

Consumer immersion in House museums

Mara Fugazzola
Bocconi University, Milano

Andrea Rurale
Contract Professor of Marketing
Bocconi University, Milan (*)
andrea.rurale@unibocconi.it

(*) corresponding author

Abstract

Acknowledging the relevance of material culture within the process of identity construction and underlying the central role of visitors' experience in shaping the realm of cultural heritage, this research investigates how people get in touch with the material traces of their past. In particular, this paper is devoted to the analysis of the mental operations that are performed by individuals dealing with a peculiar artistic context. As a matter of fact, it concentrates on the immersion process (widely considered as the very means for accessing experiences) as it is carried out by visitors of the four historic house museums comprising the Milanese network.

This exploratory work uses empirical research based on a plurality of qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, ethnography, subjective introspection and content analysis.

Keywords

Museum, Experience economy, Consumer Immersion

In recent years we have witnessed the rapid increase of the phenomenon of the so-called heritage tourism, a kind of tourism that follows the traces of a past that is particularly significant for a specific country. This kind of activity, once practiced just by a few people and known as heritage trail, has become typical of mass tourism¹. This happens because an increasing number of people is looking for a unique and authentic experience like the one lived while visiting heritage sites. Some authors have underlined the fact that generally the search for one's own past through heritage sites is linked to a common and pervading nostalgic feeling towards past times² or, at least, to a desire to establish a personal and not-mediated connection with other epochs³. The identified kind of feeling permeates various artistic-related environments, from cinema to literature. To support that thesis, we can think at the quite recent success of movies such as *The Gladiator* or, with reference to the Italian market, of historical fictions like "Elisa di Rivombrosa".

According to Belk, the highlighted feelings and attitudes are at the basis of the strategy of some museums, that induce (or, at least, try to do so) their visitors to experience that kind of emotion⁴. In order to achieve this result, he insists, they leverage on objects that are considered particularly relevant according to a scientific, cultural, aesthetic or historical point of view. And it is exactly this (already quite diffused) practice that has driven to the creation of some "living" heritage museums⁵, such as the ones established in Great Britain and devoted to the Victorian and post-Victorian age⁶. The emergence of this kind of cultural offering is the result of the arrival in Europe of the American heritage site model⁷. As a matter of fact, in the United States

¹ Cf. Leighton D., *'Step back in time and live the legend': experiential marketing at the heritage sector*, 2007.

² Cf. Goulding C., *Romancing the past: Heritage Visiting and the Nostalgic Consumer*, 2001.

³ Cf. Cameron C.M., Gatewood J.B., *Seeking Numinous Experiences in the Unremembered Past*, 2003.

⁴ Cf. Belk R.W., *Possession and the Extended Self*, 1988.

⁵ Cf. Beeho A., Prentice R.C., *Conceptualizing the experiences of heritage tourists. A case study of New Lanark World Heritage Village*, 1997.

⁶ They are mainly fake villages created in a (not always sound) historical fashion with the aim of allowing visitors to experience directly the way of living typical of the selected period.

⁷ Cf. Mortara A., *Le case museo come esempio di heritage site?*, 2006.

this type of offering attracts a great percentage (with a maximum of more than 80% reached in 2003) of the adult tourists that include in their journey a destination that could be considered part of the heritage site category⁸.

This being the general framework, it well seems that museums (and among them, of course, historic house museums), archaeological sites and natural heritage sites are willing to represent a piece of our common past, since they can count on the possession of authentic traces of history⁹. The complex and multifaceted concept of authenticity appears as the crucial issue in the current debate regarding the management policies of cultural resources and, more in general, can be considered of primary importance when dealing with heritage¹⁰. The need for authenticity seems to be more and more urgent in a context like the one we are currently facing, in which the boundaries between what is authentic and what is fake are not always well defined¹¹. In that kind of context the definition of heritage itself is blurring, so that on the one hand we are witnessing the reification of shopping malls and thematic parks, while on the other one the concept of heritage is being expanded to comprise various fields¹². To support what just said, it is sufficient to think at the recently introduced term “histourant”, created to identify a commercial activity that stands between the field of restaurants and that of heritage, typically a restaurant that, thanks to its (usually debatable) historical references, has the possibility to become a tourist site¹³.

Moreover, it is necessary to highlight the central role of visitors’ experience in the definition of the realm of cultural heritage itself. In a certain sense, we could affirm that heritage is transformed by visitors, because they are the ones that ultimately define what becomes heritage¹⁴. Since heritage could be seen as a realm of ideas rather than a mere collection of objects, we can easily state that it is the ideas and memories that we as visitors have about objects and the symbolic values that we ascribe to them that transform them into heritage¹⁵. In this way, it is possible to notice the role of objects in reminding us of an intangible past. In other terms, heritage should not be seen just as the actual “thing” (monument, artefact, building and so on), but rather we should conceive it only together with the values and meanings ascribed to the objects. Contending that on this ground all heritage is, in fact, intangible, it could be argued that heritage has the role of mediating cultural and social change through the continuous construction and negotiation of memory and, consequently, of identity¹⁶.

Despite their being so relevant for the museological field, however, individuals’ experiences have long been quite overlooked. As a matter of fact, according to Kesner, it was with the sociological approach and with the marketing one, which explored museum visiting as basically a leisure time phenomenon and a form of consumption respectively, that the understanding of the museum experience started to become explicit object of study¹⁷. In fact, he maintains, until then, some dimensions of museum visiting had been neglected or insufficiently accounted for by the traditional study of aesthetics and art history. Conversely, in the world of the “experience economy”, the concept of experience has assumed a central status¹⁸.

