

# Urban Cultures and Public Spaces the University Library and the City Museum of Volos as Cultural Spaces and Public Spaces

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## Abstract

Public spaces have always served as meeting places and communication places in the city, and they are open and constantly evolving. Public spaces, among other things, contribute to improving the quality of life and the social cohesion. Through appropriate design and active community participation, municipalities can create vibrant and accessible public spaces that increase the quality of life and the well-being of residents. The spaces in Volos that are related to public space are the City Museum and the University Library, which essentially plays the role of a Public Library but remains closed after the severe storms Daniel and Elias that hit the city of Volos on September 2023. In this article, we will try to convey the immense value that these two public spaces hold today in the city. To what extent these two spaces and how they have evolved into centers of culture and education for the city. We will emphasize to their contribution on interaction among individuals, the spatial relationships between internal and external spaces, how they promote the functional relationships that allow interaction, the degrees of freedom provided to allow spontaneous activities, and new arrangements that augment the voice and the presence of often marginalized groups of users/identities. Citizens enjoy visiting libraries, feeling comfortable and welcomed in these spaces, and they finding a sense of relaxation and pleasure that is necessary to encourage learning, as proven by our research on the University library. On the other hand, the City Museum is a space that contributes to shaping collective memory and identity, it emits aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual stimuli in difficult times. And it is in constant dialogue with citizens.

**Keywords:** Public Space, Library, City Museum, Political, Culture, Education, Memory Identity, Democracy.

## Introduction

We were inspired this paper from a piece of our research that focused on public space. In particular, there was a questionnaire that included questions on the University Library of the University of Thessaly and the City Museum as public spaces. I would like to provide here as an introduction a quote by the purpose of a public library is not just to store books and documents, but to provide a public service to all citizens. However, a public service only makes sense if it serves the needs of both, individuals and community, even if those needs are not readily apparent. A policy for public reading will only be achieved if the responsible politicians and administrators, as well as the public, recognize the usefulness of libraries for citizens of all ages and social professions. It would be futile to defend a purpose that does not have social acceptance [1].

The library was established and started operating in September 1988, during the first academic year of the University of Thessaly. But it moved to its new facilities in the building of the previous Bank of Athens in 2005, leading to the closure of its branches at the Polytechnic School (Pedio Areos) and the Faculty of Humanities (Papastratou). In the beginning of our research the questions of our questionnaire did not cover in depth what we wanted to extract on the first place, we decided to delve deeper and understand what is happening abroad with libraries and what are the current challenges regarding their use. Thus, we decided to explore how libraries are dealing with the digitization of their collections, restructuring as meeting and community spaces, and developing relationships with the local community and students. Through this research, we hope to shed light on the role that public spaces play in contemporary society and suggest possible

improvements in their operations. The University Library fills the gap left by many public libraries that should exist in Volos since its audience is not exclusively made up of students, professors, or researchers, but also includes other groups of the population who focus on literature, for example, and can be approached through qualitative research related to this subject. Additionally, the University Library can offer more resources and materials to its users compared to a public library. This can increase knowledge and education in the local community and provide access to information and content that may not be available elsewhere.

However, it is important to maintain a balance between the academic and general audience, so that there continues to be space and resources for all user groups. Also, the University Library should ensure that it provides services and programs that meet the needs and interests of all its users. The concepts of library, and the museum, as places open to the public is similar to the theoretical concept of Jurgen Habermas for the public sphere. The concept of public sphere proposed by Habermas is a space for critical discussion and is open to all. The public sphere is understood as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed [2].

It can be seen as the breeding ground, if you want. Habermas declares several aspects as vital for the public sphere. Mainly it is open to all citizens and constituted in every conversation in which individuals come together to form a public. The principles of public space advocated by such as freedom of speech and assembly, freedom of the press, and the right to participate in decision-making, are upheld in libraries. Through libraries, individuals have the opportunity to voice their opinions, engage in debates, and contribute to societal change. Overall, libraries embody the essence of public space as envisioned by Habermas, serving as inclusive and accessible spaces for intellectual exchange and democratic participation, and is the basis for emancipatory social thinking. The public library serves as an essential neutral space, free from the influence of government pressure and the capitalism. In today's information society, libraries play a crucial role in bridging the information gap created by dominant elites seeking to control knowledge. Acting as agents of change, public libraries have the power to level the playing field and democratize access to information for all individuals. By providing a space for learning, discussion, and free access to information, libraries are key players in promoting an inclusive and equitable society.

