

Museum World Café: Launching synergies for cultural professionals

Date: 29 November 2018 - 16.30 - 19.00

Venue: Benaki Museum/Pireos 138

This event took place in the framework of "The Co-Museum" Conference at the Benaki Museum on 29 November 2018, co-organised by the Benaki Museum, the U.S. Embassy and the British Council and as part of ROCK, an HORIZON2020 EU project, coordinated by the Athens Development and Destination Management Agency.

Museum World Café Partners: Benaki Museum, U.S. Embassy, British Council, ROCK Project EU, Athens Development and Destination Management Agency, City of Athens Office for Resilience and Sustainability.



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"Museums as third space"

Most voted suggestion by participants



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Context

The inspiration for this event is the recent "Athens Resilience through Culture" report by Robert Palmer (commissioned by the British Council and in partnership with 100 Resilient Cities) to highlight the need "for a more systematic and comprehensive 'culturally sensitive' urban development approach". A priority issue has been **"inter-connectivity and collaboration to improve resilience within cultural and creative sectors and between culture and other sectors."** Based on this statement and utilising the World Café format, the event was designed to pilot discussion groups of professionals in the cultural ecosystem of Athens around issues of common interest, to encourage collaboration, resource sharing and ideas generation. With that in mind, we invited cultural professionals to join the first ever Museum World Café, to share ideas, experiences and best practices in a spirit of openness and collaboration.

The main objective was to capture the key challenges that cultural professionals experience as well as ideas and proposals that will lead to vital and sustainable synergies they want to achieve in the cultural sector in Athens. This objective was realised through open dialogue among thematic clusters where the range of perceptions of what is occurring now was exchanged by 91 diverse stakeholders from private institutions, cultural foundations, museums, public authorities, civil society actors, artists, curators and other cultural professionals.

Participants

The event was organized for professionals working in cultural institutions and civil society organizations, as well as leaders of informal groups. Participation was upon registration and selection by the OC combined with targeted invitees from foundations, as well as the education and business sectors. The final group was interestingly mixed, including museum professionals from across the sector (educators, managers, curators, project managers and designers), a great number of participants from cultural initiatives and non-profits, civil servants, corporate and business professionals as well as school teachers and academics.

Below are some main remarks made by the participants during the event:

*“Build up social spaces,
find common timing, start
from small-scale initiatives.”*

Group: Community Synergies



*“Go wherever the public is!
Peer to peer learning.
Creative Antagonism.”*

Group: Creative and Curatorial Synergies

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Athanasios Anagnostopoulos*



*“Fun is not a Crime! We
need the Artists!”*

Group: Educational and Capacity Building Synergies



“Museum as Third Space”

Group: Cross-sectoral synergies



“Identify complementarity. Balance between empowerment and responsibilities”

Group: Business & Public/Private Synergies



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Approach

The event took place with a fully participatory approach aiming at creating the conditions for dialogue between stakeholders centred on specific questions that were designed beforehand by the assigned anchors and mentors. At the end of the process that lasted approximately 2 hours, each group came up with three challenges and three suggestions for synergies. Some groups worked around a specific central question, while other groups preferred more open questions and focused on specific case studies. There were 5 thematic clusters, namely:

- 1. Community Synergies:** What is Culture for you?
- 2. Creative and Curatorial Synergies**

3. **Educational and Capacity Building Synergies:** How can your institutions collaborate with new partners in the field of education?
4. **Business & Public/Private Synergies:** Which factors make a synergy successful?
5. **Cross - Sectoral Synergies:** What has been your experience so far with implementing “unorthodox” collaborations?



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During the event, all participants shared their stories and input, making a brief overview to what they see as problematic, challenging or satisfactory in the Athenian cultural sector. In addition, mentors and anchors facilitated and coordinated the group discussions in order to surface some first results regarding ideas and proposals that could initiate a round of synergies. At the end of the event, representatives from each thematic cluster took the floor presenting their ideas and suggestions and ways to move forward.

