

Original Paper

Direct Line with the Monuments of the City. Case Study: Casa Bianca-Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki. A Museum Pedagogy

Approach

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Abstract

The villas of Thessaloniki, examples of eclecticism, are architectural “wonders” situated in eastern Thessaloniki, in the district of “Exoches” or “Pyrgoi”, as it was called in the middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Casa Bianca is well known to the people of Thessaloniki, not only for its unique architecture, which is impressive since it creates an aesthetically pleasing result, but also for the story of romance that unfolded inside it. Casa Bianca shifted between various owners and uses. Starting as a house that was given as a wedding present to the newlywed couple Diaz, it was later used as a school, while today it is occupied by the Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki. The present study aims to approach Casa Bianca, from the point of museum pedagogy with references to the factual history and the history of Art. That can be accomplished by designing an educational program which aims to introduce the young and the elder to the building, to its architecture as well as the choice of its eclectic style by the architect Pietro Arrigoni, the importance of this style in Thessaloniki of that period, the multicultural characteristics and its connection to the composition of the population of that time, the story of romance that monopolized the press at the time, the choice of architect and the various uses of the building up to this day. The educational program designed for Casa Bianca is in sync with the requirements of our time and for this reason it was decided that it would be designed and implemented online (distance learning), i.e. via computer. The website, that was designed exclusively for the Casa Bianca educational program, with the use of various types of media such as text, image, video and

interactive games, seeks to stimulate the imagination and curiosity of users and to offer the maximum possible information through an experiential teaching approach and also through active learning.

Keywords

Casa Bianca, Pietro Arrigoni, Dino Fernandez, Gallery of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, eclecticism, museum education, educational program, distance learning

1. Introduction

It is now indisputable that the Museum has an educational role, even if it is different from the traditional transmitter-receiver role and unlike the restricted learning environment that has been in use for many years. On the contrary, learning in the Museum is interactive and experiential, since information is not provided to the trainee as an a priori general truth, but it is formed by each single individual, based on their cognitive and experiential background. At the same time, the Museum offers multiple interpretations of the tangible cultural heritage, offering the appropriate interpretive means to understand the essence of the exhibits (Hooper-Greenhill, 1998).

When trying to construe a museum object, one can be impressed by the multiple levels of interpretation and the different layers that one can find. For example, an object may be able to reveal information about its chronology, its former use, its aesthetic value, its economic value, its typological characteristics (e.g., shape, size), its construction material and its language of origin (for objects showing inscriptions or letters) (Tsitouri, 2002).

It has been at least four decades that educational programs have been part of museum project plans, not only in order for them to carry out their educational role but also so that they can expand their audience, always keeping their sustainability in mind. As it is known, the educational programs of the Museums are addressed to various ages and social groups such as children, families, adults, the elderly, people with special needs, people in social inclusion, etc. Museums outreach to the public, especially group visits, turns the Museum into a cultural institution open to people from all backgrounds, with the purpose of entertainment and the provoking of emotions such as aesthetic pleasure, imagination, curiosity, nostalgia and sometimes sorrow. Besides, the firsthand experience and the exchange of group experiences is the one that enhances the meaning of the museum objects and consequently of the material culture (Zafeirakou, 2002).

Through the educational programs, the Museum offers an alternative type of learning, as an organized educational environment where learning experiences are formed and expanded making it possible to include entertainment and pleasure (Filippopoliti, 2015; Hein, 2012).

Most educational programs designed by Museums worldwide are based on the so-called Museum Experience. The Museum Experience overturns the logic of the one-sided transmission of knowledge, in this case from the Museum-knowledge provider to the visitor-apprentice. The Museum Experience begins the moment a visitor enters the museum space and interacts with the exhibits. Each visitor views, understands and interprets museum objects based on prior knowledge and personal experiences. This

variety in meaning is enhanced when there is a group museum visit, since knowledge is constructed in a multifaceted way (Falk, 2009).