⁸ According to data to be found in *The Historic/Cultural Traveller*, Travel Industry Association and Smithsonian Magazine, 2003.

⁹ Cf. McIntosh A.J., *Into the Tourist’s Mind: Understanding the Value of the Heritage Experience*, 1999.

¹⁰ Cf. McManamon F.P., Hatton A., *Cultural Resource Management in Contemporary Society*, 1999.

¹¹ Cf. Ritzer G., *La religione dei consumi: cattedrali, pellegrinaggi e riti dell’iperconsumo*, 2000.

¹² Cf. Goulding C., *The commodification of the past, postmodern pastiche, and the search for authentic experiences at contemporary heritage attractions*, 2000.

¹³ Cf. Josiam B.M., Mattson M., Sullivan P., *The Histourant: heritage tourism at Mickey’s Dining Car*, 2004.

¹⁴ Cf. Smith L., *Heritage and Its Intangibility*, 2006.

¹⁵ Cf. Carman J., *Castles in the Air: the Intangibility of the Tangible*, 2006.

¹⁶ Cf. Calvo-Valderrama A., *Tangible to Intangible Heritage: A Sociological Question*, 2006.

¹⁷ Cf. Kesner L., *The role of cognitive competence in the art museum experience*, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁸ Cf. Pine B.J., Gilmore J., *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, 1999, and Schmitt B.H., *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT and RELATE to Your Company and Brands*, 1999.

However, once museums have started to be legitimately analysed through the experiential lens¹⁹, there is the risk that they could be considered mere facilitators of experiences²⁰. In fact, on the one hand a stream of thought has emerged that turns the museum experience into nothing more than a commodity which museums and heritage sites are expected to package and deliver and on the other hand influential voices from within the museum establishment have begun to assert that museums are essentially experience businesses and that experience design is a privileged key to museum success²¹. Consequently, the delivery of experiences has become the concern of many museums, with a predictable impact on the overall museum practice²².

Methods of data collection

<i>Method</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Main objective</i>
Semi-structured interviews	8 experts pertaining to the museological community	Favoring the emergence of a professional point of view to be compared with the actual findings
Ethnography	24 observational sessions	Gaining insights from the evidence given by visitors' behavior in the real context
	82 unstructured interviews with visitors	Collecting individuals' description of the experience and making explicit their mental operations
Subjective introspective analysis	5 people involved	Obtaining in-depth data regarding how the immersion process takes place
Content analysis	6 comments books	Verifying the validity of the data collected through direct interaction with visitors

Data presentation

The museum setting becomes a more interactive space (rather than a static and objective one) where subjective interactions take place that affect the individual process of identity building. In this way, visitors are recognized as actively aiding in the production of their own subjective experiences through their competences, imagination and emotions, imbuing the setting with their own personal meaning while pursuing immersion.

So, responding to the consistency concern, whenever possible without negatively affecting the clarity and the fluidity of exposure, the adopted presentation mode favours the not mediated emergence of the informants' voices. As a matter of fact, as identified by Stern, informants' voices often are a more suitable vehicle than researchers' syntheses for correctly conveying the experiences lived through by individuals²³. Of course, this quest for the reporting of not mediated voices has necessarily been paired with the need for accounting for the diverse kinds of data sources.

Interviews with experts

Thanks to their personal interest, background and expertise, it is assumed that experts are able to gain access to the artistic experience of historic house museums in a direct way, through what

¹⁹ Cf. Petkus E., *Enhancing the Application of the Experiential Marketing in the Arts*, 2004.

²⁰ Cf. Doering Z.D., *Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor experiences in museums*, 1999.

²¹ Cf. Cunnell D., Prentice R., *Tourists' Recollections of quality in museums: A servicespace without people?*, 2000, Kotler N., Kotler P., *Can museums be all things to all people? Missions, goals, and marketing's role*, 2000, Prentice R.C., *Experiential Cultural Tourism: Museums and the Marketing of New Romanticism of Evoked Authenticity*, 2001, Roberts L., *Outcomes and experiences: New priorities for museums*, 2001, Skramstad H., *An agenda for American museum in the twenty-first century*, 1999.

²² Kotler N., *Delivering Experience: Marketing the Museum's Full Range of Assets*, 1999.

²³ Cf. Stern B.B., *Narratological analysis of consumer voices in postmodern research account*, 1998.

has been defined an immediate kind of immersion. Since the main focus of this work is on the other identified type of immersion (the progressive one), it has been considered particularly useful to try to benefit from their professional (rather than personal) experience. However, it is necessary to remember that this hypothesis regarding the immediate immersion undergone by “better-skilled” people has not been taken for granted a priori, but has been tested (and, as we will see, confirmed) during the subjective introspective analysis.

According to the majority of the experts interviewed, what mainly differentiates a visit to that peculiar category of museum constituted by historic houses from a visit to a less-particular type of museum (think for instance at the traditional kind of art museum) is the **pervading feeling of astonishment** provoked by the inevitable and immediate link between specific objects or settings and their being part of a previously inhabited unicum. As one informant has put it:

“It is a kind of astonishment induced not by the masterpiece or object per se, but rather derived from the immediate perception that all the objects displayed were part of the furnishing of a house once really inhabited by someone”.

