

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AS FACILITATORS FOR FOREIGN TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

Cultural tourists are keen to understand and experiment the host culture. Generally, the interaction between tourists and the local culture is mediated either by people, or by organizations. Traditionally, cultural institutions are more inner-oriented, in the sense that they address either residents or national tourists. Various contemporary trends in the strategies used by cultural organizations, as well as the increased interest in other cultures, determine foreign tourists to be more open to the offer of cultural organizations at the destination. The present paper investigates how cultural institutions, such as museums, help foreign tourists in Bucharest to experience the Romanian culture. Currently there are occurring several changes in the offer of cultural institutions in Bucharest. We mention just a few: museums are more dynamic and more attentive in presenting the information in at least one other language but Romanian, increasingly more museums offer audio-guides, theaters have summer offer and from time to time present plays in English of other languages. Our survey examines the extent in which cultural organizations in Bucharest address foreign tourists and which are the means they use to do it. The investigations consist in systematic direct observation and interviews. Special attention is given to the strategies used by these institutions to help tourists understand local culture and contribute to their spiritual development as well as the aims they have when addressing foreigners.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourists are interested in understanding and experimenting, if possible, the host culture; they hope to be part of local cultural events. As Smith (2003, 30) shows, cultural tourism is based both on seeing and experiencing. Tourists want not only to understand local society, from its history, to present-day mentalities and cultural achievements. They also want to be part of the local culture, or at least to feel as being part of it. In general, the interactions between tourists and the local culture are mediated either by people – e.g. common people tourists meet, representatives of the travel agent, local guides, etc., or by organizations, such as museums. Taking into account the circumstances, it is extremely difficult for tourists to have real access to local culture through people they encounter at the destination, because in general tourists interact just with locals who work for their benefit (e.g. tourist guides, hotel receptionists, shop assistants etc.) Therefore cultural exchanges are generally distorted because of different positions and the specific relationships between the two parts. In this context, tourists might expect to find out more reliable and unaltered information from specialized cultural institutions, from professionals in culture.

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING CULTURAL TOURISTS IN URBAN AREAS

Culture is a very important reason for travel or an element that greatly influences the experiences of tourists. No matter the primary reason for visit, Boniface (1995, 7) considers that tourists will not be attracted if some different cultural background, some cultural attractions are not present at the destination. She also mentions that tourists are looking not just for cultural events or organizations, but also for vibrant public meeting places (Boniface, 1995: 23). This can be encountered in urban spaces more than in rural areas.

Cities are among the main tourist destinations. They are at the core of tourism because of the great variety of tourist attractions, of the activities they propose to tourists. Even if the final destination of tourists is not an urban area, most of tourists go through cities and, if the case, they stop for sightseeing or other activities appealing to them. Most of the tourist flows go through cities, since they are generally centers of distribution of tourists in rural areas.

On one hand cities are preferred by cultural tourists because of the higher density of cultural attractions and because most of cultural tourist icons are in urban spaces. On the other hand, rural areas are more appealing because they allow tourists to emerge more in the local cultural customs, therefore tourists could feel that they are closer to the real phenomenon, the true cultural milieu. Increasingly more cultural tourists are interested in experiential aspects of culture (Smith, 2003: 30). In this context, cultural organizations have the opportunity of developing offers of interest for tourists. They would be more appealing than the general urban landscape of the monuments which traditionally attract tourists at the destination, since they propose more active involvement. Still, Harrison's study (2001) shows that some tourists look for aesthetic experience, they are more interested in pleasure travel and sensual perceptions. Nevertheless, all these experiences contribute to meaning-creation.

