values to a place. This has resonance with Tuan’s view that place is a space endowed with meaning and value. Indeed he regards space and place as mutually defined terms: ‘what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value’ (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). Similarly Casey (1996) agrees that place must be experienced: ‘there is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it’ (Casey, 1996, p. 18). Escobar (2001, p. 140) emphasizes this dichotomy between place as a physical entity, ‘a constructed reality’ and place as a conceptualization of identity, our mental image or ‘category of thought’ about a locality. As an ecomuseum visitor we should both experience the physical reality of a place and develop our own perceptions about it.

Our perceptions of places affect us, they modify our behaviour. Smith (2006, p. 77) regards this ‘affect’ of place as being of particular significance in order to understand the meaning of heritage and heritage sites. She writes:

“Heritage as place, or heritage places, may not only be conceived as representational of past human experiences but also of creating an affect on current experiences and perceptions of the world. Thus, a heritage place may represent or stand in for a sense of identity and belonging for particular individuals or groups”

If the word ‘ecomuseum’ is substituted into this paragraph for the terms ‘heritage’ or ‘heritage places’ this argument makes equally sound reasoning.

Hummon (1992) also addressed the social dimensions of place and the emotional investment and meanings attached to it by local people. Of special interest to ecomuseums are his views on the personal and social meanings of place, his suggestion that places can be a ‘symbolic locale’, serving as an extension of self and community identity. The idea of ‘symbolic locales’ is very closely related to that of ‘cultural touchstones’, special features of our environment that we cherish (Davis, 2005). Whether we refer to such places as ‘heritage sites’, or more poetically as ‘cultural touchstones’ or ‘symbolic locales’, there are undoubtedly historic, contemporary, natural and cultural features in the landscape that hold special meaning. Hence for many local people these places, as part of the tangible landscape, are important in their own right by providing a beacon for a sense of belonging, a link with the past and a symbol of permanence. It would appear then that these theories support the view that ecomuseums – as signifiers of place – can have important meanings for visitors, but might have even greater significance for local people.

This conclusion demands that we question how ecomuseums construct and convey meanings and values about a place - its history, its natural environment, its cultural landscape and its people – and how they represent a range of identities and memories. How do ecomuseums help their visitors to position themselves within a community, to find a ‘place’ in the social, cultural and physical world, to ‘affect’ them? The following section describes a number of ecomuseums, reflecting on their roles to further explore these issues. The descriptions and analysis are based on extensive visits and in-depth interviews with ecomuseum personnel; these four sites have been selected because they give a picture of the diversity of ecomuseums in terms of their aims and practice on three continents.

4. ECOMUSEUMS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF PLACE.

4.1. *Gavalochori Museum, Crete, Greece.* – Although this museum, which is in the small village of Gavalochori in the north of the Mediterranean island of Crete, does not call itself an ecomuseum, I have argued elsewhere (Davis, 1999) that it has all the attributes to legitimise the use of the term. In its rural location the village’s survival was once totally dependent on agriculture, rearing sheep and other livestock and growing a variety of crops including fruit, vines and olives. However, it has gradually adapted to the influence of tourism which is now the mainstay of the island’s economy. The rich cultural heritage of the village has been integral to the promotion of tourism, with signposts encouraging visitors to discover for themselves the Venetian buildings, ancient village wells, threshing floors and Roman tombs. The revitalisation of local crafts (including pottery, needlework, painting, cookery and the distillation of raki) has been encouraged by a women's co-operative, who sell their craft goods in a taverna which they manage. The women act as guides to the Gavalochori Museum which conserves material culture linked to their village history and promotes an identity to the outside world. In every respect this approach to the conservation and use of heritage meets ecomuseum criteria, with an exceptional ‘grassroots’ approach aided by a supportive local authority.