This marked a true revolution in the world of libraries, which had previously been reserved for an educated elite. With the advent of the Anglo-Saxon-style public library, everyone now had access to knowledge, regardless of their level of education. The aim was to make a wide range of documents available to readers, from fiction books to academic works, as well as newspapers and magazines. Public libraries were thus opened to all audiences, including children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly. This democratization of access to culture and knowledge allowed many people to discover reading, to inform themselves, to entertain themselves, and to educate themselves. It also strengthened social ties by offering citizens a place for exchange and sharing. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon-style public library revolutionized the traditional concept of the library, transforming it into a place open to all, promoting social and cultural insertion.

In the reality, the public library itself is an institution formed by the government, so that in its implementation it certainly cannot be separated from the government's vision and mission. Even in practice, censorship imposed by the government also applies in the library or the museum. Management and information flow are also inseparable from the government. In addition to the government's strong influence in the administration of public libraries, the domination of capitalists in public libraries was inevitable.

Information society is a society that arises as a result of the information age, and is marked by the rapid exchange and consumption of information through various technological platforms such as the internet, social media, and digital devices as our research proves. In the information society, individuals are constantly seeking out new information to stay informed, make decisions, and navigate the complex world around them. In an information-based society, the way we learn, work, receive healthcare, and interact with our government has been transformed by the digital age and the vast amount of information that is readily available at our fingertips. In conclusion, the information society represents a new era in which information is the key driver of social, economic, and cultural development. It is essential for individuals to be able to effectively navigate and utilize the vast amount of information that is available in order to thrive in this rapidly evolving society.

In a book on public space, Thierry Paquot, a philosopher specializing in urban issues, emphasizes on the following point: "Public space is a singular term, the plural of which - public spaces - does not correspond to it. Indeed, public space evokes not only the place for political debate, the confrontation of private opinions that advertising strives to make public, but also a democratic practice, a form of communication, circulation of diverse points of view; public spaces, on the other hand, refer to places accessible to the public, frequented by residents, whether they live nearby or not. These are streets and squares, forecourts and boulevards, gardens and parks, beaches and trails, allowing for the free movement of everyone, with due respect for accessibility and free access". And according to Michel Bouvy the public library is neither a luxury service nor a charitable work. It is a public service as useful as the school [3].

The qualitative research we conducted to confirm that the theoretical approaches of the experts on libraries and public spaces. And here I present some elements that characterize the library as a public space, focusing more on the theoretical part of the research:

- The library is considered as a space that promotes access to knowledge and information for all citizens, regardless of social and economic status.
- As a public space, the library offers citizens the opportunity to meet, discuss, exchange ideas, and create communities.
- The library functions as a center of culture and education, offering education programs, exhibitions, presentations, and other activities that contribute to the education and information of citizens.
- The library promotes social cohesion and citizen participation in public life, providing spaces for meetings, events, and activities that encourage interaction and the exchange of ideas.

- Libraries are a different kind of space, a place of breathing, of resistance. They should be clearly described as spaces of freedom (of opinion of expression) and therefore as political spaces.
- The library is not utopian because it is a space that does not exist, but it is utopian because it realizes the utopia of gathering. It is utopian because it creates a public space as to Jean Pierre Rioux noticed (1997).

Based on the above, the library emerges as an important public space that contributes to the promotion of education, culture, and social cohesion.

The present paper also demonstrates how the library occupies, in the public space, a “strange”, paradoxical place. The library is an eminently political institution, but is not recognized as such, which has unfortunate (scandalous, dramatic) consequences. Throughout Europe, the library is considered by definition as a political and democratic space. The library is a public service necessary for the exercise of democracy. From the charter of Libraries, Article 3 we learn that: “Libraries are public spaces open to everyone, without discrimination based on race, gender, religion, nationality, or socio-economic status. They promote access to culture, information, and knowledge for all individuals. Libraries encourage diversity and pluralism, and ensure that everyone can feel safe and respected in this space”.

