

Museums as Third Spaces

المتحف مساحة موازية

Museen als Dritte Orte

By DYD

I fell in love with museums during my time in London. I spent my time almost every week at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), not specifically to look at art or immerse myself in the museum's new exhibition, nor to browse their carefully curated museum shop, but to sit in their garden, lay on the grass, enjoy a scone with clotted cream, watch the children play around the shallow water basin, read a book while embracing the rays of sunlight.

My fascination with museums began back in Berlin when I was in elementary school. My art teachers took our class to Berlinische Galerie where we were asked to find a painting to our liking and copy it with a pencil on an empty white sheet of paper. In that museum space, I found a painting that drew me in. It made me feel content and at ease, and I didn't want this task to end. Although until this day I haven't been able to find the name of that painting nor the painter, I can still see it quite clearly in front of my eyes.

I believe that the time I spent at the V&A Museum was what formed my connection to museum spaces the most. Despite enjoying their various exhibitions while appreciating their architecture and brand design, along with their services including the museum shop, café, interactive programs, social media posts and online learning and everything else that makes a museum - what made me feel

home was the free space they offered. A space filled with 1 SAWA Glossary 2022 Term Museums as Third Spaces flowers, greens and water; an enclosed sanctuary away from the busy streets of London, a place where I always felt welcomed.

According to the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, the first space for most people is their private home, the second is their work space and the third is an indispensable space for a fulfilled life. Oldenburg names coffee houses, pubs and beer gardens as a model for third spaces where communication and social interaction is allowed and encouraged among equals in a freely accessible space, primarily to release stress in order to balance work and family life.

In cultural policy, many currently see the potential for such third space in museums, as a “home away from home” living spaces. However, although museums are public spaces, the ticket office at the entrance feels like a barrier. In many countries including Germany, a person often has to pay to enter a museum space, even though museums are often financed by taxes. As a result, the one main point of the third space theory - the space being free to enter - is not fulfilled.

At my work as a Gropius Bau Friend, an art mediator, I notice a lot of visitors shyly walking towards the glass doors that separate the entry hall from the atrium and exhibition rooms, unsure if they are allowed to enter this space without having a purchased ticket first. Some stop at the line that divides the doorstep to take a look before turning around and make a decision whether to leave Gropius Bau or purchase a ticket. On the other hand, visitors who have purchased their tickets at the desk walk naturally into the atrium free of any doubts if they belong in this space or not as they get invited formerly by the cashier. Also, visitors who have purchased their ticket online hesitate sometimes and ask an employee if they have to show their tickets first to enter. They don't have to as the atrium has free access, they only need it to enter the exhibition rooms across the three levels of the building. Often I position myself in the entry hall for a little while of my shift

to actively invite people without a 2 SAWA Glossary 2022 Term Museums as Third Spaces ticket into the atrium warm heartedly and to inform them that the space is free of charge.

At these moments, I notice surprise and often gratefulness on the visitors' faces. It makes me happy to see people lounging in the atrium, sometimes looking at the current art installation or just sitting on the benches, chatting with other people or taking some time for themselves. In a best-case scenario, visitors should not have to pay even to enter the exhibition spaces, but at the very least I would love to see every museum creating an inviting space that is freely accessible. I would love museums as a third space to be an intrinsic part of what museums are. I would also love to imagine a future where it is common for museums to offer a safe haven, an oasis of relaxation where museums don't exclude but actively invite the people into their space. A space where there is no imposing knowledge, but only a beautiful space for visitors to just be in.

I chose the example of the V&A Museum garden in London as my favourite museum space when I entered my MA museum management and communication program at HTW Berlin as well as in the introduction round of the SAWA Museum Studies Program, and I would always choose it again. Whereas my experience in the Berlinische Galerie formed a relationship between museums and me, the V&A garden has formed my vision of my dream museum. I take this memory with me into my studies, my work at Gropius Bau and definitely my future work as a museum professional.