Mapping the range of challenges/opportunities

Following a 30-minute discussion, clusters of challenges and opportunities were created and participants in each table selected their top-three to indicate a prioritisation of the most important challenges/opportunities that need to be tackled. More specifically, each cluster highlighted their findings as follows:

1. Community Synergies

- Equality to all voices (3 votes)
- Build up social spaces and time (10 votes)
- From small-scale to large-scale initiatives (2 votes)

2. Creative and Curatorial Synergies

- Regeneration of public's interest (10 votes)

- Lack of education (1 vote)
- Antagonism

3. Educational and Capacity Building Synergies

- Sharing programs/materials (1 vote)
- Synergies within organisations' different departments
- Mapping - networking inventory (2 votes)

4. Business & Public/Private Synergies

- Bureaucracy (1 vote)
- Non-existent or inflexible regulatory framework (2 votes)
- Existing resources / Skills required for HR

5. Cross - Sectoral Synergies

- Different languages
- Lapse of mapping / Connection mechanisms (4 votes)
- Legal framework cannot predict /adapt to new ways of collaboration (7 votes)

Mapping the range of proposals/suggestions

Following a 30-minute discussion, the proposals and ideas that the participants came up with are as follows:

1. Community Synergies

- Who: Parents, Elders, Migrants
- Where: Public Schools, Public Buildings, non cultural spaces, museums
- What: Communication (3 votes)

2. Creative and Curatorial Synergies

- Go wherever the public is! Conduct audience research.
- Incorporate "immature" young people. Peer to peer learning. Invest in materials: literature, leaflets, workshops and cross-organisational collaborations. (3 votes)
- Creative Antagonism. New forms of Economy. Link key cultural players whose strategies and programmes might seem competitive. Involving people/communities in cultural projects. (4 votes)

3. Educational and Capacity Building Synergies

- Create common projects and educational programmes (17votes)
- The Network is the Solution (2 votes)
- We need the Artists (7 votes)

4. Business Public & Private Synergies

- Use of technology (4 votes)

- Needs Analysis (5 votes)
- Capacity Building and Complementarity (2 votes)

5. Cross - Sectoral Synergies

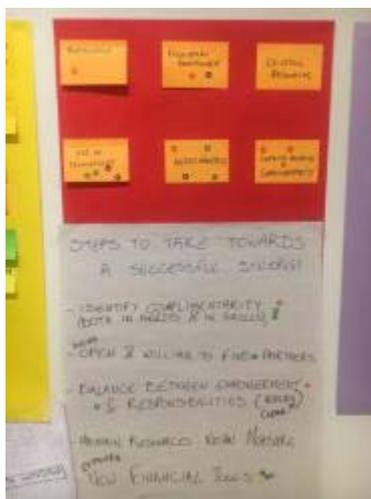
- Cross sectoral synergies
- Space - Long term collaborations - Integrate to the way of being (1 vote)
- **Museum as THIRD SPACE** (19 votes)

Reflections

The “world-café approach” was selected in order to allow new collective knowledge to arise that will be useful for both participants and the organising committee. It also facilitated a stronger network to emerge both locally and wider. Both the collective knowledge and stronger network aim at supporting the scaling up of local efforts since one of the objectives was to explore the need to work together, peer to peer learning and the need to organise networking events.

During the event, it was made apparent that all participants in all 5 different groups shared common challenges. The top shared challenges identified are: a) the lack of training and professional skills in the cultural sector of the city, b) the lack of communication between communities, cultural institutions and state/formal structures, c) the weakness of Athenian museums to act as social spaces, and d) the inflexibility / bureaucratic nature of processes.

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Working on the above issues, participants suggested ideas and solutions that could lead to the growth of the city’s cultural capital as well as to the initiation of partnerships between different stakeholders. Identifying the role of culture in the social and cultural regeneration of the city, participants stressed the importance of education not only for the audience/public but also for cultural professionals. This could be done through integrating more educational programmes for the public into the museums’/cultural institutions’ strategies, organising capacity building programmes for cultural professionals facilitated by institutions/ foundations/

municipalities and reaching out to the public where they are. Moreover, the need to create communication bridges between cultural organisations, communities, and state/institutional structures was highlighted as an essential vehicle to nurture common ground and deliver common projects. Also, the development of a shared mapping tool would be a great asset in connecting all different stakeholders. One of the heated issues discussed was the stiff bureaucratic procedures that prevent cultural professionals, communities and private institutions from initiating and developing synergies with potential public partners (e.g. municipality, ministry of culture, etc.). Suggestions to tackle this were the use of technology, needs' analysis within institutional structures and increase of communication channels.