In addition, at a time when understanding diversity and the breaking down of cultural stereotypes is more relevant than ever, museum educational programs have the potential of becoming institutions of intercultural education. Through the contact with the tangible cultural heritage of different ethnicities, the visitor broadens his cultural boundaries and his cultural identity, which is after all dynamic. According to H. Essinger, there are four basic principles of intercultural education that should govern museum educational programs, especially in multicultural or intercultural societies: empathy, solidarity, respect for the cultural diversity that derives from the expansion of borders between different cultures, and finally educating against nationalist thinking and abolishing national stereotypes and prejudices (Essinger, 1988).

2. Method

2.1 Museum Educational Programs: Collaboration between the Museum and the School

The success of an educational program and the extent to which participants can share knowledge and their museum experience depends largely on the inter-institutional collaboration between the Museum and the School.

The process of a school class or a group visiting a museum, according to Bitgood (1989) consists of four stages. The first stage is implemented by the Museum and has to do with the design of the educational program. The design is based on the theme of the intended educational program, which of course is related to the theme and the collection of the museum. A determining factor for designing the educational program is the age of the target group participating in the program since the requests and stimuli vary based on the age of the visitors (Vemi & Nakou, 2010). The greatest possible collaboration between the School and the Museum is achieved when the educational program of the Museum has common goals with the curriculum of the school and is related to the learning experience (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014).

As part of the next stage, once the teacher is informed and has selected a specific educational program, he or she prepares the students for the museum experience. Initially, the students in collaboration with the teacher look into the practical information of the visit, i.e., the days and hours when they can carry out their visit as well as the location of the Museum. Then, by giving them gradual information, the teacher tries to stimulate the curiosity and imagination of the students about the exhibits of the Museum and for their upcoming visit. New Technologies and traditional museum kits can be used as a tool at this stage. This consists of portable educational material that is distributed outside the museum, mainly in schools, and provide information about the exhibitions and educational programs of the Museum as part of the museum's communication program. They are usually used to prepare students for the visit, and often enable the teacher to implement the educational program in his / her classroom. They contain rich supervisory and audiovisual material, copies of exhibits, material for constructions, etc. (Diamantis,

1991).

The third stage concerns the main visit of the group of students to the Museum. During the visit it is the student that should be in the center of the educational process, without turning into a passive recipient of information. A short introduction by the museum educator, initiates the students into the environment of the museum. This is immediately followed by a “creative” tour of the students, motivating them to “explore”. A key part of an educational program is group discussion through the obstetric teaching method, worksheet activities, interaction with multimedia applications and creative field activities such as painting, collage, construction, and theater (Kisiel, 2007).

The fourth and final stage of the visit includes the evaluation of the museum’s educational program by the teacher and the students in the classroom. At this stage, the teacher encourages discussion and dialogue between students about their museum-learning experience. In this way, the personal experience is combined with prior knowledge and concepts are formed more easily by the students (DeWitt & Osborne, 2007).

As the students’ group work enhances the variety of meanings, the project method is appropriate at this stage, as an open learning process that encourages students’ free expression, bridging the gap between students who work at a different speed, and enhancing creativity. It is recommended that the project method leads to a learning product such as a text, a construction, an action, etc.

Finally, as part of the last stage of the museum visit, it is useful to evaluate the educational program so that the Museum can be informed regarding the results of the visit and whether and to what degree the goals of the program were achieved (Bounia, 2015).

2.2 Distance Museum Education: Implementation of Educational Programs from the Computer

Distance learning is in the limelight for many reasons. Initially, universal lockdowns, the closure of museums and compulsory e-learning, which were implemented as part of the effort to control the pandemic, demand our adapting to the new status quo. Computers and the Internet are now becoming almost exclusively the means for accessing knowledge as well as entertainment (see Tsuchla, 2020).

