

# Museum Collection Re-defined: A Case Study of TOGO Rural Art Museum, Taiwan

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## *Museum Collection Re-defined: A Case Study of TOGO Rural Art Museum, Taiwan*

*The value of collections to museums is not merely in using them for display, research and promotion, but also in establishing communication with public, as well as in the construction of meaning through collection and interpretation of collections.*

Conventionally, museums consist of buildings, collections, experts, and public while others argue that museum should be better defined by territory, heritage, memory, and population. Museum should not limit itself inside the physical “building” of a museum but it should further expand to cover the whole territory. The scope of collections is also extended to reach both tangible and intangible “heritage” within this territory, including natural landscapes, geological features, historical sites, trade activities, etc. The meaning of such heritage exists in the local residents’ lives and memories and is shaped in a bottom-up approach via collective participation by these residents.

Museum collections are subject to constant re-interpretation by ever-changing groups of museum visitors and professionals, as well as by residents and staff members. The contexts in which collections are presented and viewed can fluctuate with time and place. This paper will take the TOGO Rural Art Museum in Taiwan as a case study to explore how museum collections can be re-defined and how museum collections are to make connections with people.

Key words: museum collection, museum management, regional museum, TOGO Rural Art Museum

## I. The Significance of Museum Collection

Conventionally, museums are “collection-oriented.” The new museology is “humanistic-centered,” which emphasizes more on people’s experiences and feelings<sup>1</sup>; In the New Museology edited by British scholar Peter Vergo, he addresses the importance the relation among museums, public audiences and societies. Museology scholar René Rivard points out that the conventional museums are consisted of building, collections, experts, and public while eco-museums are formed by territory, heritage, memory and population. Eco-museum no longer limits itself inside the physical “building” of museum but further expands to cover the whole territory. The scope of collection is also extended to reach both tangible and invisible “heritage” within this territory, including natural landscape, geological features, historical sites and trade activities, *etc.* The meaning of those heritages exists in the local residents’ life and memories and is shaped in a down-to-up approach via collective participation by these residents. In the way of “preserved *in situ*,” it replaces the collection of conventional museums. The value of collection to museums

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<sup>1</sup>Tainan County TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association, Facebook Fanpage. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/%E5%9C%9F%E6%BA%9D-179826279340537/>

is not merely display, research and promotion, but rather establishment of communication with public as well as construction of meaning through collection and interpretation of collection.

## II. Unique Collection of the TOGO Rural Village Art Museum

Located at TOGO rural village in the Houbi District of Tainan City<sup>1</sup>, TRVAM is officially open on 2012-12-16 with a manifesto of “the village is a museum while the museum is inside the village” and “this village is a canvas for art, farmers are artists, and products of the soils are artworks” as its idea. Breaking away from the stereotype impression of fine art museum, TRVAM adopts the whole rural village as a museum space. In addition to the public open hours for indoor space as 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM daily, there are no other pre-regulated open hours or closure dates and no permission fee either. Since open to public in 2012, TRVAM organizes *The Village Houses Contemporary Art Exhibition* every year during off-season of farming: artists come for creational projects upon invitation and thus have some artistic exchanges with local residents. The core operational members of the museum consist of cadre members of TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association<sup>2</sup>, art and design companies formed by members of Tainan National University of the Arts (TNNUA) team<sup>3</sup> upon their graduation<sup>4</sup>. During the non-exhibition period, they host farmer experimental camps. This museum which is developed spontaneously with community residents as base, gradually gains recognition from local residents as well as gathers mutual understanding, and develops a unique collection by stages with the characters as an eco-/local museum.

### Art Project: The Buffalo

Buffalo is the logo of TRVAM and it comes from a series of reconstruction projects by the empowerment association at early stage<sup>5</sup>. It could be regarded as the first tangible piece in *museum collection*. Once there were over 400 buffalos in this village and now there is only one raised by old farmer Ching-shiu LAI<sup>6</sup>. Touched by the decline of village and buffalo as well, the empowerment association uses buffalo that village residents are much familiar with as a spiritual symbol and hence connects with residents. While reconstructing those messy spots in each cluster, they decide the stone carving buffalo at Buffalo Park to be the representative piece of public art at TOGO village. The relationship between stone carving artist Ja-fu HOU and residents becomes one of the best examples in public art projects. After the TNNUA team

<sup>2</sup> Like other rural villages at Taiwan, Togo village also confronts issues such as population loss and declining of houses and farms. Influenced by the concept of “community empowerment” by CCA in 1994, the young generation at Togo Village thus formed TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association to help with reparation of discarded farm houses and public spaces.