The museum (Fig. 1) describes itself as a 'historical folklore museum'. The building, with its arched interior, mezzanine living space, balcony and shady courtyard has been carefully restored to provide pleasant exhibition areas. The oldest part of the house has been restored to demonstrate the traditional room configuration of kitchen, bedroom and store rooms, complete with original furniture and household goods. The remainder of the museum is devoted to craft skills, notably silk weaving, pottery, 'kopaneli' (lace-making), masonry and woodcarving; a small section is devoted to Cretan history and the exploits and heroism of local people during military actions.

This small museum encourages us to reflect that in a globalised world, there is a perceived demand by small communities to appreciate and demonstrate their own history, distinctiveness and identity. The Gavalochori museum is special in that it was initiated by local people and is maintained by the community. It has a carefully-defined territory, and encourages visitors to explore the other heritage sites in the vicinity which have been preserved in-situ, and to experience the craft skills of its inhabitants. Strolling through the village visitors experience the physical nature of place, consuming an identity of place based on a heritage defined by local people. This democratisation of place is important in this context; place identity has not been decided by trained museum curators or specialists, but by members of the local community. It is evident – even as a visitor – that

there is considerable local pride in what has been achieved here, and that meaning and value cling to tangible and intangible heritage. While it is impossible to experience place in the same way as local people, the visitor can reflect on how the cultural landscape has evolved over time and appreciate its key cultural elements.

There are, inevitably, many stories about place that are missing. Although references are made in the museum to war and the hardship of past rural life, little is said about the problems the community experiences today: the impact of emigration by younger people, the growth of holiday homes, the negative impacts of tourism and the loss of traditional values. For the outside visitor these local perceptions of place remain hidden behind the mask of a rural idyll.

4.2. *Hirano-Cho Ecomuseum, Japan.* – Hirano-cho in Osaka Prefecture in Japan dates from the 14th century, and as a result of its past status has numerous historical sites, including temples, shrines, secluded gardens and traditional wooden houses which form a network of protected sites. The ecomuseum, founded in 1993 by a group of local residents, included some of these historic areas amongst its seven original sites. By 2003 the ecomuseum comprised fifteen sites and involved some forty individuals, a loose confederation of local people who share the vision of preserving local heritage and encouraging dialogue between local people, young and old. A temple (Fig.2), a sweet shop museum, a bicycle shop (famed for creating the largest bicycle in the world), vernacular local houses with shady courtyards, the old headquarters of the local newspaper, a film museum (video and audio recordings of more than 40 years of Hirano's festivals and events), and an avenue of ancient trees provide an eclectic mix of past and present, of nature and culture, of extraordinary heritage and places that to a casual visitor might appear mundane. However, the ecomuseum provides the opportunity for the visitor to experience aspects of place that would otherwise be hidden.

Hirano is an unusual ecomuseum because it is very introspective. Local priest Ryonin Kawaguchi (*pers. comm.*, May 2003), the instigator and principal protagonist of the ecomuseum, was convinced of its value for local people, but had little interest in the potential economic benefits of attracting tourists. It was his view that its most important role was giving local residents pride in their own place, an ability to reflect on their history and recognize its significance to contemporary needs. The ecomuseum embraces past and present, the tangible and the intangible, and succeeds by being intimate and low key, encouraging townspeople and visitors to discover its secrets. By doing so it is, of course, creating its own cultural identity and mythology, the narrative of which is based on local input, formulated by local people giving their views on what they perceive as their heritage.

Although there is a map depicting the scattered ecomuseum sites, the exact locations have been made difficult to find, which Kawaguchi suggests 'makes visitors ask for directions and encourages interaction with local people.' It was his view that the ecomuseum would help local people begin to understand the intangible nature of their heritage. He also suggested that 'The ecomuseum is part of our efforts to recognize the cultural and historical assets we have and to get residents involved in such activities. In a way all local residents are curators. A town is revitalized when the people there are revitalized'. In other words he realized that the ecomuseum was not about the past, but drew attention to today's needs.