Finally, the most problematic issue raised was that the “museum” as a structure appears to be inaccessible to a large portion of the Athenian population. The most highlighted response to that was: “Museums should operate as a Third Space”, a hybrid social space that will enable communities to express themselves and operate as a hub of cultural activities and projects for both grass roots initiatives and formal structures, thus allowing different stakeholders to form together the cultural identity of the city. There lies a great opportunity to achieve results and partnerships if everybody is feeling entitled to culture and if institutions reinvent the public's interest by experimenting with different approaches. Taking into consideration the plenty of obstacles that are in the way, such as the administration stiffness, the limited funding for museums to expand their timetables and the limited personnel to operate the museum, there is - still - a dynamic professional cultural community willing to nurture new working cultures and create new cultural and financial models that will rejuvenate Athens' cultural sector and will embrace the new character of the city. In addition to that, one of the most highlighted topics was that artists should act as liaisons and play a vital role in orchestrating educational and cultural programmes, synergies and cross-sectoral collaborations.

Closing Remarks

During the austerity years, the cultural sector has been affected a lot; on the one hand, it has been suffering severe financial cuts and on the other, has been lacking a cultural administering body or a shared cultural strategy for it to grow. Despite the storm, the financial crisis triggered a wave of citizen mobilisation as well as the emergence of many cultural and community spaces across the city, highlighting the importance of culture and the arts.

Summing up the challenges and opportunities that were put forward by the participants, we can conclude to the following first results:

- Accessibility to culture is essential. On one hand, museums should act as social spaces and community spaces and should welcome more cultural activities. Artists are the key mediators!
- Communicate Better. There is a need to communicate with one another and share a common vision. Create educational strategies that embrace different communities.

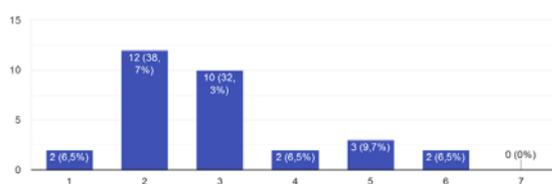
- Capacity Building training programs for cultural professionals will enable them to produce new financial models and start partnering with public institutions in equal terms.

During the Museum World Café event, we had access to 91 cultural professionals who shared their stories and visions regarding the future of culture in Athens. What seems to be missing is a facilitating “body” (state, municipality, cultural foundations, or a cultural reference group of experts - see Palmer’s Report, p. 4) that will connect all different cultural forces and efforts and facilitate synergies among them.

Survey Results

Soon after the event, we disseminated a questionnaire to all participants evaluating their experience with open and closed questions. Questions inquired the content of the discussions in each cluster, the methodology/process, what was most useful or less useful in the process and suggestions for improvement. Regarding the event, participants were asked whether the meeting was useful for building up their network and whether they would be interested in following up and how. Overall 31 people filled in the survey. Out of those, most, 32,3% were from the Cross-sectoral synergies cluster, 22,6% from educational synergies, 19,4% from creative and curatorial synergies, 16,1% from community synergies and 9,7% from business and public/private synergies. Regarding the discussions, participants were overall satisfied with the content of the discussions. Critical comments included the vagueness of key questions, in certain cases the lack of focus of the discussions, time restraints, lack of common grounds and language for communication. Most participants were very happy with the variety and profiles of discussants, open-mindedness and willingness to co-operate, ideas generation and process

6. How did you find the discussion and the ideas generated in your group?
31 απαντήσεις



Please explain (selection):

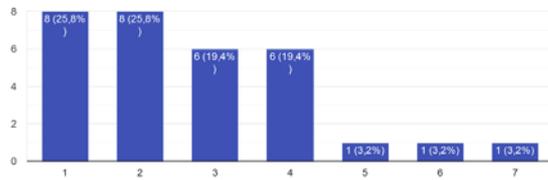
“Very different perspectives. The session - in its' limited time framework - allowed some first empathy development across sectors.”

“Not very clear goal but very good mix of people.”