<sup>3</sup> The team refers to teachers and students from Theories & Practices of Building and Planning Department, Graduate Institute of Architecture, TNNUA. They came to stay on site in 2004 to co-execute the reconstruction project with the culture empower association.

<sup>4</sup> It refers to companies formed by students graduated from TNNUA in this team, including Graceful Farmer Art Hub (Owner: Yu-liang CHEN), Graceful Farmer Art Factory (Owner: Ding-yao HUANG), Buffalo Design Hub (Owner: Yao-tzung LU; CEO: Lung-ji CHANG), Graceful Farmer Fun Design (CEO: Wan-ru WEI) and Graceful Farmer Music Factory (CEO: Ju-yang LIU). *Graceful Farmer Art Hub*.

<sup>5</sup> TOGO Rural Village Cultural Empowerment Association called villagers to clean up the camphor tree path, where is the entrance gateway to TOGO village and initiated a preservation action to keep the old small train railway outside the village, which were buried by dumped soil. Moreover, core members from the association also began to clean up the discarded farming tools and fixed the oxcart long forgotten. TSENG, Hsu Jen. *Public Art in Community*, Taipei: Council of Cultural Affairs, Executive Yuan, 67, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> Tainan County..., ref. 1.

joint in 2004, they worked together with the empowerment association to “build the house” for buffalo<sup>7</sup> and organized events such as oxcart parade and buffalo birthday celebration. The concept of buffalo as spiritual symbol recalls memories of farming years among residents.

### Essence of Art and Cultural Landscape of the Community

Landscape is a presentation of complicated interaction between mankind and the Nature and possesses spiritual and connective value toward specific community. According to European Landscape Convention (ELC), landscape is “one of the crucial components to form our life quality” as well as “one of the important elements to contribute to personal and social happiness”. As an open museum, the landscape aesthetics based on rural village and site-specific installation art pieces certainly become important *museum collection*.

Upon joining the reconstruction projects, TNNUA team began to execute a series of site-specific art creation. At first the team had difficulty to communicate with village residents due to the use of academic and professional terms. Once students learned to adjust themselves, they got along well with local people in their own cultural language. Meanwhile, village residents also realized the potential changes brought in by students’ young energy and creativities. With participation from local villagers, carpenters and blacksmiths, residents thus better identify with those pieces.

For instance, rose mallow as the main pattern of the Country Road project comes from that it is planted by almost all households here as fence before the constructed walls are built. Ding-yao HUANG, director of TRVAM said: “the making of Country Road recalls people’s memories of old good days via the symbol of rose mallow”<sup>8</sup>. Artists and residents collaborate to create highly interactive and strong territorial public art pieces based on this village landscape and rural life style<sup>9</sup>.

Martin Heidegger said in *Art as the Happening of Truth*: “Art is like a tree. Large flower and rippled fruit present a beauty admired by the mortal world. But if back to the essence of object, the root is the origin of such beauty. It requires constantly watering and fertilizing to be able to expect the said blossoming beauty.”<sup>10</sup>. TRVAM emphasizes much on local landscape and residential life and therefore establishes a profound foundation for rural village empowerment.

### Villagers as Artists, Artists being Residents

Based on the idea of “this village is a canvas for art, farmers are artists, and products of the soils are artworks,” those on-site artworks cannot be considered only as creation under the defined category of fine arts but more likely a presentation of aesthetics possessing in the existing rural life in the form of public art. The founding of “Homeland Painting Studio”

<sup>7</sup> The book *Build the House for Buffalo* records the whole story of building new home for old buffalo in village. It won the community action prize of Youth Participation to Public Domain by National Youth Commission, Executive Yuan.

<sup>8</sup> HUANG, Ding Yao. *TOGO Rural Village Art Museum*, Tainan : TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association, 2012, pp. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Yu Liang CHEN, the graduate student at TNNUA team, created site-specific mosaic pieces such as “Being TAO Yuanming for 10 Minutes” and “In a Living Room full of Happiness,” which provide comfortable chatting places for the elders in the morning markets, could be regarded as an example of perfect combination of local landscape and residents’ life style.