The identity constructed during this ecomuseum development is fascinating, but one that is difficult for outsiders – and especially a European – to begin to truly understand. Yet even here the various theoretical concepts of place are being echoed in the selection of ‘symbolic locales’, and the attribution of meaning to them by local people. The need to conserve these elements of the past and of contemporary life demand authenticity and strong perceptions of their intrinsic value. Perhaps what becomes most evident to a European visitor is just how fascinating Japanese society and culture is, and the ecomuseum enables vivid comparisons to be made between Hirano-cho and ones own place.

4.3. *Kalyna Country Ecomuseum, Alberta, Canada.* – The Kalyna Country Ecomuseum covers some 15,000 square kilometres of Alberta east of the provincial capital of Edmonton – arguably the world’s largest ecomuseum. It is roughly equivalent to the area of land settled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Ukrainian immigrants: “Here the landscape is dotted with the onion domes of Eastern Rite churches, grain elevators and the slowly decaying homes of the original Ukrainian pioneer families” (Tracey, 1994). The settlement of the region by immigrants from eastern European countries from 1880 – 1920 shaped the contemporary landscape of the area. Balan (1994) notes that “although assimilation, depopulation, urbanisation and technological change have substantially transformed the complexion and the demographic profile of the region, its fundamental make-up and distinctive features remain largely intact.” It is a multicultural society of some 42,000 people that has established a strong sense of identity.

The ecomuseum acts as a means of introducing the visitor to the many existing heritage sites in the region, although it is not directly responsible for their management. These include Fort George – Buckingham House (established in 1792) a former fur-trading post, the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village, an open-air museum that re-creates a typical pioneer community, and the Victoria Settlement, the oldest surviving buildings in Alberta. Some 23 local museums are included within the ecomuseum, as are 40 designated wildlife sites - including Elk Island National Park, Canada’s first (1906) designated sanctuary for large mammals. The landscape is dotted with more than 100 orthodox churches with their characteristic ‘onion-dome’ roofs, many of which have been conserved as part of the ecomuseum’s strategy to maintain local distinctive features (Fig. 3). Much of the original network of trails used by the Indians, by fur-traders and the pioneer settlers is still in place, providing a fascinating means of discovering the area.

This ecomuseum undoubtedly acts as a device for promoting regional tourism, drawing the visitors’ attention to the wide variety of heritage sites within the territory, and attempting to boost the tourist economy. However, it is important to note that its inception was promoted by local people who were aware that certain aspects of their heritage were under threat. In a region facing population decline and with limited economic prospects, the ecomuseum was perceived as an elegant solution. It provided an inclusive approach to the conservation of heritage resources that could be applied within overarching economic and community development strategies. It is still managed by a consortium of local people anxious to conserve the distinctive nature of this ‘Ukrainian’ landscape.

The ecomuseum encourages the visitor to explore the vast landscape of plains Alberta, but just how close Kalyna comes to 'truth' about its history and development is arguable. Many of its key visitor attractions are sanitized reconstructions or carefully conserved remnants of the past, and give few clues regarding the lives of people who lived/live there. Little is said about the past histories or present situation of native American communities despite the fact that two 'reservations' exist within the ecomuseum's territory. While some interesting narratives are provided by local people it is evident there are significant gaps.

Kalyna makes an interesting contrast to Hirano-cho (described above), and not simply because of the geographical scale of the ecomuseum. Although the processes undertaken here appear to have cherished, created and sustained local identity, their primary role has been to encourage tourists to visit and to boost the local economy. The focus – as evident from promotional material - is primarily on 'outsiders' and the encouragement of tourism. Kalyna Ecomuseum is much more of a deliberate and professional marketing construct, its boundary lines drawn on a map by its protagonists to enclose an extensive space. While the visitor will be aided by the 'signposting' provided by the ecomuseum to individual heritage sites, the sheer scale of the territory makes a comprehensive, holistic understanding of Kalyna as a 'place' almost impossible. This suggests that ecomuseums can only effectively construct place identities when the scale of the territory is small and its heritage elements tightly connected.