Normally, libraries are not virtual, disembodied, abstract, or utopian. On the contrary, they are rooted in space, specifically in the space of the city, in urban space and in political space. As well the University Library of Volos, which has been built in the city center and serves as a focal point not only the students but also the entire community. Because it's a basic cultural space that must be harmoniously integrated into the urban organization and thus contribute, in intimate relation with other organs of cultural life, educational action, social action, to ensure the deep breathing of the city. And now it remains closed and cannot play her role due to the severe storm that hit the city in early September '23.

The fact that the library is located in a public building strengthens the political character of its activities. Because it is the “common house” as had written, a place where the community is virtually united, where it can gather. A place of unity, unity between generations, between educational or social status, between users, expectations, curiosities, or needs... The physical openness of the library building is a symbolic openness to the entire community - even if we are aware of the boundaries (socio-cultural) - of such a pursuit [4].

Another objective, also political, is assigned to libraries: it is education. In a republic founded on the education of citizens (and where school is a political passion, the only one, or the last one, capable of bringing hundreds of thousands of people into the streets), education is an eminently political issue. The claimed proximity to the public education service is therefore not innocent: it is an attempt to legitimize the library on the same level as school.

Many French architects as Laurent Baudouin architect of the library of Poitiers, or Gérard Thibault, architect of the Saint-Herblain media center, or Pierre Riboulet, architect of the Limoges

library consider the library as a common space with multiple culture representations. However, Pierre Riboulet says: “In Limoges, I dreamed of the library as a single volume. It is perhaps, because, always all of us have the syndrome of the National: we always think the library as a big beautiful room, a unique room in a way, in the sense that what we need most today in the society we live in is this search, this meeting of unity, because we are in such a fragmented, dispersed, separated universe.” Or they think the library as a community of books.

It's the same thing for some of the American's architects and they insist that if they reimagining the library as a dynamic public sphere institution, librarians can work towards preserving and enhancing the vital role that libraries play in promoting education, democracy, and community engagement. And they criticized US education for sacrificing education for democracy on the altar of (market) economic instrumentality.

The process of creation of modern libraries is based on a shared vision of the media library as a place of culture, education, social connection, and living together. It is therefore necessary to go beyond the simple concept of a library to think of a multidisciplinary and multifaceted space that can adapt to the needs and expectations of the local population. This also implies rethinking the traditional missions of the library and innovating by offering new services and activities related to contemporary cultural practices.

The symbolic construction of the library is also built through its architectural dimension and her interior design. The important is to create a welcoming space, open to its environment, which promoting the meeting and the exchange between users. Reflecting on the organization of spaces, highlighting collections, accessibility, and comfort are essential to guarantee a quality reading experience.

Finally, the media library cannot be dissociated from its territory and its inhabitants. It must be a place rooted in local life, in symbiosis with the cultural and social dynamics that surround it. Therefore, it is important to involve different local actors from the start in defining the project and to create lasting partnerships with institutions, associations, and cultural organizations in the territory.

In conclusion, creating a library is an opportunity to deeply rethink the public reading project, reinventing it in the light of contemporary issues and local specificities. This requires a participatory, collaborative, and innovative approach, highlighting the diversity of audiences, practices, and cultural discourses.

The municipality of Volos, in which we were working, suffered, like many towns in Greece, from the absence of public spaces and places suitable for hosting collective activities, favorable on the development of social cohesion. If we believe on the values of equality and solidarity, we want our city to remain a space of emancipation and connection between their residents rather than stay indifferents and confinements. Therefore, we want the library to restoring social connections, promoting access to culture for all, and leveling the social differences. Additionally, the library should actively collaborate with local organizations and institutions to address systemic inequalities and promote social

justice. The University library is located in a central neighborhood where there were public services, as the Town Hall, we also aimed to open up to the city and animate it by attracting residents from the entire city.

On the other hand, the recently museum of the city The City Museum of Volos is housed in the three-story building of the former Papantou tobacco warehouse, on 17 Feron Street, in Palaios Volos. On the ground floor, there are spaces for temporary exhibitions and events, a shop, and a reading room. Below the exhibition hall, sections of water pipes from the middle Byzantine period (6th-7th centuries AD) are preserved and visible to visitors. It opened in December 2014 with the inauguration of the major temporary exhibition "Volos-Nea Ionia: so close, so far away", dedicated to the 90 years since the establishment of the refugee settlement in Nea Ionia.