Of course, it should be mentioned that distance education is not just a necessity. There are several advantages to a type of education, whether formal or informal, that is not practiced in person or in its natural environment. Arguments that support this notion include the abolition of geographical boundaries, the flexibility when it comes to the amount of time one will spend in the educational activity as it is offered on a 24-hour basis, the possibility of receiving leveled information so that an educational application can be used by people of a different age, educational and social group, the opportunity of active participation with immediate feedback and the possibility of a group visit. Another important advantage is the possibility of immediate evaluation of an educational application or an online museum website (Tsuchla, 2019).

The website of an educational program must meet certain specifications to fulfill its purpose. A well-designed website excites the visitor’s interest and makes them want to visit the Museum in person. Also, the educational program implemented on a website should in no case be devoid of a pedagogical

way of thinking, while at the same time enhancing active learning based on constructivism (see next chapter). The basic requirements of a museum educational program that is implemented remotely via computer are: to enhance the visualization of museum objects, to stimulate observation, critical thinking, and creativity, to ensure communication and direct feedback between the trainee and the trainer-designer of the website, to provide self-regulated learning and finally to ensure there is an option to evaluate the website (Zombolas & Manousou, 2011).

2.3 Museum Educational Programs: Theoretical Framework

It is well known that there are many pedagogical theories some of which aim at passive learning such as teaching and behaviorism, while others support active learning such as theory of discovery and constructivism. There is of course the approach that focuses on the psychological perspective of the learner, with the theory of multiple intelligences as its most prominent theory (Filippopoliti, 2015).

This educational program, as already mentioned above, aims at active learning while, with the help of technology, the developing, discovery and cultivation of multiple intelligences is achieved. Below, we will attempt to briefly mention the educational theories that were the core of our educational program.

The theory of discovery focuses on active learning and the discovery of knowledge in the form of testing. The process of discovery involves specific stages: it starts with a “problem” and then the learner formulates hypotheses regarding its solution. One then determines whether one’s hypotheses are correct and that will ultimately lead him to his own conclusions (Blank, 2009).

On the other hand, the theory of constructivism enhances active learning on one side and constructive learning on the other. The online educational site is a perfect application of the theory of constructivism (Piaget, 1971; Vygotsky, 1993), as the student accumulates concepts and structures meanings during his visit to the site, through interaction, while combining elements from his or her cultural background. Even the basic knowledge that the student acquires from school, functions as the foundation for gaining new knowledge from the website. With a learning tool based on constructivism, the student gains knowledge in an active way, while the teacher has an assisting / reinforcing role. As it has been methodologically suggested, the website should be used by small groups of students under the guidance of the teacher; this aims at interactive teaching and group “assisted” discovery of problems / issues related to the research subject.

It is common knowledge that a hypertext such as a website supports its non-linear access. Practically this means that each visitor chooses his own fictional itinerary, he can return as many times as he wants to something that interests him more or to something that he did not understand and wants to revisit but can also skip a topic that does not attract his attention. Furthermore, the non-linear presentation allows the user to spend as much time as he wants in a thematic unit. The above is supported by constructivist theory in education, where learning is not linear, and the learner can choose any point that will serve as the beginning of the journey. The site supports multiple links and the discovery of different points of view and various interpretations where the truth is not singular, as often suggested by standard learning, thus allowing the relationship between transmitter and receiver to become interactive.

Finally, our educational program is based on Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences. According to this theory, there are seven types of intelligence: logic, linguistics, spatial perception, physical aesthetics, music, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Since only the first two are usually cultivated in formal education, museum programs should favor other forms of intelligence in order to highlight the skills of all learners and to participate actively and creatively in the learning process.