Another expert, instead, has identified a feeling more similar to (a not negatively connoted kind of) envy,

“...something that is commonly synthesized by the often-heard exclamation: ‘Look! They had it at home!’. While they say these words, their faces express both excitement and something very similar to frustration”.

However, as it should be clear thanks to the section devoted to the explanation of the peculiarities of historic house museums, huge differences exist between the four houses of the network and sometimes generalizations are neither feasible nor desirable. In order to account for such differences, some experts have highlighted that the role played by **fantasy and imagination** varies a lot depending on the house considered.

“Since the Bagatti Valsecchi House Museums has been conserved untouched, fundamentally you see it as it was while inhabited. This is why you are not compelled to ask yourself where a specific piece was originally located... Conversely, when you visit, for instance, the Poldi Pezzoli House Museum, your fantasy and curiosity play a much more relevant role”.

Quite different is the position of another informant, according to whom historic house museums constrain the imaginative potential of visitors more than traditionally intended museums.

“(Traditionally intended) museums do not build boundaries to limit individuals’ imagination, but, like good books do, naturally allow for a sort of personal and totally imaginative fulfillment. Historic house museums, instead, are already saturated and do not leave any room for filtering the art objects by means of your competence and feelings”.

According to another expert, a visit to a house museum elicits a “chain of thought” not comparable to the one inspired by traditional art museums.

“When you are in Florence in front of the Venus by Botticelli, you inevitably start thinking about mythology, the artist, the idea of beauty, the Italian Renaissance and so on. When you are inside a house museum, instead, you just start wondering about the hosts”.

Starting with an initial moderated level of **curiosity** towards the past inhabitants of such artistically connoted houses, visitors are said to show soon the desire to **discover more** and more about the history of the house itself and, with even more urgency, about that of its hosts. According to the experts, while proceeding with the visit of a house, visitors’ questions usually become more frequent as they gain **confidence** with the context.

“Whereas at the beginning of each guided tour visitors seem shy, almost intimidated by the house, after a couple of rooms they become more interactive and start asking curious questions about the private life of the inhabitants”.

“Among the most frequently asked questions, there are those pertaining to the hosts’ everyday life within these walls”.

In general, responding to the audience’s quest for this kind of information and following the unique opportunities offered by this type of museum, when leading guided groups, the informants usually do not drive visitors’ attention towards specific objects or art pieces, but tend

to focus on the (real) fiction that stands behind the specific context. For instance, they always speak about *family matters* (such as marriages and money) and try to *re-voke the atmosphere* that once characterized the house.

“I think that my role as a guide within house museums consists primarily in helping individuals creating their own movie. In other words, I try to make them imagine how real people lived their real life right here”.

In particular, the person suggesting the “movie” idea and identifying the *guide as the privileged facilitator* of this imaginative act states that visitors are often “kidnapped” and *mentally transported into their movies*. This position seems extremely relevant, since the idea of “kidnapped visitors” could be read as a metaphor for explaining the concept of *immersion*. As a matter of fact, when the immersion construct was first introduced in this work, it has been said that metaphors are usually adopted to illustrate it because it is not an easy-to-grasp concept. Moreover, if we consider that the people interviewed are neither interested nor knowledgeable about experiential marketing topics, the cited statement appears even more interesting. What we can deduce, indeed, is that in the experts’ view, visitors of historic house museums usually manage to reach immersion (even if the latter is not identified and consequently labelled as “immersion”). Furthermore, they highlight the guide role as the main service facilitator that this kind of museum could provide.

Although almost every informant has underlined the pivotal role played by guides in making people experience house museums as “real houses”, *other service elements* have been considered because of their potential impact over visitors’ perceptions. As a matter of fact, the experts have mentioned the topic of *informative panels and labels*, debating about the suitability of their presence in this kind of museum. In general terms, the informants think that it is better to avoid too intrusive information displays. Different positions, instead, have been maintained about the suitability of the use of labels. Since experts have been interviewed for every one of the four historic houses, in the paragraph devoted to the ethnographic reporting we will see that to the various opinions over the introduction of labels correspond *different policies* regarding the display of objects.

In conclusion, all the informants except one agree that people in historic house museums are offered the opportunity to live an experience completely different from the one lived while visiting other kinds of museum. As one of them has put it:

“When entering a house museum, a visitor is literally catapulted into a complete historical reality. Every individual is able to feel that this is something completely different so that s/he transfers the perceived relevance from the object to the sensation that s/he derives from the whole setting”.

In the words of another informant:

“Visitors go away after having spent some time in the house of someone towards whom they now feel a sort of sympathy. That happens because they have been emotionally involved”.

As the reported excerpts confirm, generally speaking, the experts think that historic house museums allow people to live a particular kind of aesthetic experience, whose peculiarity stands more in the possibility to *establish a strong emotional linkage* with the hosts than in the intrinsic value and authenticity of the setting (considering both the building and the displayed objects). Furthermore, they affirm that visitors usually manage to reach immersion, with no particular reference to their *subject-specific competences*. According to their view, this is due mainly to the *narrative reading key* proposed by guides. If the latter have been cited thanks to their facilitating role, other service elements (namely, panels and labels) have been considered quite problematic in nature, since they could disturb the immersion process.