In the early 1990s, the need for the creation of the Volos City Museum began to mature and be adopted by the local community and municipality. From 1989 to 2000, the Municipality of Volos acquired the ex Papantou tobacco warehouse and three other buildings in the construction square OT 49, which was designated in 1997 as the space for the construction and operation of the Volos City Museum.

The Papantou tobacco warehouse was built around 1920 in an old district of the city, on which the city changes more slowly. Like other tobacco warehouses in the city, it housed refugees from Asia Minor until the establishment of the Settlement. There are here memories that affect the collectivity. The renovation of the building and the redevelopment of the surrounding area began in 2006 with funding from the Operational Program of Thessaly and the Municipality of Volos. The study and supervision of the project were carried out by the Technical Services Directorate of the Municipality of Volos.

The restoration of the eastern part of the castle fortification, located in the courtyard area of the Museum, was carried out by the 7th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, as part of the project "Conservation and restoration of the Castle of Palea Dimos Volos". The project, with a total budget of 1.000.000 euros, was included in the Operational Program "Thessaly - Sterea Ellada - Epirus 2007 – 2013" and included works for stabilization, maintenance, restoration, and landscaping along the western, northern, and eastern sides of the defensive wall. In the museum courtyard, the wall was maintained along a total length of approximately 40m. The works carried out, apart from the obvious goal of stabilizing the antiquities, aimed to make the area accessible and visitor-friendly. The project for the conservation and restoration of the Castle of Palea Dimos Volos lasted from spring 2011 to October 2014. The museum includes objects, photographs, and documents of all kinds and forms, related to the history and character of the city of Volos and the wider area of Magnesia and Thessaly. Chronologically, it spans from the incorporation of Volos into the Greek state (1881) to the present day.

A separate section is the digital collection, which includes audio recordings of events since 1991, the archive of the Municipal Television of Volos (1996-1998), interviews, photographs, videos, and other audio-visual material. Following an agreement

with the Social Anthropology sector of the Department of Architecture of the University of Thessaly, the City Museum of Volos has access to all the recordings gathered and being gathered by the Oral History bank of the Oral History Laboratory of the department. We may say that museums play a crucial role in the construction of social memory by preserving and presenting historical artifacts and stories, and this is the role of the city museum of Volos. It helps the society to remember her past, learn from it, and shape her identity. This museum also contributes to the reproduction of culture, traditions, and values that are important to a particular society.

Furthermore, the museum serves as symbol of the city's cultural richness and heritage. Over time, the museum can become an iconic landmark that are closely associated with the city's identity. In conclusion, museums are not only repositories of historical artifacts but also powerful agents in shaping social memory and culture. Exactly as the two great semioticians Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky define culture itself as the memory of a community. They have the ability to preserve, interpret, and exhibit the past, thus contributing to the collective memory of societies and cities. Lefebvre in the production of space (1991) called these display spaces representations of space, and reasoned that such structures are spaces designed by artists, planners, urbanists, and technocrats who both dissolve and organize societal norms. These spaces, built by certain subjects, form their objects by becoming subjects over time. One of the main reasons why this museum is so important, from a sociological perspective, is that it is essential in preserving and transmitting cultural memories. Museums serve as important repositories of cultural memory, preserving and interpreting objects and artifacts that tell the stories of our past. Through exhibitions and displays, museums bring history to life and allow visitors to engage with the past in a tangible way. The reconstruction of memory in museums involves not only the physical preservation of objects, but also the interpretation and presentation of these objects in a way that helps visitors understand their significance and historical context. By providing a space for reflection and learning, museums play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the past and contributing to the collective memory of society. Overall, museums are essential institutions for the reconstruction of memory, serving as guardians of our cultural heritage and offering opportunities for reflection, learning, and dialogue. Through their collections and exhibitions, museums help us connect with the past, understand our present, and shape our future.

The museum cluster transforms the concept of the public sphere and clearly demonstrates the shift from public institutions to public space. In this societal transformation, the architectural aspect of the museum becomes crucial. As illustrated in the blueprints, this facet of the museum project is depicted as the gateway from the city to the museum, as the integration of the museum into the city, and as the coalescing and integration of the surroundings, leading to the creation of a larger plan for the "city of museums" that fosters unity, identity, shape, and organization within the city.

