

THE MUSEUM CAFÉ

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The role of museum cafés is very controversial. On the one hand, there are those who think that through cafés, museums seek to approach their audience in such a way as to make it consider returning on another occasion, on the other hand, some consider cafés primarily as a source of income, altering that particular museum atmosphere. In this context, it is interesting to examine the role of museum cafés in Bucharest, having as main benchmarks some of the world's greatest museums and their strategy as an example.

A museum café can be a relaxing space, with a special atmosphere, emphasizing the beauty and uniqueness of the museum, preserving the museum style, or contrasting strongly with it, offering the public something new.

Museum cafés according to the specialists

It seems that commercial services are becoming increasingly more important when the museum wants to meet its public. Whether it is a shop offering souvenirs, a café where the visitor can rest, or a restaurant that serves lunch, all these features are now available to the public.

Timothy Ambrose, author of *Museum Basics*, claims that: "Each museum should have a place in which you can have lunch: a café or restaurant, or at least a place where visitors can have tea, coffee or just a glass of water."

The main competition for museums, from this point of view, is represented by the industry focused on how people spend their free time, more and more steps being taken to please those wishing to spend their spare time outdoors. A museum café could be an attractive place for tourists, helping them enjoy what they have visited or are about to visit, or simply making them feel more comfortable.

To this effect, museums in many countries have cafés hoping to create a pleasant atmosphere for their visitors. It seems that museum marketing focus has been gradually directed towards increasing revenue sources, says Fiona McLean, author of „Marketing the museum”, losing sight of the visitors' experience of the museum. However, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill stated in the paper „Museums and Their Visitors“ that museums are now becoming more orientated towards their visitors' wishes, pointing out the fact that local authorities are encouraging managers towards developing new strategies in order to attract more visitors.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill points out a frequent problem encountered by today's museums: very few museums have signs drawing attention to the fact the museum has a café, a cloakroom or a shop inside, which could lead visitors to them. It often happens that this

information has been published in a guide, but it is necessary to have signs at the entrance of the museum and then, inside the museum, in order to guide the visitors to cafés, shops and wardrobes.

Café Museum may play the part of a FYI (for your information), as Timothy Ambrose claims in his «Museum basics»: «Stores and restaurants are good opportunities to inform visitors about the museum, its collections, services, events and activities. On tables one can find information about the following week's schedule, on the back of the menu other useful information regarding the museum can be inserted and also the walls can be covered in posters revealing the latest exhibition. A little imagination and flair to provide a pleasant experience can add value to the visit. «

It seems that even at non-profit museums, commercial services have recorded a substantial increase. If in the past museums offered dinner in the restaurant, with a traditional menu for a decent price, today's museums have developed a variety of new experiences in terms of serving dinner, including sophisticated, luxurious restaurants and cafés. An example in this case is the restaurant in the Baltimore Museum of Art considered to be a place of interest in itself for many visitors. It is very often that museums focus on their catering and serving. Museums have discovered the benefits of putting many types of

food at their clients' disposal and have developed services in this direction. «Guggenheim Museum Café is coordinated by one of the best culinary arts company in New York, the Walters Art Museum Gallery in Baltimore has a restaurant with a separate entrance from the museum itself, and the Center Pompidou in Paris has a restaurant with a remarkable view. Some museums also offer live music. «, says Neil G. Kotler in «Museum marketing and strategy».

Catering services serve two different purposes: generating revenue and creating a certain atmosphere. The areas where food is served can become real meeting points, a place to internalize the visit, in contrast with the quiet atmosphere of the museum. To support this view, Fiona Mclean gives the example of The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Café in Edinburgh, which is attracting many customers who do not necessarily visit the gallery. While some would not agree to such a thing, the gallery is considered a resource for the community and needs to attract these visitors and persuade them to visit it through various methods, and not push them away.

To ensure that they have as many customers and visitors, museums have decided to organize and to host some events. In the UK, the Museum «Victoria and Albert» and «The Tate Gallery» have invested in their restaurants and offer many features. However, there are risks that come with this kind of activity: the Guggenheim Museum

café, for example, is reported to have experienced financial losses. «Our expertise lies not in the coordination of a restaurant. We want it to become primarily a service, and only later a destination point for visitors, and we want its design to be sober.», said Gail Harrity, Director of Finance and Administration.