Generally, tourist icons are important attractions for tourists. Some of them are of cultural nature; others are not but could be invested with cultural value. Icons attract both independent and coach tourists, especially the first kind of travelers, as Becken shows (2005). Many tourist icons are placed in urban areas. All of the urban icons are cultural ones. Because of the increased interest in nature, in ecotourism and sustainable tourism, many geographic and rural areas have also become tourist icons around the world. On one hand tourist icons attract tourists to a certain destination, but on the other

hand the flows determined generate a pressure too high in that specific area. Therefore control of tourist flows is necessary, as well as the creation of alternative attractions at the destinations, such as cultural events and other cultural offers.

Towns, at their turn, greatly benefit from tourist flows. As Smith shows (2007, 2-7) the development of urban tourism could lead to urban regeneration, would attract investors, would determine the creation of cultural and ethnic districts within the city, could determine the communities' development, the "heritagisation" of the urban space, and so on. In this context, cultural organizations could provide competitive advantage for the city, contributing to the emergence of cultural tourism and its multiplying effects. The museums have already become generators of economic value for their towns (Smith, 2007: 14), as in the case of Guggenheim Bilbao (Gospodini, 2001, 932; Plaza, 2000), but not only. In some cities, their museums are a "must" for tourists, but they are not the only main attractions, as in the case of Paris, London or Washington. Because of the importance of tourism for urban areas, Paskaleva-Shapira (2007) shows that integrated town management approach is necessary. City branding could become an irresistible stimulus for tourists. As Fox Gotham (2007) shows, in order to create an appealing destination image it is compulsory to create an institutional system, to which all sorts of administrative and cultural organizations to be connected. All these should make the promises true, should present to tourists the symbols and motifs representing local culture as alive culture.

It is extremely important for these management strategies to take into account the life-cycle of the town as a tourist attraction. Gale and Botterill (2005) show that all tourist attractions could enter into decline, in different contexts: underutilization, decrease of interest from the part of tourists, costs to maintain, unsatisfying cultural experience. Varied and dynamic offer from cultural organizations could contribute to the continuous appealing of a certain town as tourist

destination. Of course, this is not the only possible approach. Urban design and development should be the leading strategy (Gospodini, 2001). Still, it is not easy to implement a winning strategy. As Baernholdt and Haldrup (2006) argue, especially in medium- and small-scale towns, the cooperation between different actors is necessary: local authorities, cultural organizations, nonprofit associations, economic agents and others.

CULTURAL ORGANIZATION AS PROVIDERS OF SERVICES FOR FOREIGN TOURISTS

Smith (2003, 31) provides a list of the typology of cultural tourism. It includes heritage sites, performing arts venues, visual arts, festivals and special events, religious sites, rural environments, indigenous communities and traditions, arts and crafts, language, gastronomy, industry and commerce, modern popular culture, special interest activities. Many of these forms can be based in cities, and cultural organizations could have an important role in their development. Cultural organizations address especially individual tourists, but museums could also address group tourists (through travel agents).

Traditionally, cultural organizations are more inner-oriented, in the sense that they address either residents or national tourists. Due to the need to interact with and to transmit messages in a way fully understood by their audiences, most of cultural institutions, even museums, address a public speaking the local language. The difficulties of addressing foreigners are quite obvious, especially in the case of theaters. Nevertheless, many cultural institutions are opening to foreign residents or tourists.

The mission of cultural institutions is to contribute to the general spiritual development and to promote local culture(s). Even if most of these institutions are addressing local

communities, they try to extend their impact and to find new development opportunities. Therefore, some of them address not just locals or nationals, but also foreigners. Other important shift is related with the way the cultural message is transmitted nowadays, more creatively and interactively. These trends, as well as the increased interest in other cultures, determine foreign tourists to be more open to the offer of cultural organizations at the destination.

Another factor that determines cultural tourists to be increasingly more interested in the offer of cultural organizations is the desire to experiment the otherness. McCabe (2007, 89) shows that experiential tourists remain aware of their otherness, being in the same time sympathetic with others; they also look for alternatives, for authenticity. Other reasons tourists might increasingly travel abroad and look for otherness is curiosity or the desire to be more familiarized with alternative cultures, the desire to share noteworthy experiences, the desire of transcending today (Franklin, 2003: 215). These are general attributes of cultural tourists.