4.4. *The Ecomuseum of the Terraces and the Vine, Cortemilia, Italy.* – The Cortemilia area, which benefited from a strategic geographical location between the coast and the hinterland, was once renowned for its high quality agricultural produce, but had suffered, like many other rural areas in Europe, from economic decline, emigration and the consequent abandonment of farmland. However, the Cortemilia area had two other major environmental problems which affected people's lives, namely pollution and flooding. From 1889 to 1996 the valley had been heavily polluted by a chemical factory located 30 kilometres from Cortemilia. Pollutants had been discharged directly into the Bormida River, and noxious fumes from the plant spread into the valley. These pollutants affected soils, crops and the health of local people. The once-famous wine, vegetable and cheese production ceased, and over time the remarkable terraced agricultural landscape became partly wooded, as it had been centuries before. In 1994 a disastrous flood emphasized the fragility of a cultural landscape that had lost its purpose. The terraced hillsides lay partly ruined at the bottom of the valley, a visual metaphor for environmental and social erosion. Ecomuseum processes have been used here as a means of combating this desolation, a catalyst to an effort to regain identity and sense of pride (Corsane, Davis and Murtas, 2009).

In 1996 the ecomuseum proposal was chosen for support by the region, and the area's terraced landscape was chosen as the key ecomuseum theme, not only because the terraces are at risk, but because they give a sense of continuity in time and space. The terraces link people and places and are a good example of a sustainable approach towards local and available resources; most importantly they were built by the community and not by an architect or engineer; the terraces have no individual signature but are a collective enterprise. All the project's aims - the contemporary interpretation, preservation and

enhancement of the elements of local distinctiveness and community values – were linked to this terraced landscape.

It was recognized that the conservation, maintenance and rebuilding of the terraced landscape would never happen without a revolution in perception and attitudes, and that the ecomuseum's role was to give strength, self confidence, good practical examples and contemporary values to local heritage, to local distinctiveness. Within the framework of the ecomuseum paradigm, practical work with the community began on several different projects, including creating links with other terraced landscapes worldwide, the restoration of historic buildings in the town and in the rural hinterland and community building through activities designed to bring people together and build collective values. Efforts were made to revitalize traditional events such as Carnival, the midsummer night feast and seasonal local markets, the number and qualities of these initiatives has now grown, and offer an opportunity to strengthen the local economy by links to local produce.

Building projects were an essential component in the ecomuseum's strategy, with structures chosen because of their position, qualities, state of abandonment and potential for interpretation. None of them was restored just for the sake of conservation, but always linked to collective reuse. The ecomuseum has renovated three main structures, located in different part of the Cortemilia area. An historical building in the old village square has been transformed into an interpretation centre, library and temporary exhibition space, while the square itself, once a car park, is now a charming pedestrian area, paved with stone and used for exhibitions, theatre and film. The second building is a farm (Fig. 4). with its vineyard and orchard, and the third a small traditional store for chestnuts Located in a hamlet belonging to the Cortemilia area it was semi-derelict, but its special shape and traditional dry stone structure makes it unique. One year later, the chestnut hut is being used for its original purpose, for storing, drying and packing an important local crop.

After a dark past of pollution and misgivings about the future, the people of Cortemilia have found a way, through ecomuseum processes, of shaping a future, of ensuring sustainable local development. They have found a new vision and new ways of living, demonstrating that quality of life and sense of belonging to a specific place are strongly dependent on an understanding and appreciation of local heritage. Their collective image of their place is now a positive one, achieved through a long process of re-evaluation and endeavour.

5. CONCLUSIONS. – These examples of ecomuseum practice indicate that they are extremely diverse organizations that have originated in a variety of ways. It is also clear that just like traditional museums they too carefully select elements of their past and present environments and interpret them to construct their version of 'truth'. Although a broad variety of different stories are provided, several stories are missing. Women, children, poverty, crime, health and medicine, disasters, colonialism, class and dominance are frequently the 'missing stories' and 'missing histories' in traditional museums, and – perhaps to a lesser extent – are also missing in the ecomuseums described here. However, interviews with ecomuseum activists indicate that they are prepared to acknowledge, exhibit and work with difficult issues and indeed for many of them their origins lie with seeking an approach to change their situation or adjust to a rapidly changing world. In all cases stories are delivered by local people, and to a degree

it might be argued that ecomuseums demonstrate a refreshing honesty. This distinction - that places, their histories and their communities are being described by the people that live there - is of significant interest, even if the storylines may not be accurate in all respects.

