



Source: Alfons Morales, Unsplash



ADVISORY
BOARD
for the ARTS

Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide

Navigating Museum Library Best Practices

September 2023

Research Methodology

Research Question

What are best practices and practical lessons from contemporary art museums that have created research hubs associated with their museum libraries?

To investigate this question, we conducted the following research:



Secondary research to gather:

- Academic research on museum libraries, on the relationship between libraries and their community, on library design and on collaborations



Interviews with 4 organizations

Our interviews covered the following topics:

- Identity and history of the library
- Integration within the wider institution, mission-wise
- Self-directed activities within the museum programming
- Collaborations and partnerships with other institutions, associations and event organizers operationally
- Space layout, design and furniture
- Recent renovations with a focus on users' preferences and accessibility
- Funding sources and budget constraints
- Staff composition and capabilities

Research Participants

Conducted interviews with:

EMΣT

National Museum of
Contemporary Art
(EMΣT)
Athens, Greece

BALTIC

Baltic Center for
Contemporary Art
Gateshead, UK


FUNDACIÓN
JUAN MARCH

Fundación Juan March
Madrid, Spain

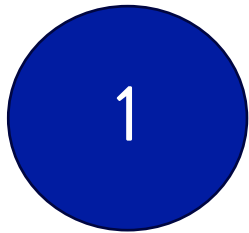
**MAC
BA**

Barcelona Museum of
Contemporary Art
(MACBA)
Barcelona, Spain

Key Takeaways

- The [museum's strategy](#) should define the library's strategy
- Libraries can play multiple roles in [supporting](#) the museum's mission - including supporting curatorial activities, archiving, knowledge creation and connecting with the community
- While being welcoming to all, the library should consciously decide who its [target audience](#) is which informs programming, public access rules, etc.
- Collaborations represent [significant opportunities](#), enabling the library to strengthen ties with the local community, gain international recognition, and maintain updated resources.
- The library's spaces must be comfortable, accessible, and adaptable over time. Incorporating [versatile areas](#) like family zones and meeting rooms can attract a broader range of visitors.
- To be successful, the library needs to be a [fully integrated](#) department in the museum's organization - not something separate
- As such, libraries do not generally [fundraise](#) independently (although they can be a focal point of giving)
- Budgets are generally set by the museum, but there is [no single way](#) in which this is done

Report Outline



Strategy
and Target
Audience



Partnerships



Design



Operations
and Staffing

The Museum's Strategy Should Define the Library's Strategy

The Art Museum's mission



The Library's strategy

Museum libraries supports the organization's mission through the various activities they do as archives, research hubs and community centers. These activities might be more organizational-oriented or public-oriented, but they always aim to create and disseminate knowledge.

Therefore, libraries work to fulfil a combination of the following objectives:

- Informing the museum's curatorial activities
- Preserving the museum's memory
- Facilitating the creation of knowledge
- Connecting with the community

The Library Can Play Multiple Roles in Supporting the Museum's Mission

Informing curatorial activities



Acquisitions

The main way in which libraries participate in the museum's mission is through acquisitions. Acquisitions are usually defined by the exhibition program **directly** – the curators select a list of volumes to be acquired – or **indirectly** – the librarians autonomously define the list.

Sometimes, current topics of interest to the public opinion (i.e., Climate change, Feminism, etc.) inform the librarians' choice and, consequently, the curators. In fact, the main function of the library within the museum organization is to provide food for thought to the curatorial team.

Developing a policy around acquisitions would avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, but also shape clearly the scope of the collection. This is especially true when considering if to accept or to refuse donations. However, donated books that do not fit completely the library's policy may still be an occasion to develop activities around the new topic.

Preserving the museum's memory



Archive

Libraries go together with archives, which are understood mainly as repositories for the material generated by the museum, such as catalogues and artists' documents, drafts and correspondence. Archives can also include donations from external benefactors.

Archives don't need to be disjointed from the museum's activities: Their materials can represent an **extension** to the museum objects and, therefore, be exhibited. For example, an exhibition within the library would attract new visitors to its spaces.

The Library Can Play Multiple Roles in Supporting the Museum's Mission

Facilitating the creation of knowledge



Research hub

Libraries that define themselves as research hub or study centers invest considerable amounts of resources towards creating relationships with universities as well as with the single researchers. Being a research hub entails offering a broad spectrum of *state-of-the-art* materials, but also *facilities* that encourage the researchers to come back.

Libraries are not static: “a library can slip out of date quite quickly if you don't keep up with the artists and the important publications and what's happening”
– Interviewee 1

Connecting with the community



Dedicated spaces

Disseminating culture also means to include users that are not specialized or have a professional interest towards the library's volumes. Museum and museum libraries that engage with the community create ad-hoc *spaces and programming*. However, the amount of attention the local community receives mostly depends on the museum administration's vision and goals for the library.

