The Concept of Archaeological Presentation Sites and Visitor Centres in Hungary

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1. Introduction

The in situ preservation and presentation of archaeological heritage remains in Hungary was based on the aspects and principles of monument protection exclusively even in the second half of the twentieth century. Archaeological heritage sites therefore fell at best into the category of ‘ruins’. Since remains excavated at prehistoric sites are not very spectacular, on-site presentation has always been out of the question. The only exception was the early Palaeolithic site at Vértesszőlős in the second half of the 1960s, which is situated in a former tuff mine. Here the in situ presentation seemed necessary not because of the spectacular scenery but rather because of the significance of the archaeological finds, which include Homo erectus remains.

The creation of the first modern prehistoric exhibition was the result of a lucky coincidence of two circumstances. One of them was that in Százhalombatta the chamber of an Iron Age burial mound came to light in an exceptionally intact condition. The other was that archaeologists, monument protection and multimedia specialists joined forces to conserve the site, and created an on-site presentation that was a novelty in Hungary both in its approach and its solutions. As an obvious development to the sensational exhibition, the first prehistoric archaeological park of Hungary was established around the burial mound. By using the tools and experiences of experimental archaeology, the reconstructed Bronze and Iron Age houses, as well as the museum pedagogical and family programmes of the park offer the visitors the opportunity to relive periods long gone. Environmental reconstruction offers a glimpse into the natural vegetation and cultivated plants of the past as well as their experimental replanting. (Jerem et al. 2001; Poroszlai 2003)

The continuous popularity of the Százhalombatta Park has highlighted the fact that visitors need spectacular presentations to understand archaeological heritage. A number of permanent exhibitions already open or in preparation (e.g. the Hungarian National Museum and the Hungarian Natural Scientific Museum) realised this need and have included many reconstructions, as well as multimedia and interactive elements. (Vasáros and Rezi Kató s.a.)

The professional experience accumulated at the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park and the international upswing in heritage tourism have made it clear that such an institution cannot function without modern infrastructure. This can be provided by a visitor centre, which offers complex tourist and informational services. In Százhalombatta, the building and functions of the visitor centre have to be incorporated into the existing park. At two other places in Hungary, such projects are under construction where the visitor centre, park, exhibition and tourist attractions are all being designed at the same time and as parts of a unified concept. Both projects aim at presenting a prehistoric period in close connection to the changes in the natural environment and the cultural landscape, using the specific features of the archaeological heritage of the given region. (Jerem et al. 2004b)

In the following, we shall present an overview of these three projects: the visitor centre of the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park; the concept of the Szeleta Museum and Archaeological Park; and the plans for the Sopron Visitor Centre and Observation Tower.

2. Archaeological Park and Visitor Centre in Százhalombatta

As it has been mentioned in the Introduction, the first important stage in the creation of the Park was the in situ presentation of a Hallstatt Age burial mound, opened in 1998. The mound has been piled up in its original shape and height, and visitors are led through its interior on a steel bridge. A twenty-minute, multilingual multimedia show presents the burial customs of the early Iron Age, the process of mound building, and chamber 115 itself with its oak corridor, stone ring and cremation burial.
Reconstructions of Bronze Age houses of various sizes have been prepared since 1996 with the co-operation of archaeologists, restaurators and architects. In the neighbouring gardens, vegetables known from the Bronze Age are planted, while inside the houses the reconstruction of garments, looms and copies of pottery illustrate different aspects of life in the past.

The creation of farmstead-like Iron Age settlement units further enriched the attractions of the Park. Next to the houses, wheat storage pits, pottery and iron furnaces, as well as goldsmith and blacksmith workshops have been built, which are suitable for experimental archaeology as well. The environmental reconstruction is based on the most recent research results and makes use of the present characteristics of the area too, presenting diverse shrubs and wooded vegetation as well as fruit gardens. (Jerem et al. 2001)

2.1. The Architectural and Functional Plans of the Visitor Centre

The number of visitors doubled between 1997–2000; presently 21,000–24,000 people visit the Park each year. These data are in themselves enough to induce the building of a modern reception building and visitor centre. The first plans were prepared in 2002–2003, and they have recently been modified. We have designed a two-storey building that, in addition to infrastructurally serving the visitors, is also suitable for organising exhibitions, conferences and training courses, and also includes research rooms, workshops and activity rooms.

