SZELETA MUSEUM AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

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Abstract

In 2002, the Curatory Board of the Szeleta Foundation decided to create a visitor centre for the Prehistoric sites of the Bükk Mountains, primarily for the famous Szeleta Cave. The preliminary study plan was coordinated professionally by the Department of Prehistory and Ancient History, University of Miskolc. The presentation can serve as a starting point for further planning, as well as a thought-provoking conception of the planned museum complex.

The development of presenting archaeological heritage – in Europe

Reconstructions and exhibitional opportunities are an important, though much debated issue in the spheres of national monument protection, architectural planning and archaeology. When displaying original ruins and excavations – reconstructed either fully or only partly – there is always the possibility of an irreversible destruction of the original state. Exceptionally, the application of particular physical protections might preserve the original state, but such an option requires the complex unity of the location, the conservational methods and the exhibitional-touristic facilities. Apart from a couple of functionally genuine reconstructions aimed to present the original state of affairs, the find assemblages cannot generally be used directly, and have merely a supplementary role in the ever-growing field of tourism. It is quite difficult to reach a balance in creating a properly conserved, reconstructed and at the same time attractive complex, capable of reflecting the past in a more-or-less genuine fashion (Hünnekens 2002). Both the cultural-political and the restorational-exhibitional “constraints” would like to move towards showing the maximum of what is possible, but the practice of recent years in the case of highly endangered sites points to a different conclusion. For a number of years now, only the replica of a hall is exhibited at the Lascaux Cave (Font-de-Gaume, Dordogne, France), but some sort of intentional restraint is applied in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes, where a number of tombs are accessible only for archaeologists; tourists can visit only three tombs with one ticket during the course of a day. An interesting solution was reached in the case of Stonehenge as well near Salisbury, England, where the visitor centre was built relatively far from the site itself, thus visitors arriving by bus can in fact leave out the original site from their programme.

The presentation of areas with historical value – i.e. the “excavation areas” – is an extremely exciting issue, which poses further questions for consideration. A good example is provided by the Neanderthal Museum, where the museum was founded on practically the “spirit of the place”, since the relatively few original finds – without satisfactorily wide-reaching interpretations – do not say much for either the tourists or the experts (Auffermann & Weniger 1997). Such cultural establishments not connected directly to archaeological finds and in situ remains are idiosyncratic ramparts aimed at the presentation of a sustained-discovered
spirit-history; they are no less than intermediaries of the material and spiritual culture of an era long since gone. This might be one of the extremes of an archaeological-architectural-preservational methodological typology, which is able to consider all the diverse possibilities. The other pole of the spectrum would be represented by the full reconstruction of a complex, based on anastylosis and speculative-theoretical methods. The task is largely architectural, slightly archaeological and cannot be considered as a method for the protection of monuments. The planning of such constructions is probably the most complex task, involving all the related fields (Schmidt 1988). Architecturally, choosing the proper framework and form poses the most difficult task, where the complex must not dominate over the period and historical unit under display, but at the same time, excessive neutrality might not be the best option either (Schmidt 2000).

In the future, conservational and preservational reasons call for a much closer attention to the excavated remains and their present-day natural environment on the excavation area – irrespective of the historical period. Access to vulnerable or unreconstructed finds needs to be restricted; and the intended exhibitional material should be concentrated in an area fit for touristic purposes through proper planning. Attractions and spectacular reconstructions are required, and the role of virtual presentations, either in situ or at a separate visitor centre, is ever increasing (Puczkó & Rátz 2000). Yet how can we steer clear of fake conceptions drifting towards the realm of showbusiness and resting on purely visitor demands? What does a planned complex actually aim at as regards to scenery, historical genuineness and visitor-orientedness? What should be given priority: the age value (Alterswert), the historical value (historische Wert) or the artistic value (Kunstwert) – if there is one at all.

The development of presenting archaeological heritage – in Hungary

The location of the protective structures that sheltered archaeological site was taken over first by local museums. These were capable of receiving visitors and were already equipped with satisfactory facilities. Then came the construction of visitor centres and archaeological parks, fit to serve diverse tasks. The function of the latter group is definitely more complex than what it used to be, since the expectations as well as the composition of the visitors – based on age and social stratification – have changed considerably. All this has been in synchrony with the constant development of tourism and a growing interest in cultural heritage. Visitor centres have an important role in general education (history, geography, nature studies, environmental studies) and artistic-visual education.

Several requirements have to be met in the construction of the exterior and interior spaces of the future museum at Szeleta Cave. Different solutions are called for when making use of space, as the multimedia-based exhibitions, the interactive computer terminals, the sensory-based attractions aimed at direct experience demand a whole new approach. In order to fulfil these functions, the institute needs the continuous presence of the constantly developing archaeological profession. It is necessary to construct auditoriums and educational rooms equipped with cutting-edge technology, as well as research facilities, archives, small libraries and computerised databases for the archaeologists, museumpedagogists and tourist guides.

The visitors can get a glimpse into the ongoing research work conducted in the laboratories and workshops. The auditoriums (also equipped with modern technology) have a double function: they not only satisfy the needs of the specialists of the field (through conferences and workshops) but also the demands of the wider public (through movie screenings and multimedia-based virtual tours). The infrastructure containing basic services, such as the admission of visitors or the construction of a separate section in charge of selling publications, postcards and souvenirs are an absolute must.