Not only the characteristics of the library and its activities define its role within the museum's environment and the scope of the collection, but they also determine the kind of users.

Case Example: Supporting the Museum's Strategy on Multiple Levels

BALTIC

The Baltic Center for Contemporary Art's vision states: "To deeply root inclusivity and diversity in all our practices, processes and actions so we may better reflect and support our local, national and international communities". This is how the library's strategy is aligned with the museum's:



Image courtesy of Baltic Center for Contemporary Art

- **Publishing:** The BALTIC organizes zine-making workshops and self-publishing workshops for artists. These allow unheard voices to make connections and spread their messages, while they allow the museum to reflect people's thoughts in an immediate way.
- **Diversifying the collection:** Acquisitions are carefully pondered as to fight the predominant white, western, male narrative. The library is trying to fill the gaps and propose a view of history that is truly diverse and representative.
- **Adapting the space:** The library currently offers support for people with disabilities, provided they are contacted in advance. However, as part of future renovations, the library is aiming to enhance accessibility throughout the space, enabling independent use. Specific improvements would be the redesign of shelf heights and the installation of automatic doors.

Case Example: Supporting the Museum's Strategy Through Data

Museum libraries are mostly interested in collecting quantitative data about visits and interactions, with the number of users being the most common metric. However, the use they make of these data is unclear or not particularly innovative. Contrarily to this trend, Fundación Juan March is promoting a data-driven culture within the organization and has established a Data Lab within the library department.

Typical Practice

- Collect user-related data (No. of users, No. of online visits to catalogue and archive, newsletter open-rate and click-through rate)
- Collect material-related data (No. of acquisitions, No. of loans, No. of consulted volumes)
- Unclear use of the data

Fundación Juan March's Data Lab's approach

- Oversees the management of the digital archive through activities such as digital preservation and it is responsible for parts of the website related to digital collections (photo archive, publications, etc.): to offer the users the substantial archive material accumulated and curated over the years
- Collect and analyze data on users' visits (physically and online): to gain deeper insights into user behavior and to enhance the decision-making process
- Provide librarians with a data-focused training (in collaboration with universities): to spread data-driven culture for libraries

While Being Welcoming to All, Libraries Determine Who Their ‘Target’ Audience Is

Museum libraries serves several communities, with the local researchers being their main target audience. Lately, diversifying the audience by expanding one’s programming and spaces is becoming more and more important to keep the library relevant.



Researchers are given full support from the libraries that identify as research hubs. They can often access archive material and “rent” a desk long-term.

MACBA offers a [Guest Researchers Programme](#) that include support to travel and reside in Barcelona



Students are offered individual seats as well as group meeting rooms. Collaborations with university enhance such relationships.

The BALTIC actively takes part in Northumbria University’s study programs. As a result, the library is integral part of the program offering.



When artists are a key target group, the collection contains volumes that go beyond the mere art – they also touch topics of social interest that can inform and inspire the artists. Tools for art-making can attract artists too.

The BALTIC has a risograph printer at the artists’ disposal



Families and kids are among the most targeted community group. The library often collaborates with the Education department to offer appropriate activities and might also have a dedicated meeting room or shelves section.

Both MACBA and Fundación Juan March have a dedicated space for kids



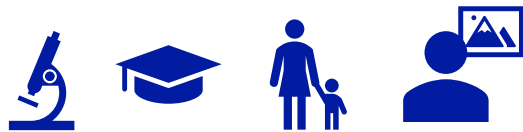
Museum visitors are usually attracted to the libraries if they want to expand their knowledge of the exhibited art. For this reason, libraries might disseminate book displays around the building or advertise clearly the dedicated section within the library spaces.

This Helps Determine Public Access Rules...

According to their main audience, the staff availability and the museum policy, the libraries we interviewed have different opening times.



The Baltic's library currently opens 5 days per week. The space is not staffed, but users can access it autonomously. In case they need help, they can contact the person responsible of the library. The books are tagged and there is a security system in place.



MACBA's library currently opens 4 days per week. Two librarians assist the users who are interested in using the reading room, meeting room or wants to consult volumes on-site. A further holding room is not accessible by the public.



Alongside the main research library, Fundación Juan March has created a small self-service public library between the garden and the café. Users can borrow and return books without assistance at both libraries.



EMST's library's main functions are to help other departments of the museum and to promote research. As such, the library is open on an appointment basis to students, researchers and experts. The aim is to open more publicly and to a more varied audience soon, as to promote contemporary art to the general public as well.