Boniface (1995, 58-60) recommends the following in order to attract more cultural tourists: distinctiveness, redesign in a modern style, repositioning etc. All these strategies are easier to implement taking into account local/national audience, than international. We stress that museums could easier achieve these goals compared with theaters. Therefore important challenges face cultural organizations which want to address also foreign tourists.

Cultural institutions generally aim locals or nationals, even if they are located in an attractive tourist destination. Taking into account the development of international tourism, including cultural tourism, cultural organizations, especially museums, are increasingly more aware of the interest foreigners have into their offer. Some very famous museums around the world are addressing nationals and foreigners equally. In less

famous museums, such as those in Bucharest, the situation is quite different. A decade ago museums in Bucharest were addressing Romanians almost exclusively (they could provide some guided tours in other languages, but the process was not very easy in some cases). Nowadays the situation changed, labels are provided at least in one other language but Romanian, the employees speak English in many cases etc. Still, cultural tourism seems not to be developed in Bucharest (there is no reliable data on the phenomenon). Increasingly more foreigners are to be seen in the streets, the figures for international tourism present a positive trend, but these tourists are not so present in cultural locations in Bucharest.

The interest of tourists for cultural activities at the destination depends on several elements. Some of them are related to tourists' interests and desire to take part in cultural activities, to visit cultural institutions, etc. Others are related to the various cultural organizations existing at a location (museums, theaters, cultural centers etc.) On one hand, these organizations have to address foreign tourists, have to facilitate their access to the offer they propose. On the other hand, they have to promote their specific offer to foreigners. The types of cultural tourists that cultural organizations could aim are varied: heritage tourist, arts tourist, creative tourist, urban cultural tourist and even popular cultural tourist (it was considered the typology developed by Smith – 2003, 37). The characteristics of tourists and their behavior are tightly related to their motives and needs.

Boniface (1995, 16) draws the attention to the actual reasons of tourists to visit museums. She points out that sometimes just the declared purpose is educational, while the actual needs of tourists are quite different. In this context, when designing their offer addressing foreign tourists, museums should take into account the actual needs of their audience. They also have to take into account, as Boniface (1995, 26) shows, that foreign tourists are accustomed with certain

presentational standards. Among them is the existence of various commercial spaces, such as cafeteria or gift shops. The latter provide tourists souvenirs and various items they can take home and use for a longer time, contributing also to the sedimentation of ideas and sentiments acquired in the museum. Items sold in the museum gift shops raise issues of authenticity and commodification, but still they have an important cultural and economic value. The literature also draw attention on some issues related with the authenticity of the objects in museum displays (Smith and Robinson, 2006: 182-183, 196). Museums, and in general those providing cultural services and products, have to be careful and to limit the effects of cultural stereotyping.

Another factor influencing the interest of tourists in the offer of cultural organizations, such as museums, is related to the image these organizations have. In the same time, the image influences not only the expectations, but also the satisfaction level. (Gil & Ritchie, 2009: 491). As the research of Moreno Gil and Brent Ritchie (2009) shows in the case of museums, the image is influenced by general appearance, while museum shops are also relevant to the overall image. Therefore image is not just a matter of promotion, but also of offer strategy. Both aspects would influence the outcomes of the visit of tourists. In this context, each type of tourists should be specifically addressed by cultural organizations.

METHODOLOGY

Our paper aims to investigate the openness that cultural organizations in Bucharest manifest towards foreign tourists, to understand how these institutions make their offer accessible to tourists who do not speak Romanian. Special attention is given to the strategies used by these organizations to help tourists understand local culture and contribute to their spiritual

development as well as the aims they have when addressing foreigners.

The first step of the investigation is the analysis of the offer of cultural organizations in Bucharest, from the perspective of the public targeted. The research is limited to the most important and dynamic types of cultural organizations, which address a wider public and benefit from larger resources: cultural centers, theaters and museums.