We are planning the construction of a building satisfying all the needs mentioned above on the Alsó-Hámor building-site, property of the Szeleta Foundation.
Constructional considerations

The Lillafüred-Hámor Regulatory Plan, administratively belonging to the city of Miskolc, specifies a “settlement-centred combined exploitation” for the properties of the area. The ca. 3000 m² area prohibits free construction, which means a 5 m front area and a 15 m backyard in our case. The maximal height is 7.5 m – provided there is a 40% built-in area. The excavation of the area is possible from the direction of the road on the southern side, yet we suggest that parking should be managed somewhere else nearby. Temporary parking space can be provided for buses and the disabled in the front yard.

The possible size of the planning programme, the topographical conditions and the functional character require a sectioned construction, which follows the natural environment. It is absolutely evident without any ground mechanical excavations that the 25° slope – close to the soil failure angle – will raise a number of statically related problems. It is not expedient to create cellars cut into the slope; yet with the help of terraces and buttresses groundwork difficulties might be avoided.

Exhibitional conception – architectural conception

Since the layers of the most significant cave sites in the Bükk Mountains represent the last 140,000 years, it is possible to present cultural development by placing it within the history of environmental changes (Ringer 2000) (Fig. 1). In the case of the Szeleta Museum, we are in a very fortunate position, since the architecture is able to accommodate the architectural-professional conception of the exhibition, instead of having to create a novel exhibition in an already existing building.

The architectural structure traces the sloping surface by integrating the exhibitional-thematic parts. The construction of the interior spaces follows a chronological segmentation and is based on 20th century principles of museum design; that is, a system of ramps and shifts in floor levels. Instead of a spirally constructed, vertical space it is possible to apply a linear contact along the inclination line, both from a visual and an exhibition-technical point of view. The horizontally stretched spiral is a representation of the last 140,000 years. Visitors are guided through time; the space is in the shape of a time spiral. The main message is human development and the changes that took place in the climate and the environment. The exhibition ends in nature and in the present – and that is where the story continues as well. Flexibility and receptibility are important factors when planning the interior spaces, captions and installations – since the exhibition cannot be taken as a permanent state of affairs but rather as something that can be shaped and extended with regard to the latest results of archaeology (Fig. 2).
Fig. 2. Architectural and exhibitional conception of the Szeleta Museum and Archaeological Park.
Fig. 3. The Palaeolithic heritage trail and the Bükk region’s cultural and natural heritage.
1: Stalagmites in Diabáz Cave; 2: Palace Hotel at Lillafüred; 3: The limestone rocks of Fehérokő Hill;
4: Rock Spring in Szalajka Valley; 5: Abbey of Bélapátfalva; 6: Primeval beech forest;
7: Castle of Diósgyőr; 8: Ethnographical exhibition in the Oszla House.
Archaeological parks also demand an up-to-date visitor centre. The planning programme is targeted at two main objectives: to attend to the visitors’ needs by a suitable infrastructure on the one hand and to prepare, present and explain the message of the professional conception and the archaeological park; as well as to host all sorts of related programmes. During the planning stage it might be important to separate the groups of visitors in a temporal sense and to segment the programme opportunities. The auditoriums opening from the main hall, the permanent exhibition, the temporal exhibitions and the archaeological park open up such possibilities. Beside the use of modern materials, with the application of more traditional materials within a high-tech framework it is possible to create an architecturally novel building which conforms to its immediate environment.

Szeleta Museum and tourism

Right from the very beginning, the Szeleta Foundation aimed to create – beside the Szeleta presentation site – an archaeological park and to construct a road leading up to the cave, which would further emphasise the touristic significance of the museum. The location of the complex makes it possible to serve as a starting point for tours to important archaeological sites in the Bükk region. With the help of up-to-date computerised applications, especially virtual modelling, it would be possible for the visitors to “walk” these trails in virtual reality – without leaving the building.

The first steps of the real Prehistoric tour lead the visitor through the Archaeological Park, where reconstructions of environmental and experimental archaeology make the past tangible. This requires the active participation and direct experience of the visitors. The attractions of the park (models, activities) all serve to present the results of ongoing archaeological research and thus will be constantly renewed. The next stop of the real tour is the world-famous Szeleta Cave, accessible by foot directly from the path, where the installations explain the archaeological significance of the site and the history of the cave’s excavation (Kadić 1916, 1934).

The visitor centre offers further archaeological-touristical highlights in the wider region. The recommended trails encompass valuable examples of our cultural and natural heritage, besides accessing archaeological sites (Fig. 3). It is rather fortunate that the targeted region falls more-or-less within the boundary of the Bükk National Park, part of the world heritage (Baráž 2002; Tardy 2002). Thus a close cooperation can be established between the National Park and Szeleta Museum, which can serve both the “edutainment” (education + entertainment) of the visitors and natural preservation. This region of Hungary offers a wide variety of entertainment and leisure possibilities, such as lakes, hot springs, thermal baths, wellness centres and diverse sports facilities ranging from riding to skiing.

With the help of the project an archaeological-touristical complex that is unique in Hungary – and also rare in Europe – would take shape that would serve the double function of protecting and presenting our natural and cultural heritage, as well as entertaining and educating the visitors.

Bibliography