These expressions of the architectural aspect of the museum converge in the public space, which connects the museums within the cluster and the cluster with its urban surroundings. As such, the public space plays a critical role as a mediator between

the museums and the city, as well as between diverse audiences and functions, areas and movements, between speed and leisure, exploration and convenience, tradition and innovation, entertainment and education, commercialism and intangibles, order and spontaneity, between the idealized city and the practical city we inhabit.

This highlights the immense importance of the linkages between the elements of the museum system and their connections with other urban systems, emphasizing the significance of accessibility, movement, connections, flows, and networks that they establish. Thus, through the museum cluster, I demonstrate the new requirements and expectations for public spaces in the modern era, as a multi-dimensional showcase, interactive and educational area, a space for engagement with heritage and the urban environment.

As the library the museum claims a role in the construction of the public space, as a democratic place for debate and encounter with otherness, but we required to distinguish it from physical public spaces. The reality we found ourselves confronted with is that the confusion between public place and public space, the difficulty in identifying the specific function and rules of the place, led to difficulties in cohabitation of different publics and incompatible appropriations with the desired mix of uses. The research led us to think that a public place revolves around a function, which determines its reception modalities and rules of use. It clarified to us that we do not welcome the public "as is", based merely on the notion of public service. This reception and connection are based on a specific public service mission, a specific service offer, but also on the perception of the establishment by the public and their partners.

The City Museum of Volos is an important public space in the city, where visitors can discover the history and culture of the area. Through the various exhibitions and activities held at the museum, people come into contact with the local heritage and learn about the past of the region. The representation of history and interaction with the public at the City Museum of Volos are points of memory that preserve the tradition and identity of the area. Through exhibitions, events, and educational activities, visitors have the opportunity to explore the past and participate in an interactive experience that empowers and inspires them.

By highlighting the history and culture of the area through the City Museum of Volos, a space is created that connects the past with the present and keeps alive the memory of our ancestors for the future generations. Thus, the museum becomes an important part of the local community and contributes to the preservation and promotion of the identity and heritage of the region. The City Museum had revitalized a neighborhood that wasn't so rich and helped to the absence of public spaces and places to accommodate collective activities, and even dedicated public services for social, educational, and other policy needs. Every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework. Space is where a specific moment becomes tangible, and it has always had a unique connection with experiences. And space holds condensed time in "its thousands of honeycombs" as says holds memories and create unites, limits, and gives identity to society and the individual, is finally sacred [5].

Today, the City Museum serves as a vital hub for the community, offering a place where residents can come together to connect with their shared history and culture. Through its exhibits, programs, and events, the museum actively engages with visitors, encouraging them to reflect on their personal experiences and consider their place within the larger community.

By showcasing artifacts, artworks, and stories that highlight the city's past, present, and future, the City Museum helps to preserve and celebrate the local heritage. It plays a critical role in transmitting knowledge and understanding from one generation to the next, ensuring that important stories and traditions are not lost over time. Furthermore, the museum serves as a venue for dialogue and exchange, providing a space for citizens to come together to discuss and explore important issues facing the community. Through its programming, the museum fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity among residents, encouraging them to actively participate in shaping the future of their city [6].

In times of crisis or uncertainty, the City Museum serves as an inspiration of hope and resilience, offering a place of respite and inspiration for those who seek support and connection. By providing aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual stimuli, the museum helps to nourish the spirit and stimulate creativity, even in the face of adversity. Ultimately, the City Museum stands as a testament to the power of culture and heritage in shaping individual and collective identity. By fostering a sense of pride and unity among citizens, the museum plays a vital role in strengthening the social fabric of the city and empowering its residents to build a more vibrant and inclusive community [7].

As a places of culture and access to knowledge, both the library and the museum, acts as a bridge between memory and projection towards the future. Through its resources and the mediation work that accompanies them, it allows individuals to connect with their personal and collective history, to access in their cultural roots. They also provide sources of inspiration, projection towards elsewhere, or attraction towards lives other than our own, which helps to develop the ability to look ahead, to imagine a future. By weaving this link between the past and the future, the media library contributes to the city and its inhabitants being able to reclaim their memory and collectively build their future. They help both to build the historicity of the city [8].

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