Evidence from visitors’ analysis

Since the various methods of data gathering deployed have brought to a quantitatively relevant set of data extremely consistent among themselves, it seemed that illustrating the results of complementary analyses in a separate fashion would have represented just an artificial and useless operation. For this reason, and with the aim of favouring the emergence of a visitors’ common vision (to be juxtaposed to the experts’ one), the evidence resulting from data collected thanks to diverse methods will be exposed within one discourse. However, this is not to say that

diverging voices have been ignored; on the contrary, consistently with what done when dealing with the previous group of informants, whenever the opinion of individuals firmly disagreeing with the general chorus was to be considered relevant for the discussion, it has been reported.

The presentation of the collected data will follow a precise structure. As a matter of fact, data will be exposed according to a predetermined logical order that will allow providing an answer to the main research questions as we have identified them in the introduction. So, in this paragraph it will be possible to:

- discover whether immersion is reached by visitors within historic house museums;
- better understand the differences between immediate and progressive immersion;
- analyse the appropriation operations which characterise the process of progressive immersion in a peculiar museological context;
- assess the collected suggestions regarding how to facilitate the immersion process itself.

Getting immersed... or not?

As far as the first among the above highlighted points is concerned, we could quite easily affirm that the vast majority of visitors are able to ***immerse themselves*** into the historic houses' context and, consequently, to successfully access the aesthetic experience. As we will later discuss in more detail, the level of ***subject-specific competence*** possessed by individuals strongly affects the ***easiness of immersion*** reaching, but does not seem to have any impact over the intensity of the experience lived through.

If on the one hand it is quite difficult to assess whether immersion is reached relying just on mere observations, on the other hand it is true that looking carefully at people could unveil part of their feelings. For this reason, gazes that from astonished became almost absent often were an effective means for revealing that people progressively got ***lost within their daydreams***. Moreover, while observing them, it was quite frequent to here people saying words that sounded similar to the annotated:

“What have you just said? Could you repeat it? Sorry, but I was wondering about how it should have been here”.

“While he (the guide) was speaking, I could see in front of my eyes the whole family sat here chatting with friends”.

*From the extracts above (both part of discourses casually “captured” while walking within museums and observing visitors), it appears clearly that it is easy for ***episodes of immersion*** to take place in such a context. Moreover, it seems that the pivotal element provoking (or, better, giving start to) immersion stands in the ***peculiar nature*** of the historic house itself. As a matter of fact, during one interview, a woman stated:*

“Although I am a quite assiduous museum visitor – they relax me a lot – I have to confess that this is my first time in a historic house museum. I have never lived such an experience before! Every time I turned or entered a room for a moment I had the impression that the hosts were there. Here you can see their beds, their chairs.... inevitably you start seeing them everywhere”.

Another informant, asked to describe the kind of experience lived through, provided the following answer:

“It’s a strong feeling, a sort of semi-conscious temporary madness. You materialize people and they accompany you across the house, but you know they are not really next to you. I should define it a holistic experience”.

The statement cited above is quite similar to many other answers received. However, its relevance stands in the two adjectives (“semi-conscious” and “temporary”) used to convey the feelings and sensations perceived during the visit. As a matter of fact, these attributes seem to perfectly suit the academic concept of immersion, particularly if associated to a noun (“madness”) that identifies a sort of ***altered state of mind***. What emerges is that visitors surely realize that, when they are into house museums, they ***find themselves into a “parallel reality”***, one in which living people ***coexist with the past inhabitants***. In addition, the fact that the experience lived was labelled “holistic” clearly conveys the idea of that ***totalizing feature*** typical of immersion. Having acknowledged this, the words of another informant describing his perceptions could be read as a further support to our conviction:

“It is something very difficult to explain... feelings, emotions and sensations all converging together. I feel as I have been immersed into another world since I stepped into these marvellous rooms”.

As it has been surely noticed, in the previous contribution the concept of immersion appears with its proper name. Furthermore, it is necessary to say that the term “immersion” (whether as a substantive or as a verb) has been cited by seven different individuals among the eighty-two people interviewed. However, if on the one hand the fact that the precise word “immersion” has been pronounced various times could further support our position, on the other hand it should be said that alternative words or phrases very often have been used to express what seemed to be exactly the same concept. In particular, among the most recurring words used to describe what had been experienced, it is necessary to mention the expressions “to be transported into”, “to find oneself into”, and “to step into”, that are very significant for the purpose of this analysis. Not only the direct interaction with visitors, but also the comments books have provided numerous examples from which the same feelings could be unveiled. It seems sufficient to cite three of them as they appear in one of these registers:

“During my permanence in this museum, it seemed to me to be living in a marvellous dream with a stunning setting!”.

“Absolutely mind-blowing!”.

“A real plunge into the past!”.

Now that a satisfying number of contributions has been proposed with the aim of responding to the first in our set of main questions, it seems appropriate to try to answer also to the second among the points raised.

Two differing immersion modes

The second of the considered issues regards the differences existing between the immediate type of immersion and the progressive one. Just to contextualize this discourse, it seems necessary to remember that the two constructs have first been identified in literature. More in detail, when the concept of immersion emerged for the first time, only the immediate possibility was contemplated. However, successive academic studies brought to life the progressive alternative, a sort of parallel (and, we should say, less direct) path to reach the same goal. The main hypothesis that is being verified in this section regards the impact of the level of ***personal competences*** related to the considered context, topic, or situation on the type of immersion an individual puts in place. In other words, what is being questioned is whether better-skilled people gain access to a specific experience through the immediate kind of immersion, whilst for individuals that do not possess the necessary background the progressive type takes place.

As already anticipated, the most suited method for testing this hypothesis has been identified in the subjective introspective analysis.