When designing a culturally oriented building at a heritage site, a number of important aspects need to be considered. Firstly, the planned structure must be integrated into the protected archaeological and natural site, and secondly, the characteristic design must create an emblematic building. In addition to its role in heritage protection, education and information flow, an archaeological park is obviously also a tourist attraction, therefore its architecture and interior design are of high importance. The building uses modern materials and considers local geomorphology as well as the pertinent regulations (Fig. 1). The presentation hall, some of the research rooms and the temporary exhibition room are on the basement level, with active spatial and traffic communication with the functional elements on the ground floor. The arrangement and orientation of the ground floor considered the structural principles of the mound reconstruction and the access opportunities of the Park. The orientation of the

Fig. 1. The location of the planned visitor centre within the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park.
(designed by Zs. Vasáros, Zs. Nagy, K. Hauszknecht, B. Kulcsár)
main entrance coincides with that of the main road of the mound display; they lie along the same axis. The gently curving architectural body is a reflection on the similar shapes of the mounds still visible in the area but avoids direct copying. The materials are mostly wood and glass, resulting in a pavilion-like structure, which, compared to the 300-square-metre area, provides a suitable architectural character on the scale of the Park (Fig. 2).

After continuous negotiations the modified permit plans are now ready and the location of the building has been determined. With support from the town’s local government, as well as from Hungarian and international heritage protection funds, the visitor centre will hopefully be built in the near future.

2.2. IT Applications in the Visitor Centre

Understanding the reconstructed burial mound, and evaluating and contextualising its archaeological remains in an up-to-date manner would be almost impossible without multimedia applications. Visitor feedback has made it very clear that the film and the presentation are necessary. With the construction of the visitor centre, IT applications should obviously also be enhanced, since our aim is to provide information about the whole area of the Park and its larger geographical and cultural environment. As planned, a projection room on the basement level will show the basic film that explains the conditions of and the reasons behind the creation of the Park, as well as the significance of archaeological and historical heritage. This will have special importance in the understanding and proper appreciation of the diverse, open air museum-like world reproduced in the Park. Interactive contents are vital in the temporary and permanent exhibition units. This is also partly justified by archaeological and interdisciplinary research results accumulated through the years. Several touch-consoles will be available for the visitors in the reception and exhibition areas, providing information not only about the facilities of the Park but also about the larger environment and other sights.

At the terminals and in the planned film, we will lay special emphasis on virtual reality applications. The computer reconstructions of past surface formations – mounds, ditches, fortifications, etc. – based on recent aerial photographs and surveys are important in the appropriate transfer of information. These can provide a spatial framework for all the information that can be interesting for visitors and researchers.

Fig. 2. Ground and section plans of the new visitor centre. In the reception building, there will be an exhibition, a projection room, research rooms, laboratories and activity rooms for children as well as the necessary infrastructure (canteen, etc.)
3. Szeleta Museum and Archaeological Park

The Palaeolithic Period has an outstanding position in the rich archaeological heritage of North-Eastern Hungary. Most of the known Hungarian Palaeolithic sites are in this region. The reason behind this is not only the higher intensity of archaeological research, but also the geographical position and past environmental conditions of the region. North-Eastern Hungary has connections through river valleys with Lower Austria, Moravia, Southern Poland, Western and Eastern Slovakia and Western Ukraine, all rich in contemporary sites. A specialty of the city of Miskolc, centre of the North-Eastern region, is that the first stone tools that can be dated with certainty to the Palaeolithic were found in 1891 within its confines. As a result, for a long time the city also functioned as the centre of research carried out in the neighbouring Bükk mountains as well. The most famous of the many excavated caves of this karst area is the internationally known Szeleta Cave, which gave its name to the Upper Palaeolithic Szeletian culture.

In 1999, the Public Foundation for Szeletian Culture was established in Miskolc in order to create a museum and archaeological park near the cave based on the archaeological heritage of the region. Thanks to its capacities, the institution can serve a number of purposes. As an exhibition area, it will familiarise the visitors with the Palaeolithic heritage of the region, while the archaeological park and the proximity of the site will offer a chance to relive the past. As a research institution, it will serve as a basis for prehistoric studies in the region. As a visitor centre, it will be the starting point for excursions to other regional heritage sites and it will also help to make a connection between cultural heritage tourism and other attractions. All this will be implemented through the usage of modern information technology. (Jerem et al. 2002)

3.1. The Exhibition, Architectural and Tourism Concept of the Szeleta Museum

It is a rather lucky circumstance that the aspects of this triple role could have been present in the Szeleta Museum project from the very first phase of the planning process and could therefore influence the process in an interactive manner. We presented our first ideas at the 2003 CAA conference in Vienna (Jerem et al. 2004a). In harmony with the concept of the exhibition and utilising the sloping terrain, the architectural concept of the Museum connects the three rooms along a rising spiral. (Fig. 3) The exhibition therefore symbolises a time spiral through which visitors can learn about the history of the last 140,000 years, the changes in climate and nature during the last Glacial and Interglacial Periods.