3. Result

3.1 Case Study: Casa Bianca-Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki

3.1.1 The Diaz Family and the Story of Romance

Casa Bianca (Figure 1) was owned by the Diaz family. This was an Italian Jewish family that was one of the most famous and rich families of Thessaloniki during the middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Salomon Fernandez, the grandfather of the family, was associated with the well-known Alliance Israélite, while kinship connected him with Allatini. His son David Fernandez was a wealthy banker who married Esther, a Misrahi. The couple had three children, Dino, Mary, and Germaine. Young Dino Fernandez Diaz fell in love with the Swiss Blanche de Mayer who worked as a reader in the family. Casa Bianca, or villa Blanche, was given as a wedding present by Dino to his wife Blanche, and it took her name. Later, Dino, as a successful merchant, became a partner in the Olympus brewery.

Casa Bianca, however, was marked by the romance between the daughter of Dino Fernandez Diaz and Lieutenant Spyros Alibertis. Alibertis was of aristocratic origin and education and charmed young Alimi. However, her parents and the Jewish community of Thessaloniki objected to the prospect of marriage between them, as Alibertis was a Christian Catholic. Alim's father forbade her to meet her lover and then sent her to Paris hoping she would forget about him. When Alim came back, Spyros Alibertis also returned to Thessaloniki and they eloped, first by taking a boat to Chalkida and then to Athens, where Alimi was baptized a Christian thus allowing the two to get married. The Press of the time was monopolized by this love scandal that became a cause célèbre.

During the German Occupation, the Diaz family was forced to flee to Italy to escape the Nazi persecution of Jews. There, they settled in a hotel near Lake Maggiore where the Nazis eventually located them and allegedly threw them into the lake alive. According to records, before Diaz left Casa Bianca, he left Alimi a paper, saying he bequeathed the house to her (Moutsopoulos, 1998, pp. 110-125).

3.1.2 The Architect of Casa Bianca and the Architecture of the Building

The architect of the emblematic Casa Bianca was Pietro Arrigoni (1856-1940). An important architect and engineer of Italian origin who moved to Thessaloniki in 1890 for professional reasons, as director of a Belgian tram company. During his stay in the Macedonian capital, he designed some of the most interesting buildings in the city. In addition to Casa Bianca, he designed Villa Mehmet Kapantzi (1912-1913, National Bank Educational Foundation), Villa Ahmet Kapantzi (1896, former NATO

headquarters), Hirs Hospital (1893-1894, Infectious Diseases Hospital), the Aslanian Mansion (1923-1925), the Dionysia Cinema (1925) and others.

Casa Bianca was one of the most beautiful buildings around “Exoches” and was built, as mentioned above, on behalf of the Jewish industrialist Dino Fernandez Diaz. Architecturally it follows the eclectic style (with elements of the art nouveau style), a movement whose presence was notable in Thessaloniki during that time. Casa Bianca has many features, which were analyzed in detail in a monograph by Professor N. Moutsopoulos, who, among his many remarks, points out the sense of a painting that emerges from viewing this amazing building, noting that in order to understand its composition, one must perceive it as “a first-hand painting depiction of a building in space, without having resolved its internal functions from the start. Nevertheless, the volumes of the building are balanced thanks to the skills and experience of the architect, who, while composing diverse and heterogeneous morphological elements, finally manages to create a unity “in the diversity”.

As mentioned above Casa Bianca follows the eclectic style. Morphological elements of different eras and styles can therefore be identified when looking at it. The monumental baroque staircase can be mentioned as an example, the iron railings and the wooden constructions on the covered balconies relate to the art nouveau movement, while the roof is in Central European style (Moutsopoulos, 1998, pp. 292-299).

