

Food service in museums and galleries: Dreamscape spaces for extended contemplation of the beautiful and the sublime

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Abstract

Concerning tourist consumption, food purchasing is commonly regarded as a key purchase for those seeking a distinct, sensory experience. Suitably focused food service design promotes reflection upon the holiday environment's cultural differences, compared to that of the everyday, and many tourist domain food offerings can be seen to have been designed to amplify this effect. This culture-food service integration, however, has not been much studied relative to museum cafés, although museum and gallery visits also form a type of leisure 'break' from everyday surroundings within a culture-laden environment. This paper explores the ideal spatial design dimensions of various museums, art galleries and historic house relative to food service integration. It proposes theoretical design dimensions, characteristics and considerations for the spatial design of the foodservice offer, as divined from consumer narratives concerning the ideal holistic visit experience.

Methods: A southern county museum/gallery study

The research was mainly focused around a sequential investigation into consumer/potential consumer research of a *qualitative* nature to gain local peoples' input into a four year planning and refurbishment project for a combined museum and art gallery on the south coast of England. Further details of the methodology can be found elsewhere ^{1, 2} with only a summary of outline aspects here.

To frame the research a number of museum/gallery sector interviews were held with various management and staff of a number of Southern England museums and/or galleries as well as those involved in running the core operation under study. The major method of research thereafter was the holding of a number of local resident focus groups, mostly circa one hour in length featuring 39 respondents in total, in sessions of 4-8 respondents, including museum gallery users and non-users across a wide socio-economic and life-stage span of adults, 25+. This process included a reconvened focus group process of 6-8 (average 7) heterogeneously selected respondents across three separate sessions. In addition there were four shorter group processes featuring around 24 students, aged 20-25. There was also a managed participant observed visit of one of the reconvened adult groups to a museum/gallery; the adult respondent outputs forming the main focus of the research. All groups were held in the county of Dorset, in and around the town of Bournemouth. Sessions included projective materials such as sentence completion, criteria/matrix ratings, psycho-drawing/collages and other projective exercises used commonly in perception

research^{3, 4}, as well as printed and projected stimulus slides and display materials from museum/gallery institution archives and works. The presentation of holistic findings, after full mechanical transcription, coding and analysis of all sessions, are hereby presented as key theoretical summaries developed throughout the research.

Results: Cafe spaces and their design parameters within a museum/gallery spatial mix

Good cafés were found to be a key attraction and motivation for museum and gallery visitation, with a visit to the café seen as an extension of the duration of a visit to the core exhibition spaces, providing 'a cognitive break' during the potential intellectual stresses or 'wear-out' of a visit's self-educational purpose. The idea of a *cognitive break* from the everyday being formed by a taste-sensory experience is one that has also been found in generic 'snacking' research⁵ – but, given the non-everyday experience of a museum/gallery visit in itself, here it effectively forms a break-within-a-break. Investigations into the café aspect of the museum and gallery visit, which also features museum retail⁶ as well as core exhibit areas, proved fundamental in arriving at a summarising model for differential types of museum/gallery spaces and how they may work together during a visit's duration and activity mix. Café spaces were often described by participants over the course of the study as being desired to be 'cool' in the nature of their spatial design and experiential qualities. 'Cool' space was discussed as being sufficiently core-exhibit detached (non-objectified) and yet remaining hi-context (complimentary in features and generally lo-tech) in spatial nature relative to the overall visit intent, and therefore supportive of reflection upon it. The design of cafés to be suitable within the overall ambience (context) of the establishment - detached from the core learning spaces but allowing reflection upon them - was found to be a welcome adjunct to the overall museum/gallery experience, rather than providing an everyday café space. The description of 'coolness' was attributed directly by respondents as being particularly relevant to the cafe or restaurant spaces (as well as to more reflective types of art gallery spaces).

In terms of building upon this temperature analogy, a matrix was designed for classifying the varieties of spatial types within the museum/gallery experience as in **figure 1**. Further applications of the temperature analogy to spatial descriptions came from participants' representations of such spaces in drawings and conversations relative to temperate descriptors. The overall desired nature of a museum/gallery visit was more than just considering artistic or historic *objectification* of presented displays and then moving on; rather the visitors wished to be *subjectively* transported within a meaningful dreamscape connection to the objects and the spaces around them. This process included their desire to avoid boring or 'cold' exhibit spaces, expressed in terms of being of a 'glass case', hi-object nature and with high objectification of information. A 'bad', purely objectified museum shop, with little connection to the exhibits, and therefore detached from the core-experience, could appear similarly 'cold' to the visitor. Necessary to achieve the ideal core (exhibit)-experience of 'time-and-space dreaming' or 'dreamscape' imagining was a 'warm' humanistic type of exhibition space - not too objectified, compressed with objects (or too Hi-tech). In contrast, there was a perception that an unsuited process of modernisation of the core learning spaces could effectively immerse the visitor within a compressed, Hi-tech, 'hot' spatial effect, that was not necessarily in keeping with the desired, ideal exhibit ambience, although perhaps more acceptable in designated 'entertainment' spaces, including some museum shops (provided it corresponded sufficiently to the exhibit's core-experience, cultural orientation).