We need to decide to what extent 'truth' is important in these ecomuseum narratives - and indeed to reflect on whether any museum or ecomuseum can ever hope to accurately represent place or the past. Is this goal impossible, simply an illusion? Perhaps ecomuseums - and museums generally - have more important goals than simply providing an honest, accurate narrative. For many ecomuseums - Cortemilia is an excellent example - the primary goal is to rebuild the community, not necessarily to rescue heritage and create an ecomuseum. Their goals are frequently more closely related to building social capital than heritage interpretation (Corsane *et al.*, 2007b).

Perhaps ecomuseums should seek 'tone' rather than 'truth'. Haruki Murukami, in his novel, *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (2007), suggests that tone is much more important when creating a narrative:

“When you listen to someone’s story and then try to reproduce it in writing, the tone’s the main thing. Get the tone right and you have a true story on your hands. Maybe some of the facts aren’t quite correct, but that doesn’t matter - it actually might elevate the truth factor of the story. Turn this around and you could say that there are stories that are factually accurate yet aren’t true at all. These are the kind of stories you can count on being boring, and even in some instances, dangerous. You can smell these ones a mile away.”

Ecomuseums - and museums generally - are rarely boring. They try to represent places as honestly as they can using the material and intangible resources that they have, capturing the tone of places, even if not necessarily an accurate truth.

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RIASSUNTO: *Gli ecomusei e la rappresentazione dei luoghi*. – Questo articolo tratta delle modalità attraverso le quali gli ecomusei rappresentano i luoghi, interrogandosi sulla possibilità effettiva di produrre rappresentazioni accurate o piuttosto di elaborare un'illusione del luogo e degli eventi che vi sono occorsi e di partecipare alla costruzione di una località geografica e della sua identità. La filosofia e le pratiche adottate dagli ecomusei vengono descritte, apprezzandone le potenzialità ai fini della costruzione della 'verità' in comparazione con le pratiche dei musei più tradizionali. Al

fine di valutare le potenzialità degli ecomusei si propone inoltre una breve esplorazione delle teorie riguardanti spazio e luogo. Infine si descrivono alcuni esempi di ecomusei in diverse parti del mondo per verificare se essi forniscono una versione ‘veritiera’ dei luoghi o se piuttosto producono semplici narrazioni che possono essere ‘lette’ dai visitatori.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article s’intéresse à la façon dont les écomusées représentent les lieux et se demande dans quelle mesure une représentation exacte est possible, ou si au contraire elle ne peut qu’amener à une illusion d’un lieu et des événements qui s’y sont déroulés, et participer à la construction d’une localité géographique et de son identité. L’esprit et les pratiques qui animent les écomusées sont décrits pour leurs plus grands bénéfices potentiels pour la reconstruction de ‘vérité’ par rapport aux musées plus traditionnels. Afin d’évaluer les écomusées, on propose d’abord une exploration rapide des théories concernant l’espace et le lieu, et puis quelques exemples d’écomusée afin de tester se les écomusées produisent une version ‘véridique’ d’un lieu ou une simple mise en narration ‘lisibile’ par les visiteurs.

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Captions for Figures:

Fig.1 – Gavalochori Museum, Crete.

Fig. 2 – Temple, Hirano-cho ecomuseum, Japan.

Fig. 3 – Dicky Bush Orthodox Church, Kalyna Country Ecomuseum, Alberta, Canada.

Fig. 4 – Restored farmhouse, Ecomuseum of the terraces and vines, Cortemilia, Italy