As preparation for this time travel, in the reception hall visitors get a short overview of the main steps of the biological evolution of humans, as well as of the Early and Lower Palaeolithic not yet found in the region. The exhibition presents the archaeological cultures of the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic in the context of environmental history. The time travel continues in the archaeological park surrounding the museum building, where archaeological presentations and interactive programmes provide immediate experiences.

The institution functions as a research centre as well. This is aided by a multimedia presentation room where workshops can be held, a specialised library with computer terminals and a couple of research rooms. The principal aim of the research conducted here is to provide professional background for the continuous renewal of the exhibitions, for the integration of the latest scientific results.

The visitor centre function is the most important for the future. The institution is at one of the entrances to the Bükk mountains, not far from Lillafüred, a popular tourist destination. There are a number of significant prehistoric archaeological sites in the mountains and the surrounding hills. In the visitor centre, people can visit these in virtual tours. At the same time, the centre offers several real tourist routes to these sites. The tour that encompasses the three most important cave sites of the Bükk mountains (the Szeleta, Istállós-kői and Subaluyuk Caves) into a unified Palaeolithic heritage tour has an outstanding position. The visitor centre will create a connection between archaeological heritage and the countless other tourist attractions in the Bükk area: historical-archaeological monuments (castles, churches), industrial historical remains (furnaces, lime- and charcoal kilns), folk-art presentations (folk architecture, events), mountain sports (caving, mounting biking, hiking), thermal baths, catering (gastronomy and wines). Archaeological heritage can have an important role in the rich cultural and tourist panorama of the region, as shown by the fact that the Szeleta Cave was included in the application of the city of Miskolc for the title of Cultural Capital of Europe.

3.2. The Role of IT in the Concept of the Szeleta Museum

The presentation of the Palaeolithic Period to a general audience is not an easy task, even archaeologists of other periods find it difficult to understand this stage in the cultural development of humankind. The main difficulty
is that both the natural environment and people’s way of life greatly differ from today’s standards. Furthermore, this is the longest historical period: it lasted for 2.5 million years and encompassed huge and significant changes. These questions can be resolved by modern information technology, especially virtual reality, which can transform reconstructions into realistic and moving pictures. Such effects have so far been attempted only through artistic means, such as paintings and graphics. (This, however, does not mean that we want to downgrade the visual power of artistic talent. It is perhaps enough to mention the world-famous, fantastic paintings of the Czech Zdeněk Burian.) Such a new visual experience can bring this non-existent world closer to the people of today.

Fig. 3. Various views of the planned building of the Szeleta Museum. (Designed by Zs. Vasáros, G. Kállay, P. Kováts)
The formation of the caves, the accumulation and transformation of sediment layers, the changes in warm and cool periods and the north-south shifting of climatic zones all have taken millennia. With the help of computer simulations, processes that change the natural environment can be presented in fast forward motion, which helps to understand them better. Visual materials, which provide a clear and quick understanding of different relationships, have an important role in the interactive terminals, where they allow a glimpse at the methods of scientific research. They present in a puzzle-like fashion how reconstructions are arrived at from remains: the appearance of an extinct animal from excavated bones, vegetation from pollen grains, past human activities from archaeological phenomena. A specialty of archaeological excavations is that they destroy the original context of the finds. Information technology can virtually reconstruct these relationships. By the same token, it enables visitors to virtually excavate the finds and get to know the work of archaeologists.

The other area of the application of virtual reality is tourism. Some visitors do not have the time or face transportation problems and therefore cannot or do not want to go to the heritage sites. With the help of a complex multimedia programme and interactive virtual reality devices as parts of the services of the visitor centre, these people can learn about the sites without stepping out of the museum. For disabled and health-challenged visitors this provides equal opportunity in visiting often hardly accessible caves. Other visitors will be encouraged by these virtual tours to actually go to the sites. Virtual reality programmes can include extra visual and textual information that can turn a visit to a not very spectacular site into a more enjoyable experience.

4. Visitor Centre and Observation Tower in Sopron

When at the end of the 1990s the Sopron Museum prepared the plans for a new permanent archaeological exhibition, the idea of a new kind of presentation was already in the air. Firstly, we prepared the theoretical reconstructions of a few excavated archaeological phenomena from the 6th–1st centuries BC based drawings, photo documentation and contemporary parallels. House 270, which had burnt down with a loom inside, was first reconstructed as a small-scale model for the exhibition, and afterwards as a full size building in the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park. (Jerem et al. 2001)

The new archaeological exhibition called attention to the chain of fortified settlements surrounding Sopron and the importance of the roads connecting these. The area between the Lajta Mountains and Lake Fertő, mostly the terraces of river valleys, were especially suitable for human habitation. The settlements at the foot of the Soproni Mountains were only a few kilometres from one another and clearly formed an interconnected network. (Jerem 1986) Since at the Sopron-Krautacker site we did not have an opportunity for the in situ presentation of buildings, while the reconstruction of a part of an Iron Age settlement fitted in well with the concept of the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park, the latter now hosts Sopron Iron Age building reconstructions. (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4. Iron Age settlement units within the Százhalombatta Archaeological Park.
4.1. The Archaeological and Tourism Concept of the Visitor Centre in Sopron