Core-Experience Detached	Core-Experience Active
COLD	HOT
'pure' object exhibition	'entertainment'
'bad' shop	exhibition
	'good' shop
COOL	WARM
modern cafe space	'context rich'
reflective gallery	exhibition
	'core' learning space

Figure 1. Museum/gallery space typology grid: differential space typology within the design and operation mix related to core desired experience dimensions.

Given the amount of objects presented for consideration during an overall visit, participants generally described café spaces as of a type where 'cooler', more relaxed social activity and subjective reflection upon the nature of the whole experience could take place. To adequately support this, the café spaces were considered to present opportunities in their servicescape design to present functional (technical food and service), mechanic (ambient and process design) and humanic (social performance and behaviour) related cues, or 'clues' that should ideally fit within their ideal visit dimensions.^{7, 8} Rather than considering the museum café as a detached food service offering, such clues should be orchestrated to deliver a consistent service message within parameters of the ideal holistic visit experience. The research further attempted to characterise the specific café design dimensions, spatial qualities, or clues would be suitable within various museum, gallery and 'housed' cultural attractions - which contextual parameters should they work within to support a suitably reflective, 'cool' atmosphere within each type of institution to become hi-context? This was elaborated by participants as pertaining to key reflective signifiers for each particular type establishment considered. The range of design signifiers were formulated into a mix of descriptors relative to the personally reflective nature of each visit experience as in **table 1**. These including reflective aspects of *past, present, future, family* and/or *local* associations as enshrined in the establishment's exhibit orientation (local museums and historical houses proving to be particularly related to the latter two dimensions for their visitor experience). The holistic experience dimensions are assigned in summary, in relation to an ideal 'mix' for each type of establishment's core, or 'primary' visitor experience. By extension, ideal café design orientation parameters were then assigned; cafés being designed to provide a hi-context/highly reflective domain, complementarily integrated within the visitors' unified aesthetic desires of a visit.

Table 1. Desired experience dimensions related to café design (ME = museum experience, LME= local museum exp., GE= gallery exp., CGE= contemporary gallery exp., HE= 'house' exp., L= local parameter orientation, F= family orientation - all related to stated time-dimensions; underlined/italicised signifying relative strength)

Primary experience dimensions	Café design orientation parameters
ME = (past + present) x L	Past element can be contrasted with the contemporary, whilst the local element can be contrasted or supplemented in design
LME = (past + present + future) x L	As above but local, place elements can be emphasised to greater extent in complimentary, catalytic or supplementary fashion
GE = (present + past) x L	As with ME but accent on present as opposed to past implies greater potential for 'modernism' (or 'futurism') in design
CGE = (present + future)	Future element can be further complemented or supplemented
HE = (past + pres) x (F+L).	Past element can be contrasted but usually complimented, with potential for the local and family element to be emphasised in complimentary, catalytic or supplementary fashion - more 'homely'

Discussion

Food consumption is a readily apparent key signifier of non-everyday sensory experience whilst *in situ* in tourist/leisure domains, providing experiential reminder associations of indulgent, non-everyday food experiences.^{9, 10} Museums and galleries are venues where people tend to go on a non-everyday outing and their café spaces can be considered to serve as major 'pause' reflective 'places' - not just spaces¹¹ - of meaningful significance during a visit. This suggests such cafes are effectively an escape within an escape (a dream within a dream) within the museum visit experience, providing a reflective extension of the non-everyday museum/gallery visit for contemplation of the beautiful and the sublime as presented across the full visit. In this role, museum cafés should be designed to offer suitably integrated 'dreamscape' environments, synergistic to the museum/gallery core experience. The café may then even stand as a key motivator for attraction towards the pleasures of the museum itself, as typified by the 1980's Satchi and Satchi advertising campaign for the Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum in London as 'An ace café with quite a nice museum attached.'¹² This museum spatial study suggests that the café design involves the creation of intellectual 'resting' leisure space, effectively providing - as with other leisure food consumption events - a 'cognitive suspension to experience moments of pleasure in another world than this!'¹³ This can only be achieved through the application of suitably considered food service design dimensions for holistic visit experience integration.

Conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further research

Museum café design should ideally encompass experiential signifiers to support visitors' contemplation of, or reflection upon, aspects of socio-cultural significance - the beautiful and the sublime - as represented by each distinct type of venue. The café space offers an extended immersion in time and space within a distinctly non-everyday, reflective ambience. The design of museum cafés as spaces not only to eat in but also to dream in provides challenges to food service providers, but ones that could result in the cafés themselves becoming motivators for institutional visits and longer stays due to their particularly appealing and distinctive design dimensions. It should be stated as a limitation that the current research was largely carried out within a middle-

class area with participants who were overall more likely to be museum/gallery visitors than not...and possibly as oriented towards the aesthetic appreciation of leisure eating environments as towards the purely functional dimensions of food provision. Nevertheless further research into specific design parameter needs for the integration of specific food services within defined spatial, cultural experiences in the maturing leisure market could reap increased visitation, re-visitiation and higher visitor spend rewards for their operators.

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Compressed/
Hi-object
Hi-information
(Hi-Tech)

Spacious/
Hi-context
Hi-reflection
(Lo-Tech)