Even from a first rapid reading of the reports it has appeared straightforwardly that the two individuals equipped with a relevant degree of content-specific knowledge were able to ***eliminate the distance*** separating them and the context ***sooner than the other participants***. As a matter of fact, as we will see in a while, for the novices two or three rooms were needed before they could in a certain sense feel close to a house museum, whereas the two experts “got in touch” with the context approximately as soon as they got into it. Whereas the arts graduate were able to abolish very soon the distance between her and two of the historic houses (namely, the Poldi Pezzoli and the Bagatti Valsecchi), the architect managed to do the same only with the Necchi Campiglio villa. Interestingly, a different result has characterized the findings related to the Boschi Di Stefano house museum, since both the experts were able to access the aesthetic experience only through progressive immersion. So, we will now move on to the presentation of the data above briefly introduced.

In order to clarify how experts engaged in more than one visit are able to feel the difference between a context stimulating an immediate immersion and another more difficult to get mentally and emotionally in touch with, it seems effective to propose some extracts taken from the report written by the arts graduate following the visit to the Necchi Campiglio villa. Before leaving space to this contribution, it is necessary to explain that the one at the Villa was the third of the visits undertaken. As a matter of fact, previously, the Bagatti Valsecchi and the Poldi Pezzoli had been visited.

*“Differently from what happened to me in the other two historic house museums, today at my entrance into the building I was not captured by that complex array of strong sensations which I felt the other times. At the beginning I thought this was due to my personal taste, more in tune with other kinds of setting. But while our tour within the house was proceeding I realized the real cause of my initial difficulty: I took just two exams about that historical period – the worst I have ever had to prepare – and, despite my degree, I must confess I do not know a lot about the Italian Novecento...
... After a while (to be sincere, we had already got to the second floor), I started imagining what the guide was describing. From that moment on, I could even see in front of me the three hosts and their servants animating that huge house...
... It was like living inside one of the old photographs displayed. I definitely got a marvellous tour within a picture!”*

The extracts proposed are really interesting because they succeed in explaining how immediate and progressive immersion differ in nature. As a matter of fact, the writer of the report could certainly be considered an expert as far as the Poldi Pezzoli and the Bagatti Valsecchi are concerned, whereas, as she explicitly affirms in her diary, she does not possess a comparable level of competence regarding the Necchi Campiglio kind of setting. Considering the profound differences shaping the identity of the four diverse houses, it is more than acceptable that the same individual could occupy both the role of the novice and that of the expert according to the specific house museum investigated. So, she has been able to sketch both the occurrences: on the one hand she has described what we could identify as the *immediate* type of immersion (in another passage referred to as something “*sudden*” and “*totalizing*”), whilst on the other hand she has told us about the *initial difficulty and gradual improvements* leading to the experience typical of *progressive* immersion.

The discussed contribution has allowed us to obtain a very relevant piece of information. As a matter of fact, it is quite rare to have the possibility to compare two different immersion modes as they have been experienced by the same person within two similar but highly differentiated contexts. However, it should be said that such an effective analysis has been written after the third visit, that is when the individual had already gained an appreciable level of familiarity with the explanation of her mental processes. Anyway, since it seems a quite complete piece of writing, it makes superfluous to insert any further contribution to cover our second point.

Operations leading to immersion

The third issue we have to address in this paragraph regards one of the most interesting elements of the immersion theory. As a matter of fact, we are going to explore the various internal operations of appropriation that individuals put in place when trying to access the historic house museum experience. Before starting presenting the emerged data, it seems necessary to remember that in the theoretical framework informing this work three major types of appropriation operations are present and that these are the nesting, the investigating, and the stamping one. Of course, the objective that is being pursued in this section is that of verifying whether and in which way the three occur within the peculiar context investigated. As clearly stated in a previous section of this work, particularly in the analysis of the three groups of appropriation operations extensive reference will be made to the research carried out by Carù and Cova²⁴ concerning immersion into musical experiences.

A. Nesting operations

As far as nesting operations are concerned, consistently with the theory of reference, we could relate them to the feelings and sensations linked to the search for points of anchorage. Sometimes, it has been observed that people translate their *search for anchors* into a real *search for “famous” objects* known for being part of the furnishing of a house. In particular, I found this happening frequently at the Poldi Pezzoli house, for sure the one possessing the major number of renowned art pieces among the four museums of the network. As an informant confessed during an interview taken at the end of his visit of the cited museum:

²⁴ Cf. Carù A., Cova B., *How to facilitate immersion in a consumption experience. Appropriation operations and service elements*, 2006.

“I immediately started looking for the masterpieces which I knew had to be found here. As I turned right, my eyes were captured by the marvellous fountain which I had noticed within the museum Internet site. I suddenly felt secure: I would have found what I wanted to see”.

Other times, visitors started their visit of the house conserving a quite *sceptic attitude*, and then **changed their mental state while moving** from a room to another. This was the most frequent case, as it could be easily detected by the facial expression of people. The same finding could be confirmed on the one hand by the dialogues heard while passing by groups of visitors and on the other one by the statements pronounced during many interviews. For example, these are the words of a person interviewed at the end of her visit to the Bagatti Valsecchi museum:

“It was when I got in the first bedroom that I managed to recognize the setting that I expected”.