... and Programming Choices

In pursuit of the museum's mission and strategy, the library can engage in various specific activities which usually require a joint effort between the museum and its library. These library-centered events can fall into three distinct categories, and they are not mutually exclusive, allowing for potential combinations.

Heritage Activities

When libraries include the museum's archives, they often capitalize on the archival material that the museum has generated over time.

Generative Activities

These activities aim to create something new and include the participants in the act of creating.

An example is the BALTIC's Zine-making workshop, where artists collectively create a collective booklet that becomes part of the museum's zine collection



Image courtesy of Baltic+

Learning Activities

Learning activities are educational activities that make the library a dynamic learning hub. Examples are seminars, conferences and artists talks.

Fundación Juan March invites speakers for roundtables that offer the audience the possibility to engage in open discussions

The Collection Size Has a Small Impact on the Strategy

According to our data, the size of the collection has a limited impact on the strategy of the library. However, there are some areas that might be affected by the size of the collection.



Source: Emil Widlund, Unsplash

Area

Research

When deciding about the acquisition policies and the target audience, a bibliographic checking should be made. This is particularly true when the main target audience is researchers

Storage

Shelf space and storage options are crucial, especially if the library is planning to acquire books over time and if some of those books need specific conservative conditions

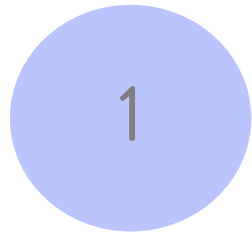
Questions to ask

Could this specific research be supported here?

Do we have enough space for future acquisitions?

Do we have an appropriate space where to store books that need special care (e.g., antique books)?

Report Outline



Strategy
and Target
Audience



Partnerships

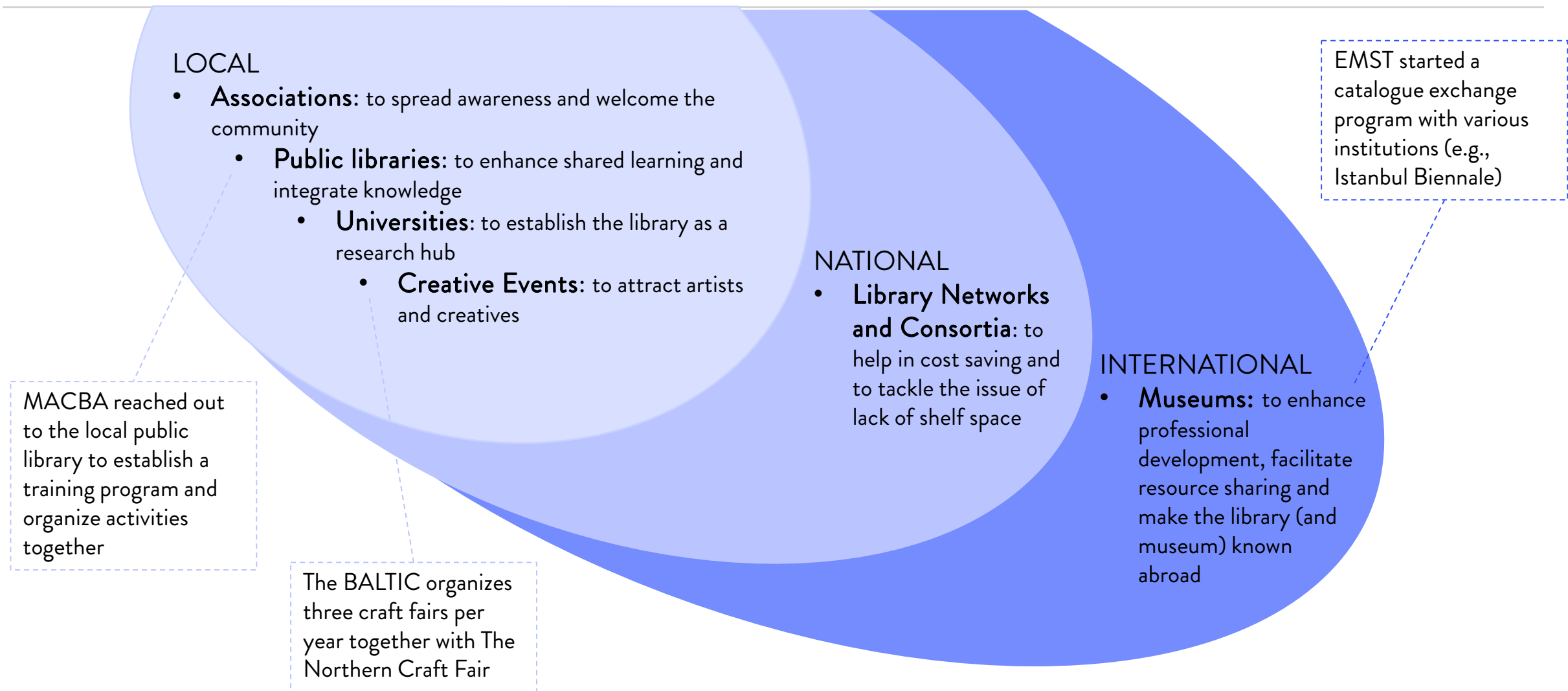


Design





Operations
and Staffing

Collaborations Represent a Significant Opportunity, Particularly at the Local Level