3.1.3 The Uses of Casa Bianca

Casa Bianca was built in 1911-1913 ordered by Dino Fernandez Diaz, designed by Pietro Arrigoni, and created in the workshop of Debrelis George Siaga. The Diaz family lived in Casa Bianca until 1941, when it was commandeered and given as a residence to the Italian Consul. It is possible that this was the reason that the family left for Italy. Nevertheless, Spyros and Alimi Aliberti continued to live on the ground floor of the house during that time. It was then confiscated by the German army. After the liberation, the couple Aliberti rented the upper floor to a Kindergarten and a Primary School. Later it was sold to N. and G. Triarchou and S. and S. Mallah. In 1976 it was declared a work of art by the Ministry of Environment, while in 1993 the restoration project for the building began and was completed in 1997. Since 2013, the Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki occupies the building and its collection is displayed in its premises (Moutsopoulos, pp. 160-165). The collection of the Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki was initially composed of a selection of works owned by the Municipality, from donations and purchases during the 1950's. In 1977 the collection of Greek engravings was displayed for the first time, while in 1985 it acquired a large collection of works by artists from Thessaloniki. In 1987 the exhibition “Collection of Thessaloniki Artists” opened. Today, in addition to the “Collection of Thessaloniki Artists”, it also has a Collection of works by Nikolaos Gyzis, a Collection of Byzantine Icons, a Collection of Folk Iconography, a Collection of Engravings, and a Collection of works by renowned artists such as Iakovidis, Thomopoulos, Papaloukas, Steris, Eggonopoulos, Bouzianis, Chatzikyriakos-Gkikas etc.

3.1.4 Educational Program: The Educational, Interactive website for Casa Bianca

This is the educational, interactive website designed for Casa Bianca, that has already been made publicans any interested party can visit it at the following link: <https://mouratieftichia.wixsite.com/mysite>. The website is also compatible with mobile phones, making it possible for the visitor to choose this way of interaction with the website, since it is widely used more often than the personal computer for reasons of convenience. Its design is non-linear, as the visitor can be transferred to as many pages of the website as he wishes and in any order he chooses.

The website for Casa Bianca consists of six web pages, which are 1) Home Page with the name "CASA BIANCA" 2) "STORY OF ROMANCE", 3) "ARCHITECT", 4) "ARCHITECTURE", 5) "GALLERY" and 6) "CONTACT". The pages "STORY OF ROMANCE", "ARCHITECT", "ARCHITECTURE" and "GALLERY" are the four main axes around which the educational, interactive games of the website were designed and that underline its educational role.

On each page, apart from its menu, one can easily find the symbols that allow a language change between Greek and English, but also the symbols for social media. The visitor can also find a bar with a picture of Casa Bianca on each page, which when activated a song entitled "Casa Bianca" will start playing in a continuous flow. The visitor can listen to it at any time or can pause it at will. On the Home Page "CASA BIANCA", one can watch a video which presents photos of the exterior of Casa Bianca accompanied by music.

On the page entitled "STORY OF ROMANCE" the visitor can find information about the history of Casa Bianca, but also about the romance that unfolded inside its walls. The story becomes known to the visitor through text, but also through relevant photos with their corresponding information. At the bottom of the page there is an active button titled "Let's play!" and anyone can access a game based on the above theme. It is a crossword puzzle, with the rules written at the top, for the user's convenience, but also the active button "Check" at the bottom, which allows him to check his results at any time during the game. By pressing the numbers 1-6 on the crossword puzzle, the user is being asked questions, which appear at the top of the screen and next to them there is a box where the visitor can write the answer and then enter it into the grid by clicking on the button "Introduction". The answers are automatically added horizontally or vertically, depending on the position of each question. Every answer, regardless of whether it is correct or incorrect, is presented in the crossword puzzle grid. However, when the "Check" button is selected, the letters or the entire answer, if it is incorrect, are removed from the grid so that the visitor knows exactly which answer was false. The reason for the removal is communicated to the visitor through a bar that provides the above information. The visitor can be informed about their progress through the same bar.

On the page entitled "ARCHITECT" the visitor can find information on Pietro Arrigoni, architect of Casa Bianca, through text, but also through relevant photos with their corresponding information. At the bottom of the page there is an active button titled "Let's play!" which gives access to a game based on the above theme. It is a matching game, with the rules written at the top for the user's convenience,

but also includes the active button “Control” both at the top and bottom, which allows the user to check their results at any time throughout the game. On the left hand side there are photos of four monumental buildings of Thessaloniki, apart from Casa Bianca, designed by the architect Pietro Arrigoni and on the right -and more specifically next to each photo- there is a bar, which when selected allows you to match each building to its name. The visitors can check their progress through an information bar.