Systematic observation is the instrument used to investigate each type of organization. Several observation forms are developed aiming to identify how friendly with foreign tourists these organizations are. The variables used to describe friendliness are: “accessibility”, “information”, and “offer”.

“Accessibility” does not refer to how reachable is the organization from the perspective of physical proximity or how easy to get to is that organization. This variable refers to how handy it is for foreign tourists interested to get information on those organizations and their offer. Since foreign tourists tend to obtain information from the internet, we investigated the websites of cultural organizations in Bucharest, from foreigners’ perspective. An observation form was filled in for each cultural organization in Bucharest, registering the following data for each of them: how easy it is for a person who does not speak Romanian to find the website, language used to transmit information to foreigners, type of information transmitted in other languages, how easy it is to find the information on offer of interest for foreigners (if such offer exists).

“Information” is the second variable investigated. It refers to the means used by cultural organizations in Bucharest to transmit information of interest to foreigners who already reached them (i.e. museums to foreign visitors). Two directions are investigated – the human factor and the printed materials. The first direction regards languages spoken by the ticket

officer, surveillance personnel and shop assistants, as well as the possibility to have guided tours in foreign languages. The second one investigates the diversity of materials used to directly transmit information to foreign visitors: museum signs, museum floor plan, brochures, museum guides, public program presentations, audio-guides and labels.

“Offer” refers to what cultural organizations in Bucharest propose to foreign tourists. Personalized observation forms are developed for each type of cultural organization. The broadest investigation is concentrated on museums. The observation form takes into consideration what is specifically designed for foreign visitors (exhibitions, programs) or items from the museum’s offer they might be interested in. The later could be either useful objects (e.g. books, albums, interior design items, jewelry) or just souvenirs. During the systematic observation the existence of some standards in ensuring a comfortable visit is also investigated. There are explored issues such as: the presence of gift shops and the items sold, if there is a cafeteria or a restaurant in the museum. These two aspects are investigated because most of the foreign tourists coming to Bucharest with an interest in cultural offer come from Europe and North America and they are used with certain standards and expect a certain offer from museums, besides the presentation of their collections. These commercial services are more relevant to foreign tourists, then to locals which do not really expect such spaces.

The second step of the investigation is to understand the strategies addressing foreign tourists that the cultural organizations in Bucharest use. In this context interviews were conducted with PR coordinators from several institutions. The investigation aimed to interview 3 representatives of cultural centers in Bucharest, 3 representatives of theaters and 5 representatives of museums. Unfortunately, just 2 interviews were obtained for theaters and 3 for museums. The interview regarding theaters aims to understand how important are

foreigners for theaters, if and how theaters in Bucharest address foreign tourists. The interview regarding museums investigates how important are foreign visitors for the museum, what kind of offers are developed for foreigners, what are the strategies used to attract foreign visitors and which are the main obstacle for promoting the museum among foreign tourists.

RESULTS

The research shows that the offer of the cultural organizations in Bucharest does not specifically address foreigners. Most of the cultural centers in Bucharest are in fact organizations which promote foreign cultures in Bucharest and Romania. They are financed by foreign governments. There are active 9 such centers. Their cultural offer is quite rich, mostly oriented towards art exhibitions, movie projections (in original languages, subtitles either in Romanian or English) and concerts. All these are accessible to foreigners in Bucharest but because these cultural centers target the Romanians, they do not promote their offer among foreigners. There are 4 main other cultural centers in Bucharest: Arcub, Romanian Cultural Institute, National Center for Dance, and International Center for Contemporary Art. All these organizations have complex activities, they develop various interdisciplinary projects, but also cultural programs of general interest, many of them accessible to foreigners in Bucharest (they do not require knowledge of Romanian).

