

**Report examining the arguments for and against removing buildings
from their sites in the landscape to the safekeeping of St Fagans.**

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Abstract

This report will discuss the arguments for and against the removal of historically relevant buildings by the Museum of Wales, and the reconstruction of said buildings at the sight of St Fagans.

St Fagans

St Fagans has for years been known for its reconstructive buildings. As a 'living' museum, it was created to represent Welsh history in a more interactive environment (National Museum of Wales, 2018). As part of the National Museum of Wales, St Fagans houses around one million artefacts, buildings, paintings and other assorted donations and acquisitions from the main museum's collection of five million, with an emphasis on working with mostly historians and the community, with input from specialists in Archaeology and Conservation. Funded by donations, Welsh Assembly Grants and its own revenue, St Fagans is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Wales, holding classrooms, lecture theatres, galleries, and workshops as well as the buildings on the grounds, that are pieces of history in and of themselves (Walker, 2018).

The museum prides itself on making the visitor experience key to life at St Fagans, and allot of energy is spent on new interactive environments, and classroom activities, to engage educational tours in particular. Since 2005 the site has received a boost in funding and has undergone an extensive redevelopment that as Adrian Murphy explains in his 2018 article on St Fagans, has created "new opportunities for visitors to learn, play and be creative with hands-on experiences within the exhibitions'.

St Fagans was first opened 70 years ago but in 2005, the museum tendered a redevelopment plan to transform the visitor experience and break new ground in museum practice. Welsh history and heritage being the main focus of the site, it has in the past come under criticism for concentrating on the preservation of outer buildings whilst neglecting the visitor areas (Young, 2017), something the new redevelopment has sought to leave in the past, and by many

accounts has managed (Murphy, 2018/Reeves, 2017/Collins, 2018). However, the issues that come with housing both history and heritage are many and varied.

History and Heritage

Lowenthal distinguishes history as that which explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over times, but heritage as something which clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes (Lowenthal, 1985). This implies that he believes history to be more objective than heritage, which can potentially distort history when used to serve a new community in another way. This view of heritage is not particularly true when we look at St Fagans, which although makes use of both heritage and history, seeks to stage it rather than mold it to a new purpose. Lowenthal's words do warn us however of the dangers of changing the community and landscape around historical sites and locations, and how it can warp perception, something that we have struggled with in museums in the past (Bennett, 1995). Dicks goes on to disseminate the issues with heritage as potentially reducing the past to what we can see feel and hear, limiting experiences of things such as law or religion (Dicks, 200). Essentially this tells us that the problems in representing heritage and history is that of the perception of said history, and the community it is being presented too. It can challenge our ideas of what history is, and what we are comfortable with as individuals.

The most common arguments around the conservation and preservation of history are those of authenticity and intangible cultural heritage (Staiff, 2013).

The Main Issues

The presentation of historical buildings at St Fagans has always been a key feature. They are well known for moving historically relevant architecture 'brick by brick' back to the site where buildings are reconstructed and presented to the public as they might have been used in their original state (Museum of Wales Website, 2018). This process is seen as largely positive as most of the buildings donated are done so because of new developments or disuse of the buildings. By disassembling them, it is possible to learn how to re-assemble in the original style, whilst preserving what can be preserved for the public and academics to view and appreciate (Cardiff News Room). However, differences in opinion surrounding authenticity can cause some academics to feel uncomfortable with this process, as much of the original fabric of the building would be lost (Martinez, 2017). Lowenthal might argue that the building should be left for use as part of a new development, to 'infuse' the historical relevance with a more modern use for the community. The presentation of any building in its 'early form', particularly when talking about buildings that have been actually moved to St Fagans, can negate their later history.

In the rebuilding of these constructions, much is learnt in terms of experimental archaeology. Due to twenty first century health and safety guidelines, it is almost impossible to construct any historical building in an historically accurate manner. From dangerous and disused materials to working procedures, and to customer care, there are a number of laws and guidelines that outline how any construction can be handled and as a result you might argue that authenticity, and least structurally and constructively, can never be achieved. But the purpose of St Fagans is not to necessarily provide physical authenticity, but to display a snapshot of time in a tangible way. Museums have used unlabeled replica's for years when original items have needed attention, without

the public noticing and in more recent years it has been argued that replicas are the way forward (Marshall, Dulake, Ciolfi, Curanti, Kocklekorn, Patrelli, 2016). Many academics might be more comfortable with St Fagans being referred to more as an experimental archaeological park, like that of Sutton Hoo or Fortevikens Museum, where the aspiration is to be as authentic as possible.