As it is possible to deduce even from the previous contribution, usually people **do not enter a historic house museum by chance**. Engaging in conversation with a good number of visitors has allowed to see the initial supposition confirmed: differently from what happens for other museums (the most cited case for Milan has been that of Brera), it is quite difficult that people decide to visit a historic house without a minimal amount of background information about the host(s) and what can be found once entered. As a matter of fact, (with the exception of the Poldi Pezzoli), historic houses are still not enough famous to be part of the conventional routes proposed by editorial products suggesting sites to be visited when spending a few days in Milan. If on the one hand this is certainly a limitation (especially for the attraction of foreign tourists), on the other hand it allows to have an **audience generally better skilled** than the one that can be encountered in the majority of museums. From this, it follows that usually visitors enter a historic house with a quite defined image in mind related to the setting they will find themselves into. So, they are provided with a **set of potential anchors** that become effective once really met and recognized as familiar.

Often, the *referents* proposed by the guides both before and during visits were extremely useful for facilitating the nesting operations undertaken by individuals. In particular, guides insisted in the provision of quite general information at the very beginning of each tour. In this way, people could more easily leverage on that basic degree of contextual information which, as just said, they were generally provided with. Telling them about the *hosts' private life* and the **historical period** of reference helped individuals to fix in their minds their own points of anchorage. Conversely, during guided tours, they usually made people notice **specific objects they could be familiar with**. This strategy has turned to be particularly effective for elderly visitors, for whom the **“house” component** (versus the museum one) became predominant as soon as their attention was caught by pieces of furniture they were already familiar with. In the words of a woman visiting the Bagatti Valsecchi museum:

“Seeing that wooden cradle for babies, similar in all its features to an old one my family once possessed, made me immediately realize that I was inside a real house”.

On the contrary, the total **absence of personal points of anchorage** was an **obstacle** for some individuals visiting house museums on their own (meaning without a guide who could remedy to this deficiency). For instance, into the Boschi Di Stefano historic house museum, a middle-aged couple, made up of an art lover (the man) and a person totally untrained as far as twentieth century art is concerned (the woman) was noticed. They were visiting the museum on their own, just looking at the content sheets provided for each room. In those cards, they could find only the indication of title, author, year and technique of the art pieces. It is not that difficult to imagine that the woman was quite bored and continued repeating:

“I imagined I would have seen something different. You told me about a house but here I can see just an apartment full of paintings put one too close to the next”.

The case reported above was meant to demonstrate how important it is to be able to identify soon some personal anchors from which to start one's own adventure. As a matter of fact, in the absence of any competence or service element that could be helpful in finding a person's fixed points **it is not automatic that the immersion process could be initiated** even in the most secure, thematized and enclavized of contexts.

B. Investigating operations

When visitors successfully went through the nesting operations (as it usually was, with just a couple of exceptions – one being the episode reported above –), they started carrying out the so-called investigating operations. Within the context of historic houses, as all the research methods deployed have confirmed, investigating operations appear to be characterized by an *extension of one's own territory* both at a *cognitive* and at an *emotional* level. Furthermore, according to the specificities of the aesthetic experience studied, the ethnographic method of analysis has provided enough data to suggest another ground for advancement, which is *spatial familiarity*.

Before starting the exposure of findings supporting the existence of those internal dynamics labelled as investigating operations, it is worth while saying that this is the section for which *the highest level of consistency* among the information provided by the various informants has been registered. As a matter of fact, the enhancement in the felt proximity between the individual and the context has generally been possible thanks to the *supplementary information* provided by museum personnel. Of course, the primary facilitator of the advancement has usually been the *guide*, already identified as a really valuable actor within this kind of experience. As variously pointed out by many scholars studying the immersion process in different contexts, in fact, the guide (whose title changes according to the specific situation) often occupies a peculiar position, being the “element” that stands between the individuals and the context of reference. As far as historic house museums are concerned, the guide's main merit is that of providing visitors with the needed information and *the most suited referents* in a timely fashion. Quite intuitively, this is because guides materially *follow people* during their staying into the houses, so that they can choose exactly the words most appropriated with regard to the numerically reduced audience standing in front of her/him. As many people admitted, it was primarily thanks to the guide that they managed to *reduce the perceived distance* initially separating them and, for example, a sumptuous and suggestive environment. In order to better appreciate the basis of the whole discourse, two contributions are reported below:

“With his pleasant voice, he (the guide) accompanied me in that marvellous and incredible journey throughout this enchanted museum. All the objects surrounding me became almost animated, in the sense that I could perfectly see them as actively responding to the needs of a real house”.

“Once concentrated on his narration, I managed to let my mind free to be transported wherever he and my fantasy would have decided. This is how I found myself completely immersed into an ancient novel”.

As it has surely been noticed, in the second of the above proposed contributions the immersion concept is exposed in our words. That fragment has been considered particularly relevant because it perfectly addresses the issue of the ability of an experienced guide to *help visitors* during that delicate phase.