Theaters also do not develop programs especially for foreigners, even if some considered doing this for the foreign residents in Bucharest. Nevertheless from time to time, plays in English or other languages are performed. This happen mostly during theater festivals, but not only during them. Opera would be more interesting for foreign tourists, since all the shows are in the original language (just Romanian translation is provided on a special device). There is another theater – Odeon – which

translates the plays in English in a similar way for those who do not speak Romanian. Another theater that has an offer that might be of interest for foreigners speaking Yiddish is the State Jewish Theater. There are two main philharmonic orchestras in Bucharest – the Athenaeum and the philharmonic orchestra of the Radio House – which could be of interest for foreign tourists, since benefiting from their offer is not dependent on the knowledge of the Romanian language.

Museums in Bucharest, in general, do not offer special programs or exhibitions for foreign tourists. They could benefit in all museums from guided tours in English and in some museums also in French. In order to benefit from these guided tours, tourists have to make a booking with at least one day in advance. From the 15 museums investigated, 2 of them have restaurants and one has cafeteria. Their offer is quite limited and they could not be considered as high-class and trendy restaurants as in the case of some famous museums in other countries, very popular both with tourists and locals.

The observation also included the gift-shops of the museums in Bucharest. Just 3 museums, the Peasant Museum, the Village Museum and the National Art Museum, have special spaces with this purpose. The National Museum of Geology, as well as the National History Museum have special show-cases for the items they sell to those interested, but there is not a very well defined space for the shop. All the other museums sell books, some postcards and several souvenirs in the same space where they sell tickets. In several museums, as in the case of the National History Museum of Romania, the number and diversity of the items sold are very large. In general the number of souvenirs is relatively high for many museums, but just a few of them have items of more significance that might interest foreign tourists. Just 2 museums offer personalized souvenirs and items at their gift-shop. There is a general lack of exhibition catalogues or specialty books edited in other languages but Romanian. The exceptions would

be the National Art Museum, the National History Museum, the National Museum of Contemporary Art and Vasile Grigore Museum.

The interviews conducted show that just the large museums take into consideration foreign tourists and they develop some programs for them, but the main difficulty is to promote these offers. The most complex situation was revealed by the interview at the National Art Museum. For this museum foreign visitors are considered an important public, as they represent 15% of the audience. Because of this, all the employees who develop public programs are fluent in at least one foreign language (English, French or German). All the exhibitions have labels translated both in English and in French. The museum does not develop exhibition considering foreign visitors, but there are some educational programs in English or French specially designed for foreigners in Bucharest and their children (for instance programs for the French School in Bucharest). At request, there are thematic tours organized for foreign tourists. There are some itinerary exhibitions developed to travel abroad, aiming to present the Romanian culture and the museum's collection to foreigners. In order to attract foreign tourists, the museum cooperated in the past with several travel agents, but the experience was not satisfying. To make the museum's offer more accessible to foreigners, the Museum present information on its exhibitions and public on diverse websites addressing foreigners. It is also an interest to develop the offer of the museum's shop with items that might be of interest for foreigners.

Special attention during the interviews was given to the relations with travel agents. All the museum representatives are highly unsatisfied with these. They consider that the travel agents are not interested in cultural development of tourists, but in giving the impression of diverse offer while on travel. They also seem that travel agents are not reliable as "business" partners. In the past museums tried to develop formal

partnerships with travel agents, but they are not interested anymore in this approach.

The online survey shows that foreign tourists searching the internet for data on various cultural organizations in Bucharest would find relatively easy information in the case of museums (direct or short indirect links to their websites). The information on cultural centers and especially theaters is harder to retrieve for persons who do not speak Romanian. They would also not have straight access to the online platforms presenting daily updated information on cultural events in Bucharest (platforms which are well known by locals). The access to the websites of cultural organizations in Bucharest is significantly easier for persons using English, than in the case of French or German.