Few museum cafés generate income, in fact most of them use up resources. But there seem to be other advantages in having a café: it is an additional attraction for visitors, a means to prolong the visit with a coffee break or even dining. And it is also convenient for museum employees who may have business meetings inside the café.

Regarding the strategy a museum can undertake considering their café there are more possibilities. There are cafés with an atmosphere similar to the museum's, while there are some with a very contrasting one. There are some museums that offer their public not only one café, but more, thus aiming to please more segments of the target audience.

Cafés in the world's greatest museums

An article published on the website www.bloomberg.com, in March 2009, announced that the Louvre, with its 8.5 million visitors, is the most visited museum in the world. Ranked second is the British Museum, with 5.6 million visitors; third place is occupied by The National Gallery of Art in Washington, with 4.96 million visitors, followed by the Tate

Modern Museum in London with 4.95 million visitors and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with 4.82 million visitors. Are there cafés inside these museums? Can one have dinner after a visit to the museum? Analyzing the museum that came in first, the Louvre, we discover that it doesn't have just one café, but seven of them, offering the public a place to relax after visiting da Vinci's Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo. Here are the seven cafés, their working hours and a brief description for each of them:

The Pyramid Café, open daily from 10:00 to 18:00, has a classic style, offers a beautiful view of the museum's inner courtyard;

Café du Louvre, open from 9:00 to 19:00, has an elegant interior, twentieth century style, preserving some of the museum's sobriety, but at the same time providing a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere;

Café Richelieu is open from 10:15 to 17:00, 19:00 or 21:00, depending on the calendar and holiday periods. The design of the three rooms in this modern coffee place was made by Jean-



Fig 1 - Café Marly

Michel Wilmotte in collaboration with artists Daniel Buren and Jean-Pierre Raynaud. Café Richelieu can accommodate 60 guests for dinner and up to 150 people for cocktails, offering a lovely view of the glass pyramid in the museum's yard;

Mollien Café is open from 10:15 hours to 17:00, 19:00 or 21:00, depending on the calendar and holiday periods. Beautifully decorated with paintings and caryatids, with a terrace facing Napoleon's court and the Tuileries Gardens, Mollien Café is a perfect place for breakfast, dinner, or cocktails;

Denon Café, open from 9:00 to 19:00, is located on the ground floor of the museum, overlooking the garden with its pond and fountain. The café has two rooms that can accommodate up to 50 guests for breakfast and dinner;

Starbucks Coffee: Café documentation center, open from 9:00 to 19:00;

Café Marly: open daily between 8:00 and 14:00.



Fig. 2. Cafe Denon



Fig. 3 Cafe Richelieu

Opinions differ when it comes to Café Marly, one of the most popular museum cafés. Being under the arches of the museum, in the glass pyramid, some consider it charming, with a great continental cuisine and a beautiful terrace where you can enjoy a cocktail or an excellent meal. "You could not think of a better location for a café. This café is in the Richelieu wing of the Louvre museum, with a view to Napoleon's court and the glass pyramid. When the weather is nice, you can have a drink or meal on the terrace and you can enjoy the view. The prices are a little high, but of course, one pays for the location just like for the food. Café Marly offers a much calmer and more refined atmosphere than the places in this area that have similar prices", says one customer.

But there are also negative viewpoints: "We came here after we visited the Louvre. I was disappointed with their menu and their services. If you still want to go there, and not have to eat bad and overpriced food, you had better sit at a table in front of the



Fig 4 - Cafe Marly

café, in the square. There they only serve drinks.” Following this brief overview one can notice that the Louvre aims to please many audiences, offering both classic style cafés, mirroring the museum’s style and also more modern cafés for a younger public. All the seven cafés serve meals with more or less affordable prices. What matters most is that the view they offer is highly enjoyable and that it also emphasizes the Louvre’s architecture.

Ranked second most visited museum in the world, the British Museum offers its audience two cafés. What is interesting in this case is that the museum’s official website offers its visitors a map to point out where the cafés are in relation with the entrance to the museum and its major exhibitions. The two cafés are:

Gallery Café, open between 10:00 and 17:00, located downstairs : offers pasta, soups, salads, desserts, cakes, hot and cold drinks, all in a friendly atmosphere;

Court Cafés is also located downstairs, is open between 9:00 and 17:30 Sunday to Wednesday and between 9:00 until 21:00 from Thursday to Saturday.