<sup>10</sup> LIN, Wen Jia – HUANG, Jun Hao – CHEN, Yu Liang. The Art Reforming Project at TOGO Cluster: A Case Study of Zhuzaijiao. In: WU, Mali (ed.). *Art & Public Sphere: Working in Community*. Taipei : Yuan-Liou Publishing Co. Ltd, 2007, p. 179.

further leads local residents to art creation under artists' guidance. Some regular members at the studio including Yue-hsia CHEN-BAO (known as Grandma BAO locally), Chao, CHANG-JEN (known as Grandma Dao-ah), Shiu-nui LU-HSU (known as Grandma squirrel) and Hsin-jih HUANG (Grandma Hsin-jih), are seriously considered as the most representative figures by museum operation team and put them as leading figures in the museum open event poster<sup>11</sup>.

Artworks by professional artists also infuse with the villagers' life style, which becomes an attraction luring them settling in TOGO rural village as well. Ja-fu HOU who creates stone-carving buffalo, decides to move into the village since he felt for the local folk custom and friendship. His studio at TOGO now is one of the must-visit spots in the trip.

On the other hand, Graceful Farmer Studio formed by TNNUA team transformed into several sub-divisions in 2009: Graceful Farmer Art Hub, Graceful Farmer Fun Design and Graceful Farmer Music Studio. They want to recruit young talents and professions moving in. With TRVAM as base, we wish to promote a neo-fashion movement consisting of rural village, art, youth and labor, to co-execute the idea that transform farming fields as art space, agricultural products as artworks, and farmer as artists of lifestyle.

The empowerment process of TOGO rural village "not only turns from subjectively descriptive approach to an interactive one, but also an artistic social realization with rural village as the site. Therefore, the meaning of participating to exhibitions is very different from the stereotype in the past. In other words, it is an innovation initiated by rural art museum."<sup>12</sup> Based on this case, we could see that art provides innovative force and energy for the rural village seeking for transformation.

### III. Art Empowerment Builds up Local Museum

In 1994, Council of Cultural Affairs (CCA) proposed the concept of "community empowerment" and suggested an integration of five community development aspects such as people, culture, land, landscape and product<sup>13</sup>. CCA also planned five indicators of self-evaluation and audience-evaluation based on the four major indexes of the "Local Cultural Museum:" holistic functionality and operational management, community empowerment and local feature development, versatile development and creativity inspiration, substantial management, and visiting satisfaction. Under each evaluation category, there are questionnaire available<sup>14</sup>. We could analyze TRVAM with five community development aspects under the indicator of "community empowerment and local feature development."

Collaborating with TNNUA team joint later, TOGO Cultural Empowerment Association as a local organization intends to gain approval from villagers with the aspect of reforming

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<sup>11</sup> HONG, Yi Chen. Village as Art Museum, Art Museum as Village: Narrative Analysis of TOGO Rural Village Art Museum in Tainan. In: *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum*, vol. 26, 2012, p. 25 ISSN 1560-4713.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> "People" refers to the satisfaction to the community residents' needs, management of human interrelationship and generation of happiness in life; "culture" refers to the extension of collective history and culture in the community, management of art and culture events and life-long continuous study; "land" refers to conservation of geographical environment and feature promotion, as well as extension of localness; "product" refers to collective operation of local industries and economic activities and development and marketing of real estate; "landscape" refers to empowerment of public space in the community, substantial management of living environment, creating unique landscapes, and residents' self-development, *etc.* Available from: <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%A4%BE%E5%8D%80%E7%B8%BD%E9%AB%94%E7%87%9F%E9%80%A0> [viewed: 2014-08-31]

<sup>14</sup> CHEN, Kuo Ning. *The Local Cultural Museum Evaluation Manual*, Taipei : Council of Cultural Affair, 9, 2010, p. 16.

TOGO rural village. Ding-yao HUANG, director of TRVAM said in an interview, “artworks before the museum opens are based on daily life”<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, Chia-hui CHANG, the former village head of TOGO village, said that the meaning of community empowerment should be aim for happiness and identification and provide villagers peaceful living and pleasant career<sup>16</sup>. “CHANG’s comments indicate that the association emphasizes more on invisible software than tangible hardware and equipment. During the community empowerment process, life-oriented value and aesthetics as well as space empowerment are meant to increase villagers’ collective understandings”<sup>17</sup>. In addition, residents use public space in the village to conduct their exchanges in daily life or participate to artists’ creational projects, *i.e.* Homeland Painting Studio, TOGO Rural Culture School, and Grandma Squirrel’s Courtyard Garden. “We don’t need many artists. One or two who could share common faith with us is enough. The mutual study and growth during the process are incredible experiences. Such experience asset or knowledge economics is public goods TOGO village is proud of.”<sup>18</sup>

As to cultural development, TRVAM invites artists to create on-site artworks relating to local characters in annual *The Village House Contemporary Art Exhibition*. Visitors are guided to observe rural village from different viewpoint. They could further find out the possibility of rural village reforming and inspire villages for further discussion on the value transformation of traditional rural village. “Culture empowerment associations of grassroots nature independently seek for homeland identification; TNNUA team brings in young and artistic energy. Therefore, the long silent TOGO village thus receives new life context and also possesses new stories to tell”<sup>19</sup> points out that the traditional culture of TOGO village could be preserved by this way and the involvement of young generation contributes to management of art and culture activities and further culture heritage.