Presuming that foreign tourists manage to reach the websites of the three types of cultural organizations investigated, we investigated how useful and accessible for them these would be. The observation reveals that all the websites of cultural centers in Bucharest have pages in Romanian and their own language. Just 3 of them (the Polish, Czech and Hungarian centers) also have an English version. Among the 17 websites of theaters investigated, just 7 of them have versions in other languages but Romanian. Comedy Theater and the National Theater in Bucharest just partially translate the content in English. The Opera House, the Operetta Theater, the Odeon Theater and the Tandarica Theater have full English versions of their websites. The Ion Creanga Theater (dedicated to children) has full English and French versions. The National Jewish Theater has just Yiddish version besides the Romanian one (which was not functional 3 consecutive days when tested). Among the philharmonic orchestras in Bucharest, just the main one, playing at the Romanian Athenaeum, has an English website.

The observation of 17 museum websites reveals that just 6 of them are taking into consideration foreign visitors on their

Internet pages. One of them, the National Peasant Museum, is just partially translated in English. Another one, the National Museum of Geology, has just its presentation translated into English, German and French. Four other museums, the National Art Museum, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the Cotroceni Palace Museum and the Museum of Old Maps and Books, have full versions of their websites in English.

The investigation of the websites of the cultural organizations in Bucharest shows that, in general, these organizations do not consider the foreign visitors who might retrieve information from their websites. Just some of the most important cultural organizations (in terms of the variety of their offer and long term tradition) also have partial or full English versions of their websites. Almost none takes into account persons speaking other languages but Romanian or English. They do not optimize enough their websites, taking into account foreigners. When an English version of the website exists, it is not personalized to the interest and specificity of foreign visitors, it is the translation of the Romanian website, and it does not present any specific information for foreign visitors.

“Information” is the third variable taken into account. The observation regarding the knowledge of other languages but Romanian by the personnel of cultural organizations in Bucharest reveals that most of the front-line personnel do not speak other languages. Just a few of the theater representatives speak English, while none speaking French or German has been met during the investigation. The situation in the museums is better. Most of the ticket officers speak at least English, especially in the case of larger museums which are also visited by foreign visitors. In just one case the ticket officer spoke French but several others seem to understand this language even if they do not speak it and they properly answered in English. The surveillance personnel in museums also do not

speak other languages, except in the case of larger museums. The younger persons speak English, while the older ones tend to speak French. Not even in the case of larger museums, visited by more foreign tourists, all the surveillance personnel speak at least one foreign language.

The observation also analyzed the way the information on exhibits is transmitted to foreigners. None of the museums investigated has floor plans in any foreign language or materials presenting the museums' public programs. In just 3 museums there are general presentations of each hall inside the museum, at the entrance of these exhibition halls. In all museums, labels are the main means of information on the museums' collections. Not all the museums have the labels translated. Just the museums which were reorganized in the last 10 years have labels in English. In 5 cases, the labels are both in English and French. The Peasant Museum has the information translated also in German. In a few cases the labels in Romanian present additional short information compared to the English version. For instance, in the case of the National Art Museum, the Romanian label includes some information on the provenience of the item or its history.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the cultural organizations in Bucharest, just the museums manifest a more significant interest in attracting foreign tourists. The strategy is based on making accessible information on the museums' offer, more than actively determining tourists to come to visit the museums. Especially larger museums, with valuable collections, seem to actively make foreign visitors to feel welcomed and comfortable inside the museum. Most of the efforts are targeting English speaking visitors. Foreigners who would not speak either Romanian or English would have some difficulties in having access to the offer and message of the cultural organizations in Bucharest.

The trend is to increasingly more address foreigners in Bucharest, both from the part of museums and theaters. The strategies are oriented more on promoting the offer to tourists than on developing personalized programs. The strategies regarding foreign tourists aim just to bring them inside the cultural organizations and to make the information accessible just from a linguistical point of view. The research reveals that cultural organizations in Bucharest help foreign tourists to get familiar with local culture, but they are not active parties in the process.

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