According to reviews, these are both very good cafés: “Gallery Café, the most peaceful place of refuge, is in the south-west corner of the floor and provides good services. The Court Cafés offers snacks and refreshments, but it is not as peaceful. The most expensive option would be the Great Court restaurant, which has a view to the first floor Reading Room. It offers morning coffee, lunch and afternoon tea.”, says one visitor.

It seems that these museum cafés are also trying different approaches for different types of visitors: the Gallery Café is that quiet place meant for those in need of a break, while the Court Cafés offers a more lively and energy-filled atmosphere.

Occupying third place in the top most visited museums, The National Gallery of Art in Washington has almost as many cafés as the Louvre: five. Garden Café, the best known, is on the ground floor and has a good location in relation to the



Fig 5 - Cafe Marly

rest of the museum, as one can see on the official website's museum map. Concerts are held there and desserts and soft drinks are served Sundays, between 16:00 and 18:00.

Garden Café España will be accessible to the public between the 4th of May – 17th of September, 2009;

Pavilion Café overlooks the Sculpture Garden and offers salads, pizza, various desserts and beverages;

Cascade Café, with a view to the waterfall, offers soups, salads, pizzas, desserts and more specialties- the menu is available for online browsing;

Espresso & Gelato Bar offers 19 types of ice cream, sandwiches and desserts.

Regarding the quality of the services provided by a museum café, Timothy Ambrose asks: "What can one say about a museum café? That the food they offer is acceptable, and the place feels familiar? If people would feel more comfortable to sit on the floor than to sit on chairs, could this be accepted as a mere whim? Generally speaking, are there things people can do in order to feel at home inside the museum?" Ultimately, it seems that it is possible to create a difference between an ordinary café and a café inside a museum. Museum Cafés should make the visitor to feel more at home inside a museum.

On the Tate Modern Museum London blog, Fiona Sibley, editor of Design Week, writes an article about the museum's café. "Well, why shouldn't there be a café inside

the museum? It could be a crucial factor in how the new Tate Museum is perceived as a place to spend your free time. If contemporary art is a passion of yours, then it is essential to have a place to sit down after you have visited the exhibitions and take it all in. In a photograph taken by Brassai in Paris, in the 1920's, one thing is surely visible: cafés are those places where life really happens.»

As we proceed, the following question arises: which are the defining elements of a great café? Of course, there are many factors, but among the most important are the atmosphere it manages to create, with comfortable chairs where people can feel good with their friends and the impeccable service. Fiona Sibley continues to describe what a museum café should be like, quoting the Science Museum in London and its Dana Center Café, a café that encourages the public to be optimistic by displaying pleasant images and by determining it to question life and its purpose.

There are cafés that are true places of refuge, areas where people feel more relaxed, calmer, where they feel encouraged to interact with other people at nearby tables or where they can simply sit around and read a book. Should the Tate Museum try an experimental setting, in line with its style? There are successful examples in this direction, as Fiona Sibley stated, spaces arranged more like installations rather than the facilities inside a café, therefore creativity has no limits in such situations.

The question is, ultimately, whether the new Tate museum café should be a noisy area, vibrant, stimulating debate, or simply a quiet place for reflection? Should it resemble the museum that hosts it or not?

Looking at the museums that are among the most visited tourist attractions, it is clear that there is a strategy in terms of the museum café. The museums usually offer two different types of cafés: some with a more elegant and sober style, true spaces of refuge, while others have more modern cafés and an atmosphere that encourages socializing. This way, the diverse audience can find a place where it feels comfortable.

Another element that I noticed about the Louvre and about other museums is the important role played by the view that the cafés offer, the setting of the café putting an emphasis on the museum's beauty. And finally, another aspect which is worth mentioning is the fact that catering services are part of the museum's strategy, giving a personal touch to the area and meeting the public's wishes to serve the meal before or after visiting the museum.

