



**Case Study:  
Food, Drink,  
and Community  
Building in a  
Women's Museum**

**Holly Porteous**

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### Case Study: Food, Drink, and Community Building in a Women's Museum

#### ABSTRACT

This short case study discusses how museums can draw on hospitality practices to create an atmosphere of inclusivity and mutual support. In-depth research into a women's museum, archive, library, and community space has highlighted how food and drink has been used as part of feminist organisational practice to foster a sense of openness and welcome. Our case study organisation sought to empower a diverse community of women, and the symbolism of food and drink was integral to helping museum staff and volunteers to form strong connections with visitors and service users. Building a sense of community in this way is an invaluable way for cultural organisations such as museums, which can sometimes be seen as intimidating by those experiencing vulnerability, to connect with a broader range of people.

#### CV

Holly Porteous is based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. Her research focuses on how inequalities are produced and reproduced, particularly from a gender/feminist perspective. After finishing her PhD on gender in Russia (University of Glasgow, 2014), she worked on projects studying how migrants from former state socialist countries made themselves secure in Scotland. Her most recent project, Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability, looks at how service spaces have the potential to ameliorate vulnerability.

#### KEYWORDS

Food, Hospitality, Material Culture, Community

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## Introduction

This short case study of a women's<sup>1</sup> museum, archive, library, and community space shows how food and drink has been used as part of feminist organisational practice to foster a sense of welcome, inclusivity, and community in a museum environment. As an organisation which sought to empower a diverse community of women, and particularly those experiencing vulnerability, the symbolism of food and drink was integral to helping museum staff and volunteers to form strong connections with its visitors and service users.

## Food and Drink as Welcome

Some of our research participants who had little experience visiting museums and cultural spaces spoke about experiencing trepidation on engaging with our case-study organisation based on a feeling that museums, libraries, and other cultural spaces were somehow “not for them” (for example, due to literacy issues or migrant status). The museum used the powerful gesture of an outstretched cup of tea to create a sense of welcome for everybody coming into the space:

*“Just being offered a cup of tea is such a simple thing, but if you go in somewhere and you're immediately noticed and said hi to, and asked if*

## Background

Our two-year project, *Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability*<sup>2</sup>, explored why our case study organisation in the UK was a transformative space for many women and non-binary people. Methods included interviews with sixty-four staff/volunteers/serviceusers/networks; material from two arts-based workshops; analysis of the organisation's archives, website, and social media; and participant observation. Quotations used below are from women and non-binary people who held various (and often multiple) roles in the organisation, with boundaries between volunteer and service user often blurring.

<sup>1</sup> The museum space foregrounds women and nonbinary people's history and experiences. It is inclusive of all genders but holds some events which are only for women (inclusive of trans women) and nonbinary people.

<sup>2</sup> See Holly Porteous, Kathy Hamilton, Juliette Wilson, and Sarah Edwards, *Transformative Spaces: Final Report from the Project 'Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability'* (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.OO081812> (accessed 25 July 2023).

*you're all right, and offered a cup of tea. [...] You're made to feel welcome, and you're spoken to."*

(Alex, staff member and former volunteer/service user)

Being greeted and offered a hot drink by a friendly face as soon as you walk into the museum space is a small gesture, but our research found that our case study successfully used such small acts to facilitate deeper, long-lasting connections and have a transformative impact on the lives of service users.

## The Symbolism of Material Objects

Symbolic material objects linked to food and drink were also highlighted in our research as part of a process of connecting with the women's museum and its work. For example, a giant teapot used at group events was described as "quite an icon" by one participant. China teacups were also important for building community and for making people feel valued in the space as they felt "special":

*"They would feed back and say the cups are really special: getting to use that proper china is really special. And we had that all the time, any time there was a conference or an event, that they had the proper china. People rave about it."*

(Eve, community development worker)

These material objects often held nostalgic memories, especially for older museum users, of crockery only brought out on special occasions by a mother or an aunt. They were metaphors which helped to visually anchor the organisation's core goals around welcome, acceptance, and reclaiming women's history.

## Community Building through Food and Drink

Embedding food and drink-based practices also helped to create an informal museum environment where groups felt comfortable to engage with material culture during workshops and events.

*"For some people, being able to come along and have tea and something to eat is really, really important—from a social aspect but also, you know, for people who are living in food poverty, to be able to come and have that. And for people who are living on their own, to be able to share lunch with someone is really important. I think having that really helps create the atmosphere, and I think it helps people then relax and be able to enjoy [the space/event]." (Rebecca, staff member)*

Rebecca notes that these practices helped to address social issues such as food poverty or social isolation. They also helped service users relate to one another and facilitated an atmosphere of mutual support, even within museum events:

*"It's not a one-way support network, and quite often, as you know yourself, when you get a tea break and you all go into the kitchen and you're all blethering to each other is when the real magic happens, you know?"*

(Iris, service user)

*"Really, it was the cups of tea, like genuinely, because... [...] I felt like it was sort of a channel to talk to people and to get that kind of range of experience. And because it allowed a different kind of conversation to happen."*

(Poppy, service user/volunteer)

As Poppy observes, sharing a cup of tea with somebody helps to put people at ease and makes space for dialogue. It also created a useful time for staff/volunteers to offer individualised further support (for example, with literacy or English as a second language) where necessary.

Finally, the symbolism of food and drink also became important to maintaining the museum's connections with service users during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the physical space closed, people missed the convi-



Fig. 1: An illustration of research findings from the project by Jenny Capon

viality of in-person events, but spoke to how a sense of connection and community was maintained through food and drink. For example, care packages including teabags were posted to attendees of online events, and service users were invited to meet for lunch online via video call.

## Conclusion

This case study highlights the potential for museums and community spaces to use hospitality practices and the rich symbolism of food and drink to welcome visitors and service users, create an atmosphere of inclusivity and mutual support, and to encourage a sense of community in cultural organisations that can sometimes be seen as intimidating, especially by those experiencing vulnerability.

Although there is not scope here to fully explore the theoretical implications of the research findings, we note that feminist scholarship has understandably problematised hospitality practices<sup>3</sup>, which have been associated with traditional gender roles that relate normative femininity to work in the domestic sphere (and, by association, justify women's exclusion from the public sphere). Our case-study organisation reframed the traditional offering and sharing of food and drink as a feminist practice and a means of increasing social inclusion.



<sup>3</sup> Cf. Maurice Hamington, "Toward a theory of feminist hospitality", *Feminist Formations*, 22/1 (Spring 2010), 21-38.