“Very interesting topic, challenging task to open it up for discussion in a big group with chatty individuals. The process needed very careful time management in order to give voice to everyone and also stay focused on the theme and the objectives of the exercise.”

Regarding the methodology, many respondents were very happy with it. Explanations highlighted the question-asking process, design thinking, the mingling and the different clusters.

8. Did you like the methodology/process?
31 απαντήσεις



Respondents found less helpful, in certain cases the moderation, time management was considered unrealistic, and final presentations as poor. In the next question with suggestions for improvement, participants suggested smaller groups, more time and more space for each group. Specific comments:

“I would prefer more crucial discussion axes in order to produce more useful results.”

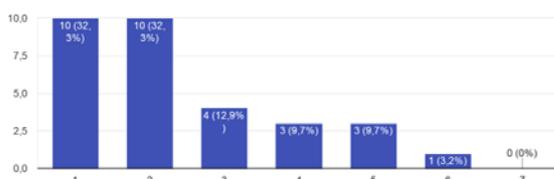
“I believe that a slot of allowing more getting to know one each other and dynamics to flourish at the beginning would have been useful.”

“A half-day workshop with focus on results rather than meet-up.”

“I would extend the time period and would like to have the chance to exchange ideas and connect also with the other groups.”

Regarding the networking opportunities, most participants were very happy to meet new potential collaborators or reunite with colleagues from other institutions.

12. Did networking and meeting other cultural professionals work for you?
31 απαντήσεις



“I realised how many of the agonies we share and how many of the solutions we have tried between us.”

“Not any particular follow ups, but it is very reassuring to meet people you either share similar ideas or they have something very interesting to propose.”

Out of all respondents, 74,2% are interested in following up the discussion, most of which with a new meeting (35,5%). Finally, of those were willing to take the lead in organising a possible follow-up (52,6%), something that gives us great joy, as we are planning to involve more interested parts in the next steps of this endeavour.

Special thanks are owed to all CLUSTER LEADERS:

Community Synergies

MENTORS: **Carol Rogers MBE**, Executive Director, Education and Visitors, National Museums Liverpool (UK)

Yannis Koukmas, Director of Audience Development and Participation, Eleusis 2021 European Capital of Culture (GR)

ANCHOR: **Haris Biskos**, Coordinator, synAthina (GR)

Creative and Curatorial Synergies

MENTORS: **Vassilis Haralambidis**, General Manager, Bios Organisation; Co-Founder, European Creative Hubs network (GR)

Barbara Polla, Founder, Sharing Perama project (GR)

ANCHOR: **Poka Yio**, Co-Founding Director, Athens Biennale (GR)

Educational and Capacity Building Synergies

MENTORS: **Adam Rozan**, Director of Programs and Audience Development, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian; Adjunct Professor, Harvard University Extension School (U.S.A.)

Patrick Presch, Curator of Education, Department of Education and Outreach, National Museums in Berlin (Germany)

ANCHOR: **Zanet Battinou**, Director, Jewish Museum Greece (GR)

Business and Private/Public Synergies

MENTORS: **Thanos Argyropoulos**, Executive Director, Marina Abramovic Institute (U.S.A.)

Alexandros Kambouroglou, Executive Director, Athens Partnership (GR)

Monika Niki Tsiliberti, Head of the Department for European Programs, International Synergies and Enhancement of Entrepreneurship, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports (GR)

ANCHOR: **Elina Klaridopoulou**, Program Officer, Stavros Niarchos Foundation (GR)

Cross Sectoral Synergies

MENTOR: **George Sachinis**, Co-Founder, Ohi Paizoume /Urban Dig Project (GR)

ANCHOR: **Stelios Voulgaris**, Founder, COMM'ON (GR)

Credits

The session was developed collaboratively by: Eleni Alexaki (US Embassy), Katerina Gkoutziouli (R.O.C.K.), Sophia Handaka (Benaki Museum), Dina Ntziora and Maria Papaioannou (British Council) according to guidelines for World Café events. Special thanks to Robert Palmer for his insightful comments.

Hosts: Katerina Gkoutziouli, Sophia Handaka, Anthi Christou, Eleni Alexaki, Maria Papaioannou

Facilitators/harvesters: Dina Ntziora

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