Café museums in Bucharest

In recent years it seems that the Bucharest museums have started to become interested in the idea of having a museum café. While still early in the process, we have three different situations regarding this issue: there are museums that already have a café (The Romanian Peasant Museum, The National

Museum of Contemporary Art and The Museum of Romanian Literature), museums that will soon open a café (The Grigore Antipa Museum of Natural History) and museums that have up until recently had a coffee shop, but decided to give up the service (The National Museum of Geology). One of the most famous cafés is in The Romanian Peasant's Museum: "Just as the museum was able to recreate the Romanian village and give it a cool air that makes it desirable for urban hippies, the downstairs café and terrace have managed to establish themselves as a meeting spot for Bucharest's cream of the crop. In comparison with the café from The National Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museo Café, inside The National Museum of Geology, this café has a more democratic, less exclusive air, which makes it more popular." www.metroptam.ro argues in an article.

The first thing we see when we come to The Romanian Peasant Club is that it keeps the style and theme of the museum. "Cutlery, tables and chairs trying to keep the theme of the museum, without exaggerating the folklore aspect, but trying to merge with the



Fig. 6. The NMCA (MNAC) café



Fig. 7. The Romanian Peasant Club

surroundings: wooden tables, rustic painted chairs, walls decorated with all kinds of objects used in the work of the land, clay objects scattered all over, having various forms (ashtrays, decanters, vase, cups, etc.)” state the writers of www.metropotam.ro. Everything is in perfect harmony with the museum and its exhibitions.

The working hours of the café are different from those of the museum. If The Romanian Peasant Museum is open between 10:00 and 18:00, except on Mondays, The Romanian Peasant Club is open daily from 10:00 to 00:00, which is an indication that the museum wishes to keep the visitors close even outside its program.

When it comes to spatial relations, namely the arrangement of tables and the manner in which people are seated, the Romanian Peasant Club tables are arranged close to each other, but there are also separate tables prepared for the customers that might want a more intimate atmosphere. The wooden tables and chairs occupy the entire surface of the terrace, totaling a capacity of over 50 people. There are tables for four people, but also tables with 10 places for bigger

groups, suitable for those groups of friends who want to spend their free time together.

To find out about the diversity of their food offers and the kind of music played, I researched whether lunch or dinner can be served at the Romanian Peasant Club and if the music played is the regular café type (jazz, blues). I noticed that one can serve soft drinks, desserts and snacks, but also plates with Romanian Cuisine and salads. An interesting and original aspect is that popcorn can also be served there, and is extremely popular with the terrace customers. The music played there is what one would call “typical café music”, focusing mainly on jazz and blues.

The Romanian Peasant’s Club also has an informative function, allowing visitors to find out about the events the museum and the other cultural institutions are organising. For example, around the terrace walls in the room and on the notice boards located at the entrance to the terrace, one can see posters reminiscent of the “Conferences from the road”, an ongoing project that museum organises, posters advertising the “New Romanian film cinema”, another project currently taking place, and the fairs being held at the museum on various celebrations.

Regarding the customers’ age range, another interesting aspect is that, unlike the other two cafés (MNAC and MLR), here customers of all ages can be found: children, adolescents, adults and seniors. I believe that an important factor contributing to this age diversity

is the outdoor terrace and the courtyard with a playground.

Another well known place is the café of The National Museum of Contemporary Art. The rapid rise of the café is linked to the development of the electro scene and the first edition of Rokolectiv, an electronic music festival. A few years ago it was considered the most modern place in Bucharest, but things have changed since the electro trend lost part of its popularity.

This café has the same program as the museum, is open to the public daily between 10:00-18:00. There are two ways in which this could be interpreted: on the one hand it could be an advantage for the museum, thereby ensuring that the main customers of the café will also be visiting the museum, on the other hand it could prove to be a disadvantage, because the museum fails to attract other customers who might later on become visitors of the museum.

The National Museum of Contemporary Art Café is inside the museum, located on the 4th floor, accessible via a glass elevator. The terrace extends itself outdoors, on the roof of the building, where one can admire the cityscape as a culmination of the museum tour. Tables and wooden chairs are arranged near one another. I noticed that most of the times visitors prefer to just stand and admire the view.

The terrace is not covered, but if it rains, customers can move inside. Even if the terrace does not offer a unique design, being fairly neutral

in this aspect, the inside tables and chairs, with their out of the ordinary design may draw your attention to the fact that you are indeed in a museum of contemporary art. As regards the number of seats, the terrace offers about 40 seats and the inside part can still offer enough room for about 40 people.