However, sometimes people decided to visit a museum alone, with the only support of a quite diffused technical device, the *audio guide*. In those cases, the provision of this kind of instrument could be effective, particularly if compared with a situation in which visitors lacking basic competences try to go through the house without any kind of support. Anyway, the findings of the study demonstrate that generally speaking human guides are the privileged facilitator, since they succeed in correctly supporting individuals in the very critical moment of their search for a certain kind of enhancement. Coming back to the audio guide, as it could be noticed from the analysis, this facility has been particularly appreciated by individuals visiting the Necchi Campiglio villa. A quite long fragment of an interview is proposed below with the aim of reporting how investigating operations are carried out in the mind of a visitor recurring to that support:

“It was due to the audio guide if I could appreciate features that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. The peculiarity of this device (this being also the characteristic that helped me more in letting me be completely conducted) is that its functioning is totally different from that of any other audio guide I had previously used. In other museums you usually walk until you stand in front of a certain art object, and then you have to read the number assigned to that piece, compose it, and finally you listen to the explanation. Here, instead, you press the start button and the audio guide begins conducting you across a couple of different rooms, speaking for various minutes without

any interruption. It even tells you to turn, let's say, left, and to look at the picture you find, for instance, at the right of the window on the wall in front of you. It's a revolutionary approach! It allows you to totally relax yourself and let your mind follow its instruction... While I was hearing that calm voice driving me throughout the house I found myself catapulted in a past era. It conducted me by the hand in my voyage of discovery!"

From this quite long extract, two main findings could be highlighted. On the one hand, audio guides could be helpful in providing people with that **information** needed to advance their knowledge, while on the other hand, in some cases, they could be effective even as far as the **emotional involvement** is concerned. In addition, thanks to the frequent use of adjectives and pronouns identifying **the individual as absolutely central**, the proposed excerpt stresses with relevance the "personal" feature, suggesting the shaping of **one's own unique experience**.

However, when introducing investigating operations, it has been said that, due to the specific nature of the experience, felt proximity with the context could be enhanced also from a further perspective. As a matter of fact, since the **physical movement** across the house constitutes a founding element for every visit, also the spatial dimension should be considered. Of course, the degree of familiarity with the space of reference could be assessed only thanks to the conducted ethnographic observations, because one's own relation with the environment is often something we do not have complete conscience of. So, looking at the way visitors moved within historic house museums, it could be noticed that at the beginning they were usually quite static, privileging the movement of the eyes over that of the entire body, and avoiding getting too close to the real things (these being paintings, statues, or even walls). Following this first phase, people used to follow more their **curiosity**, for example abandoning for a moment the group to better observe a certain object. It seemed that the highlighted path could be the symptom of a **search for an advancement** pertaining to the mental sphere. In this way, also the physical component has been inserted among the various dimensions (just as a reminder, the other two being the cognitive and the emotional one) defining the territory that an individual seeks to expand with investigating operations.

C. Stamping operations

When we consider the imaginative activity through which personal meaning is attributed to what has been lived through, we are dealing with the so-called stamping operations. Since in this phase individuals' own attitude, background and fantasy play the principal role in elaborating over service elements, the outcomes emerging from this analysis could potentially be the most diverse. In other words, when the moment of forming impressions related to the specific situation gone through arrives, every individual inevitably draws upon her/his subjectivity. Predictably, thanks to the multiple research methods deployed, a vast set of data has been collected witnessing the **extreme variety of personal interpretations** that could emerge. As it will become clear after the presentation of some contributions, as far as stamping operations are concerned, **service elements do not directly facilitate** the process of meaning attribution, but they are relegated to a quite marginal role, this being the mere support of a totally **imaginative activity** driven primarily by one's own background. This finding contrasts with what observed for the other operations of appropriation, where the impact of service elements (and, in particular, of the guide) assumes a higher relevance. As already anticipated, a selection of sentences reporting various impressions and meanings ascribed to the context is proposed:

"I leaved the historic house museum with the strong convincement that contemporary designers continue re-proposing something originated in the past".

"So gorgeous! And how great the collection! It reminded me of the glorious history of this nation... you could feel it!"

"I was quite surprised by the images this museum called back to my mind. It reminds me of my childhood".

"It was delightful to find out the treasures our ancestors collected here in Milan".

"I had never wandered that a piece of paradise could be found here!"

"Absolutely inspirational to my soul! It makes me think about our Lord and his extraordinary gift of talent to artists throughout history".

As the previous contributions confirm, impressions have usually been elicited by the environment in its more general definition. As a matter of fact, a huge number of comments inspired by the pervading and completely *thematized atmosphere* reigning within every historic house museum has been collected. Consistently, also the process of meaning attribution has seen the physical context as the sole element stimulating visitors' imagination.

Disturbing and facilitating elements

Although they had not been directly asked for suggestions regarding how to further facilitate their immersion process, sometimes visitors made explicit what they were disturbed by, thus making it possible to identify which kinds of occurrences potentially take them apart from the intense moments lived through. Other times they expressed their appreciation for some elements or features, which, in our words, help them accessing the artistic experience.

As far as the *“distracting” elements* are concerned, they could be grouped into two big categories. First of all, even if it could sound a little bit strange, in some cases people lamented the presence of some facilities that are usually meant to make them feel as comfortable as possible when visiting a museum. Here the reference is to chairs and other structures where it is possible to rest.

“I was totally absorbed into my fantasies when my eyes encountered those horrible plastic benches. They abruptly made me come back to reality. I was really annoyed by their presence”.

Predictably, *chairs* have been criticized because of their being made up of plastic and, so, *in sharp contrast with the overall setting*. Of course, this comment has been moved by visitors pertaining to guided tours, while among persons proceeding at their own pace no one has been heard complaining about the provision of chairs. At this point it seems useful to make a comparison between this complaint (“captured” both within Poldi Pezzoli and within Bagatti Valsecchi) and the manifested appreciation for the *old-style* (but, obviously, recently produced) *sofas* where visitors can sit which are present in the Boschi Di Stefano apartment.

“It is marvellous. You feel like you are going to take a tea with the hosts!”