Much like archaeology, one can argue that, recording, removing and preserving history guarantee's its survival and record, where as there are no guarantees when archaeology is left in situ. Despite this the removal of any archaeological or historical materials comes with risks. Rarely can you guarantee that anything damageable can be moved without causing further damage. Buildings are no different, in fact you could argue, that in moving a historical building you are guaranteeing damage will be done, however the careful observation and analysis that takes place in Archaeology does guarantee the recording of as much detail as possible, meaning the record, the knowledge, stays with us forever (Dowman,1970).

This is one of the ultimate challenges in Heritage, authenticity verses disrepair.

One of the obvious issues with the grounds at St Fagans is the limit of space.

Removing buildings from their original landscape, can distort how they are perceived. St Fagans has clearly carefully allocated the buildings to plots that are most suited i.e. iron round house is at the outer edge of the forest out of sight of any other constructs, but as space is limited and the museum is partly privately funded there are other issues surround authenticity.

Recently, to improve revenue, St Fagans have installed a high tree assault course, cutting across the skyline to the majority of its outer buildings. Due to the commercial nature of the new attraction it is likely to detract from the historic

nature of the museum. This might be critiqued by fellow museums, however funding to the arts and education has been cut and is likely to suffer further cuts in the coming years. St Fagans has had massive investment in the last 15 years and may be under some pressure to begin providing for itself where grants may no longer be available.

Dr Elizabeth Walker, principle curator of collections and access at the museum explained that the coming international funding issues are a concern to the entire industry, and that there are pressures to start providing more revenue for themselves as well as saving more money, and that this can sometimes come at a cost to a solely historic visitor experience. By using replicas of artifacts and features, it saves money spent on damage or cleaning, and the addition of interactive activities, serves as another draw to those looking for something to do (Walker, 2018).

It is worth noting on the issue of authenticity, that one of the problems St Fagans has is a lack of information on site, to disseminate what you can see around you. The information on display is very 'user friendly' so as not to alienate the audience and extremely limited. As part of an immersive experience, stewards are posted at most areas to answer any questions you might have. Although these tools are used so that they don't alienate the audience, they also allow for the misinterpretation that these places are 'exactly like' they would have been in their heyday, whilst the information actually given is generally vague.

One of the larger issues St Fagans has dealt with successfully is that of intangible heritage and political correctness. Museums do not have the best track record with politically correct behavior and values, particularly when we look at past behaviors of exploiting and presenting subjects such as war and death in what would now be considered a disrespectful manner. Not many of the buildings on site come with an overtly complex history, other than the Unitarian Pen-Rhiw

Chapel. The Chapel was acquired when attendance dropped to an unmanageable level and despite the Chapel being the only place of worship for the local Unitarians, it was donated to the museum on the condition that it could still be used for services. This is an excellent example of working with welsh community to provide for the preservation of an historic religious place of worship whilst providing the utmost respect to those who still associate the building with family, religion and community (National Museum of Wales, 2018/Wales.com).

Conclusion

In general St Fagans does a good job of representing a 'snapshot' of history to its visitors. The authenticity of anything that is essentially dismantled in its original landscape and reconstructed in another using different building materials and methods is always going to be in question, but St Fagans has done as well as possible given British health and safety and construction guidance's. There are also many conservational and historical guidance's set out by CADW and the Welsh Assembly to protect history and heritage wherever possible and it is worth acknowledging that it is fine balancing act adhering to both guidelines whilst still providing an enjoyable and profitable museum experience.

St Fagans main issues are those of any museum, that of authenticity and money. The authenticity has to be a negotiation between presenting an accurate historical interactive experience and the kind of damage caused if you let the public interact with actual historical material. The British Museum might use a replica at any time and very few people would be able to tell the difference, however you might be able to tell if the same replica were the size of a house that you are allowed to explore, touch and ask direct questions about. I believe the lack of information provided at St Fagans goes some way to making this issue less prevalent to the average visitor to the museum, which is very much

advertised as a fun family day out rather than particularly a trip for history and museum lovers. For the museum to exist and provide a service to history and society it must be financially viable. As time goes on and funding becomes less available this fine line of money vs authenticity is likely to become an even bigger issue in the conservation, restoration and protection of Wales' historical buildings.

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