The empowerment association reconstructs many discarded spaces and executed a series of environmental reforming projects with old buffalo of village as symbol. Later on, TNNUA joint those projects and collaborated with residents to turn public space into public artworks infusing with local landscapes. “The Fluid of Visions – The Dream-come-true for Community Project” went further through a process that all community members and external experts work together to clean up the middle-scale drains and rejuvenate the long-called “stinky ditches”. “Environment is one of the most important assets TRVAM has. All those assets come from everyone who lives in this museum.”<sup>20</sup> TRVAM heavily addresses an connection with daily life so residents could identify with the land they live on and further are willing to participate to events organized by TRVAM.

Integrating local environmental resources and promoting reformation of cultural landscape make TOGO village a unique case. The reforming through art creation at TOGO village does not depend on artists’ solid effort, but that TNNUA team and on-site artists gain villagers’

<sup>15</sup> HUANG, ref. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Interview record with Chia-hui CHANG, former village head of TOGO village. In: HONG, Yi Chen. Village as Art Museum, Art Museum as Village: Narrative Analysis of TOGO Rural Village Art Museum in Tainan. In: *Journal of Taipei Fine Arts Museum*, vol. 26, 2012. ISSN 1560-4713.

<sup>17</sup> HONG, ref. 11, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> LU, Yao Tzung. *The History of Art at TOGO Village – The Six-year Process of Art Reforming*, 2008 [viewed: 2014-08-10]. Available from: [http://www.ncafro.org.tw/abc/community-content.asp?Ser\\_no=191](http://www.ncafro.org.tw/abc/community-content.asp?Ser_no=191)

<sup>19</sup> HONG, ref. 11, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> HUANG, ref. 8.

assurance and collaborate for projects.<sup>21</sup> “When self-development of a public space is a creation, the focus should be the effect that collective action experiences bring onto community identification. A symbol is choosing to initiate a collective identification to the community. Once the space is developed, the usage further transforms social relationship and increase identification.”<sup>22</sup> Through empowering space with art, private space is able to be turned into public one, a place for discussion and meetings regarding community affairs where residents’ living area is thus expanded to encounter with outdoor. The goal is to help residents change their views and attitude toward their homeland.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the aspect of local industries, TOGO village dose not choose a commercial approach to please and to attract tourists. Instead, they put more emphasis on the localness of TOGO village. As open space, TRVAM requires no entrance permission. During *the Village House Contemporary Art Exhibition*, tickets for annual exhibitions would be for sale and visitors could receive a TOGO map and a pack of rice grew here. Some local companies such as Graceful Farmer Fun Design operates website community to help promoting local agricultural products<sup>24</sup>, aside generating higher exposure for art from the community. Recently, the museum has faced shortage of budget due to lacking income channels. As a result, the museum changes police in 2014 to integrate “On-site Art Planting Project” with local companies<sup>25</sup>, by requiring those companies self-funding as well as charging exhibition fee, in hoping to operate without relying on governmental funding and resources.

## IV. Conclusion

### Common Issues of Rural Villages at Taiwan

In 1953, Taiwan government-initiated agriculture automation. Consequently, human resource in rural villages largely moved out and it resulted into population imbalance between urban and rural area. Due to population loss, many houses even public utilities were discarded. It also causes a young population gap and discourages the substantial development of agriculture<sup>26</sup>. However, nowadays agricultural reformation at Taiwan seems not to have apparent emphasis and improvement on regional farming, rural villages and farmers. The food self-sufficiency ratio of 32.66% could be one of the lowest around the world<sup>27</sup>. We need to reflect again on the meaning of “agriculture is the backbone of our country.”

The TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association, formed by local young population, saw the crisis of decline in rural village and was inspired to call villagers to

<sup>21</sup> For example, in the “Build the House for Buffalo,” Uncle Ching-pi, buffalo owner’s younger brother and a professional house builder, instructed students to process traditional hammed earth method personally. The famous landmark art piece “Being TAO Yuanming for Ten Minutes” are co-created by Yu-liang CHEN from TNNUA team and Uncle Ching-pi. Reference resource: *ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> TSENG, Hsu Jen. *Public Art in Community*. Taipei : Council of Cultural Affair, Executive Yuan, 2005, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> LIN – HUANG – CHEN., ref. 10, pp. 197-199.

<sup>24</sup> The Graceful Farmer’s Product Shop at Graceful Farmer Art Cluster provides online service to order agricultural products at TOGO village. However, they make self-fundraising with products in limited quantities and the effect is limited accordingly.

<sup>25</sup> The local company team refers to Graceful Farmer Art Hub, Graceful Farmer Music Factory, Graceful Farmer Fun Design, and Buffalo Design Hub which are owned and run by the youth, Buffalo Architect & Association run by middle-age professionals, and TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association as regional organization.

<sup>26</sup> TSENG, Hsu-Jen. The Methods of Rural Village Rebirth. In: *ACT Art Viewpoint*, Winter, iss. 45, 2011, pp. 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> Based on the agricultural index from Council of Agriculture, Executive Yuan, the food self-sufficient ratio in 2012 is 32.67% by calorie, 67.90% by price. [viewed: 2014-10-28]. Available from: <http://agrstat.coa.gov.tw/sdweb/public/indicator/Indicator.aspx>

reconstruct their environment. TNNUA team then presented the vitality of rural village in the form of empowerment with art. They believe “discussing how to turn hardworking farmers into graceful farmers based on their life.”<sup>28</sup> The buffalo which is closely associated with rural village life style as a symbol recalls residents’ collective memories. Villagers gradually build up faith and assurance to artist teams settled into TOGO village through their participating to the community empowerment process. With villagers’ support and assistance, TRVAM and the empowerment association are able to organize and promote events successfully. In addition, young residents and local companies owned or run by the youth voice to public audiences via website platform and manage blog and social networking sites to advocate the idea of “graceful farmer” proposed by TRVAM. They also host events such as farmers’ experiment camp and rural village rock music festival to appeal more young people. Those innovative and fresh event topics and friendly marketing strategies attract visitors and successfully reach the promotion goal.

### The Over-emphasis on Revenue from Governmental Policies and Incentives

During the decade of preparing and developing TRVAM, the empowerment association and TNNUA team start over a series of art-relating events which tie to residents’ daily life. Nevertheless, they constantly have difficulties to communicate with public sectors during organizing and executing those events<sup>29</sup>. It suggests that the key to the success of public art might rely on respect and understanding on the public art fabrication and installation regulation from public sectors.

The example that public sectors question about the value and effect of art empowerment at TOGO village indicates a huge gap of awareness between public sectors and those organizations run community empowerment projects. Some public sectors even focus solely on industrial operation and tourism income and do not care much about the in-depth effect on the spiritual benefits for local residents. The operation team of rural art museum has to fundraise by themselves in order for substantial management. Sometimes those organizations choose not to apply for governmental incentive programs because they feel the current evaluation and process of incentive system are not updated. How to fulfill cultural policies including equal rights on culture, community empowerment, and village culture development projects to a highly friendly and convenient level would be main issue for effect review.

### Discussing Innovative New Value from a Viewpoint of Cultural Value

TRVAM invites local residents and young professionals to co-work art empowerment that is innovative and stays true to the roots. This makes TOGO village a unique case in the trend of community development movement at Taiwan. The TOGO Rural Village Culture Empowerment Association and TNNUA team believe to change the gradually waning rural village through the force of community and adopt an artistic approach to integrate different

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<sup>28</sup> HUANG, ref. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Some issues during organizing and executing events are as follows: in the fourth reformation of Buffalo Park in 2004, the officer from Tainan County government questioned the artistic value of birdhouse made by old man in the village and further commented that it would be very difficult to get funds from public sectors; in “Living Room Reforming Project” in 2006, the executive organization assigned by county government didn’t have consultant or advisory instructor from art reformation related background. In the presentation by the end of project, they ask mostly about development of industries and tourism and didn’t mention about having art into community.

aspects of rural village life style as a whole<sup>30</sup>. It is truly a great benchmark to get close to life, to fulfill artistic concepts and actions into daily life through surroundings.

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<sup>30</sup> LIN, Wen Jia – HUANG, Jun Hao – CHEN, Yu Liang, ref. 10, pp. 172-173.