As it could be noticed, the Necchi Campiglio villa has not been mentioned while dealing with the presence of chairs and benches. The reason is straightforward: this kind of facility is not provided by that historic house museum.

Another of the most frequently mentioned “disturbing” elements is represented by *labels and information panels*. As a matter of fact, visitors sometimes have described them as *too intrusive* and, thus, a potential *obstacle* for the emerging of the peculiar *domestic feature* that characterizes this museum category.

In contrast, individuals appreciate a lot the *lack of noise and crowds* inside these museums. Although it is quite intuitive that people visiting a museum enjoy it more if not too many other individuals are contemporarily present, this condition assumes far more relevance when dealing with historic houses. This happens because, as it has been various times highlighted, immersed people start *daydreaming*, managing to see in front of them a sort of movie representing domestic scenes. It is easy to understand that the presence of crowds could negatively affect this imaginative activity. So, in order to minimize this already identified risk, house museums tend to limit the number of groups visiting them in the same moment.

Findings and discussion

The most relevant among the findings presented in this section, together with their theoretical support and the related managerial implications, have been synthesized in the following table.

Finding	Managerial Implication
<i>Immersion as a succession of moments of intensity interrupted by falls in the level of attention</i>	Stimulating visitors: keeping them interested and involved through the provision of contents of interest. Moreover, inter-house referents regarding topics of interest could influence the choice of visiting a further house museum.

<i>More expert visitors report less interruptions and reduce sooner the distance with the context</i>	Organizing seminars and diffusing information in order to raise individuals' knowledge (again, suitability of inter-house synergies).
<i>At their arrival visitors look for physical anchors (such as famous objects)</i>	Diffusing information (e.g. through the Internet site) that could constitute a set of potential points of anchorage. Within the museum, providing also complementary mental anchors (see below for the role of referents).
<i>Guides are considered the most effective facilitator for the nesting and investigating phases: they accompany visitors and provide the necessary mediation</i>	Teaching guides how to shape contents and referents according to the specific people comprising the group (e.g. adapting to their age).
<i>Individuals conceive their visit as a journey of discovery</i>	Helping visitors in their exploration activities (again, role of guides).
<i>Audio guides appreciated when designed to conduct visitors rather than to provide punctual explanations (since they favor immersion)</i>	Transforming audio guides into an "accompanying device" (more similar to a human guide than to a "speaking panel") able to affect also the emotional sphere.
<i>Emotional factors prevail over cognitive ones in shaping visitors' impressions</i>	Avoiding providing excessive punctual contents (e.g. detailed characteristics of each object) during the visit, but favoring contextual information.
<i>General positive attitude towards the past emerged as recurring element (reported in meaning attribution)</i>	Emphasizing the time travelling dimension through ad-hoc narratives (especially during guided tours) and historical re-enactments.
Visitors choose historic house museums because they are authentic and thematized settings	Placing emphasis on the overall atmosphere, which represents the gate for immersion and the main input for the personal elaboration of impressions.
Visitors naturally quite linked to historic houses because of the "domestic" component	Linking the objects to their past everyday function through the use of a narrative reading key.
Individuals appreciate the sight of functioning objects since they add concreteness (and favor immersion)	Making people notice that precious objects are not just masterpieces, but functional pieces of furnishing (also distinguishing the museum offering).
Relevance of the physical dimension of investigation	Suitability of the introduction of further sources of corporeal stimulation. For instance, organization of special events during which tools for the sensorial stimulation are deployed (wider audience appeal).
Visitors usually daydream while visiting historic houses: they manage to see past hosts in front of them	Adding concreteness to their fantasies: on an event basis proposal of historical re-enactments (raising the figure of visitors).

It seems appropriate to suggest that historic houses try to benefit also from their being *part of a network*. As a matter of fact, collected data have shown that visitors eagerly look for complementary information concerning, for instance, hosts' private life and the related historical period. This quest could quite easily be not only met but also exceeded thanks to the presentation of the facts linking on the one hand the protagonists of the nineteenth century (Poldi Pezzoli and Bagatti Valsecchi) and on the other hand those of the twentieth century (Necchi Campiglio and Boschi Di Stefano). In fact, having inhabited the same city, it is obvious that individuals lived during the same period have been touched and influenced by the same events. Furthermore, it is quite probable that they could have got in touch with the same people.

The findings of the present research have shown that this is exactly the kind of *additional contextual information* that is appreciated by visitors because it allows them to penetrate into the context in an even more effective way, thus making *immersion* far more simple. However, it is necessary to underline that on the Internet site created for the network it is possible to find a section in which a short presentation of each house museum is offered together with some brief notes about the historical period of reference. These institution-specific cards have been written with the aim of making it easier for people visiting all the four historic houses to make comparisons among them, since a paragraph is devoted to the presentation of the people and their context. Anyway, it seems that the provision of such contents should not be limited to their publication within an Internet site. On the contrary, short *seminars* could be organized in order to provide prospective visitors with further points of *anchorage* that could result extremely useful for giving start to their immersion. Moreover, also during guided tours *inter-museum referents* could easily be proposed with the purpose of stimulating individuals' reflection and helping them with the *meaning attribution* phase. Finally, the use of inter-museum referents could instill in visitors' minds a certain degree of *curiosity*, which, in turn, could lead to a desire for a successive autonomous learning and, even more important for the management of the four institutions, could be extremely relevant as far as the decision to *visit* also the other historic house museums is concerned.