At first, we wanted to place the visitor centre at the part of the Sopron-Krautacker site unaffected by the housing estate. The basic idea was to have a building in situ, that is at the site of the Iron Age settlement, with the virtually reconstructed houses, workshops, out-buildings and past environment exhibited inside it. The architectural design of the building would have allowed a view over the other sites near Sopron, giving a sense of the past settlement structure of the region, and the spatial connections between the settlements and earthworks.

We gave a poster presentation of the first plans of the archaeological and tourist centre in Sopron at the CAA (Computer Application in Archaeology) conference in Prato, Italy, in the spring of 2004. Planning focused on some significant central ideas, such as the still visible natural environment and the Fertő-Hanság National Park, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. However, during the first steps towards the realisation of the visitor centre – as we negotiated with the town leaders about developments, tourism and architectural concepts and surveyed the site – we had to realise that the Krautacker site, which is located in the north-western area of today’s Jereván housing estate, was not ideal for the envisaged functions.

On one part of the area a housing estate has been built after the excavation, which, although it looks fairly orderly, is unsuitable for hosting a tourist and cultural exhibition hall. The unsettled state of empty plots on the edge of the town that were connected to the site and the lack of basic infrastructure also questioned our original idea. As an alternative solution, we thought of the open area on Bécsi Hill, next to the Roman amphitheatre. (Fig. 5) After visiting and surveying the area and considering the development plans of the town, this place seemed rather suitable for our plans from several points of view. It has very good topographic characteristics with an especially fine view over the town and the famous prehistoric (Iron Age fortified settlements in the Soproni mountains), Roman and medieval sites. We prepared our preliminary conceptual plan including the presentation of the amphitheatre, which had been proposed earlier and was a topical issue at that time. The observation tower, as part of the building, was designed onto the structure of the amphitheatre, integrating it into the surviving Roman environment. In our concept, this means that the visitor centre built right next to it will match in bulk and spatial structure, but will sharply differ in architectural design. (Fig. 6)

The establishment of the visitor centre in the town, more precisely on Bécsi Hill, is further justified by the following reasons:

- The proximity of a border checkpoint, which is highly important for through and tourist traffic.
- A location with good conditions: easily accessible with plenty of parking space.
The archaeological and historical heritage of the town and its immediate surroundings is outstandingly rich, there is a unique continuity from prehistory to the present.

The archaeological heritage of the Iron Age is visible at a number of locations: ditches, fortified and village-like settlements, sites identified through fieldwork and cemeteries occur in large numbers in the river valleys and on neighbouring hillsides. Research data concerning the past environment allows for a landscape reconstruction.

Being close to the Austro-Hungarian border, it attracts attention at an easily recognizable location, and may serve as a point of orientation.

As an information centre, which presents the natural and cultural heritage and sights of the immediate and wider environment, it can recommend important tourist targets.

It provides information about less spectacular or protected areas through the most modern technological means; for example we virtually present the past natural and cultural environment to protect the archaeological sites.

The form, construction and spatial structure of the building must comply with the most modern requirements. Through its high-quality architectural solutions, the building must also serve as an example for other investments. We consider using wood and glass interesting and important in the architectural design. This is justified by the environmental conditions and Sopron’s traditions in wood industry.

4.2. The Role of IT in the Concept of the Visitor Centre

According to our plans, the building will serve as an information centre that presents the natural and cultural heritage and sights of the immediate and wider environment. Its aim is to transfer information with the help of the most modern, multimedia-based technology. It helps with orientation 24 hours a day, since the emblematic, icon-like forms of the illuminated building will be attractive and therefore suitable for becoming a symbol of the town. It will also have a unique observation tower. When travelling forward in space and time, there will always be an
opportunity to compare the real and virtual sceneries, the panorama on the outside and the exhibition on the inside: the projected pictures, photos and drawings.

The inner layout of the multifunctional building will be suitable for the above purposes. The posters on the ground level will serve as a quick orientation, while the café, combined with a book and map shop, will provide relaxation. Upon entering the exhibition area and walking towards the observation tower, visitors will participate in a time travel from prehistory to the present. After this we will call their attention to the most important sites, museums and tourist attractions with the help of a compass.

The number of tourist attractions that can be properly presented as well as protected is limited. With the help of the latest research results, virtual modelling methods provide new opportunities to learn about cultural heritage. At the same time, they protect sites that are unsuitable for presentation, such as archaeological and nature reserves.*

References


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