Another thing I noticed was that music was not available on the terrace. This can be traced to several reasons, including that being an outdoor terrace, music could affect the peace of the neighbors, or that some visitors prefer silence when admiring the exhibits. Also, unlike The Romanian Peasant Club which informs visitors about events the museum organizes, in this case there is no information offered on the terrace through posters or any other materials.

The third café is in The Romanian Literature Museum and the terrace opening hours differ from those of the museum. If the museum is open between 10:00 and 18:00, "At the Museum" terrace receives its last clients at 22:00.

The atmosphere here is totally different from what we encountered in the other two locations. While The Romanian Peasant Museum Café adopts the museum's style and the National Museum of Contemporary Art has certain neutrality in terms of style, in this case, "At the Museum" terrace contrasts sharply with the museum in the vicinity of which it is situated. Tables and chairs are made from plastic and are arranged around one another, without any aesthetic role, just a practical one.

The seating capacity is above 50, coming close to almost 80 available seating places.

Since it is an outdoor terrace and is located close to residential buildings, the lack of music is easily explained. Regarding the diversity of its offer, the “At the museum” terrace serves soft drinks, coffee, beer and hot snacks at affordable prices. The kitchen closes at around 19:30-20:00.

Conclusions and recommendations

Are museums seeking to meet their audience by developing a new public service in the shape of the museum café? For now, I do not think we can say this because we have found clear differences between the public of the museum and that of the museum café.

In most cases we have taken into consideration there isn't a strategy designed for the museum café, there is no attempt to offer the museum's visitors some benefits or to persuade the customers of the café to become visitors. Most often, what happens is that museum visitors do not go to the café and the café customers do not go to visit the museum. In my opinion, a first recommendation to address this problem is to understand the difference between museum visitors and café customers. Consequently, a study should be done in order to identify not only the museum's main public, but also how these people normally spend their leisure time and what they would like to find inside a museum café. I also

think it would be a good idea for museums to have themes for their cafés, for example the Romanian Literature Museum could address young people through its café and perhaps try to encourage writers who are starting out with their career through various events where they could release their book.

Another very important aspect that I would like to underline is the informative role that a museum café could play. A very good example in this case is given by The Romanian Peasant's Club, which promotes events that The Romanian Peasant Museum organizes, presenting their posters or sharing informative materials about future events. Thus, if at first the café's public is different from the museum's, things can change, and the café's customer, after being informed about the exhibitions and events made by the museum, can decide to go and visit the museum.

Regarding the future of the museum, Mrs. Dr. Aurora Stănescu, director of the Department of Public Relations, Cultural Marketing and Educational Programs at the Museum of Natural History “Grigore Antipa”, believes that it will become an institution of cultural entertainment, because people want to feel better in a museum and the museum itself should attract other audiences to always keep up with what is happening around it. Mădălina Nailia, Secretary of Public Relations at the National Museum of Geology, believes that in the future the museum will be a public service in the true sense of the word, and that the quality of its

offer will increase. We cannot know precisely whether these things will happen, but what is obvious is that museums continue to evolve and adapt to contemporary society.

The “White Night of the Museums” and “The Night of cultural institutions” have an increasingly large audience, which is an indication of the favorable cultural context nowadays. It is a perfect time for museums to improve services, to perform a wider range of functions and to turn their attention to new potential audiences.

Regarding the role of the Bucharest museum cafés, a positive aspect that I noticed is the recent willingness of museums to develop such a service, as stated by Mr. Dragoş Neamu, President of the National Network of Museums of Romania. Clearly, in order to have a strategy adapted to the target audience, we need experts

who know how to do this, while specialising in the cultural field in Romania is a topic as new as the idea of a café in a museum.

From my point of view, museums must be anchored in the present and should be a nice way to find information, to spend one’s free time, to remember the Romanian traditions or Romanian-specific art, all without affecting the basic functions: conservation, research and education, but always keeping an open mind to possible new functions.

The following years will mark an evolution in the museum cafés. I expect museums to become increasingly responsive to public desires and to recognize their ability to satisfy these desires. Will museums become places of cultural entertainment? I believe so, and what’s more, we should try to reach the standards that the world’s greatest museums have imposed.