On the page entitled “ARCHITECTURE” the visitor can find information about the architectural style of Casa Bianca, through text, but also through a relevant photo. At the bottom of the page there is an active button titled “Let’s play!” which accesses a game based on the above theme. It is a multiple-choice quiz, with the rules written at the top for the user’s convenience. More specifically, there is a total of four multiple choice questions, with four possible answers for each question. The visitor is given the opportunity to move to the next question with the active button “=>”, alternatively he can see all the questions in vertical order and not horizontally, by clicking on the option “See all questions”. Each wrong answer offers the player relevant information and not just a warning that the answer was false, in order to enhance their knowledge in an entertaining way. In case the answer is correct, in addition to the relevant information, photographic material is also provided for better comprehension. The visitors can check their progress through an information bar.

On the page entitled “GALLERY” the visitor can find information about the Municipal Gallery of Thessaloniki that occupies Casa Bianca since 2013, but also about its collections, through text, and through relevant photos with their corresponding information. At the bottom of the page there is an active button titled “Let’s play!” which gives access to a game based on the above theme. It is a multiple-choice quiz, with the rules written at the top for the user’s convenience. More specifically, five photos are presented that should be matched to five possible answers. The visitor is given the opportunity to move to the next question with the active button “=>”, or is able to see them all in vertical order and not horizontally, by clicking on the option “See all questions”. In each of the answers, whether it is right or wrong, the visitor is given information about the question, but also about the progress of their answers through an information bar.

The last page of the Casa Bianca educational website entitled “CONTACT” provides information about the opening hours, address, and contact details of Casa Bianca. Finally, there is an active map which can help the visitor locate the building, and calculate the distance in relation to his home in case he wants to visit it, as well as an active form that gives him the option to send any comment he wishes.

4. Discussion

During the 19th century, Thessaloniki presented remarkable economic growth thanks to the active participation of different ethnic groups, such as the Jewish community, the most powerful of all, followed by the Greek and the so-called Franco-Levantine (Western European) community in the economic and social development of the city.

The prosperity of the city can be seen today in the prodigious mansions and buildings that have stood the test of time, designed by Italian and Greek architects, and owned predominantly by Jews. The architectural style that prevailed in the 19th century and in the early 20th century was eclecticism, with elements from Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, the Baroque, and the French Rococo. Casa Bianca is one of those buildings designed by Italian architect Pietro Arrigoni, commissioned by the Italian-Jewish family Dino Fernandez Diaz. The history of this iconic building is associated with one of the most romantic stories of that time, the love of two young people (a Greek man and a Jewish girl), which caused a sensation in the social circles of that era.

Today, this building is occupied by the Municipal Gallery of the city consisting of works by Greek artists of the 19th and 20th century, who, together with the post-Byzantine icons, constitute one of the most important museums in the city when it comes to modern and contemporary Greek art. In view of the new use of the old mansion and taking into account its history as a memorial to older times, at a period when the city was still enslaved (liberated in 1912), our proposal aims to create a unique educational program for students. The method we used was distance learning, due to the extraordinary conditions that were formed because of the pandemic (covid-19) and it is based on the main principles of museum pedagogy. Through this scientific point of view, a special educational program was developed, in order to make students' learning more active. The aim is to acquire new knowledge that will be conveyed through the modern digital media operation. In this context, a special educational interactive website was created, making the “visit” more practical and productive. The website includes all the historical and factual elements, which along with the museum and its educational purpose give the real overview of the building. The educational website is addressed mainly to elementary and high school students, but also to all those who wish to get to know Casa Bianca better by spending their time being creative and entertained through their interaction with it.



Figure 1. Casa Bianca, 1911-1913, Pietro Arrigoni, Thessaloniki

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