Best Practices Already Exist in Building Collaborations

- Use your personal connections as a librarian and researcher, but also the wider museum's network
- Contact cultural and artistic associations that could benefit from your spaces, materials and expertise
- Be open to suggestions: peer organizations and creatives might reach out to you
- Establish recurring events that could attract both visitors and partners (e.g., artists talks and workshops)
- Ask your audience: if you are planning to make a survey, include a question about what they would like to experience at your library

 **ADVICE** 
Prefer long-term partnerships to one-off projects: the higher effort, investment and risk will be outweighed by higher benefits

Report Outline



Strategy
and Target
Audience



Partnerships



Design



Operations
and Staffing

Comfort Is the Most Important Design Feature of the Library...



Image courtesy of MACBA

- **Open spaces:** open layouts contribute to fulfil the needs of light, air and comfort and allow to cut maintenance, security and housekeeping costs.
- **Transparency:** offers not only increased natural light but also the potential for interaction between the library and the main building. This interaction could potentially attract visitors to move between the two spaces.
- **Relax areas:** comfortable environment for relaxation, reading or casual conversations are appreciated by the users. These areas are characterized by soft, comfy seating options, coffee tables and decorations that enhance the soothing atmosphere.
- **Kids areas:** dedicated areas for kids or families are a must when the library offers a programming for this audience. Usually, the space is cozy and the furniture child-size and minimal, so that the young readers can play freely and safely. Several books for children should be displayed and easy to access.

... Followed Closely by an Effortless Experience

- **Reachable shelves:** shelves that are reachable without the use of ladders are safer and easier to browse.
- **Simple cataloguing:** labels and books dispositions should facilitate the user in their research, too. Libraries catalogue their collections by main topics and sub-topics.
- **Thorough search system:** the search system should be easy to use but also efficient. Attaching several keywords to a volume makes it more usable and findable because it can be connected to similar volumes. If you feel that your search system is too complex, consider providing an instruction manual.

“There’s no point in taking on a book and putting it on shelf if people can’t access what’s inside it, or at least have a reason to find it in your library” – Interviewee 1



Image courtesy of EMST

Library Spaces Are Alive and in Need of Constant Transformation

Most museum libraries are included in the original museum plans, but they inevitably end up facing challenges that are directly related to the layout and utilization of their space. While some issues can be preventively avoided, some others need creative solutions.

Issue

Running out of space

The building of the library is often part of the original project for the museum. However, due to the characteristics of the building itself or the planners' short sight, the library can run out of shelf space pretty quickly.

New ways of using the space

Different generations use the library differently. If in the past the library used to be a study place where to find quietness and focus, now the trend is to use it to have group meetings and discuss.

Prevention

Estimating the number of acquisitions long-term can help in calculating how fast the available space will be filled up and, therefore, when new spaces will be needed.

Designing multifunctional spaces will facilitate seamless changes in their utilization.

Solution

If preventive estimations are not possible, one should consider moving some volumes to less accessible spaces or retiring them (scholars have created evaluation methods to define which books should be retired).

Modular and prefabricated booths create enclosed spaces within the larger library rooms and guarantee privacy to those inside as well as silence to those outside.

“I think it’s very important to know really the holdings that you want from the beginning. If you want your library to be very specialized or in the contemporary art in general, if you want to grow a lot etc. I told them I wanted X meters, which would be enough for 25 years, but I was told I only had Y, which was enough for 10 years. So, if I wanted to design the growth of the collection for 25 years, it would have not been possible” – Interviewee 2

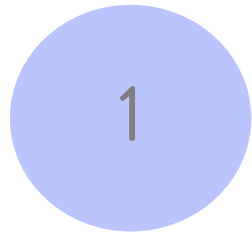


Image courtesy of MACBA

Image courtesy of Fundación Juan March



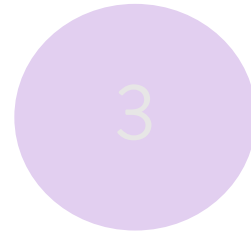
Report Outline



Strategy
and Target
Audience



Partnerships



Design



Operations
and Staffing

The Library Needs to Be Fully Integrated in the Museum's Organization

For the library to be a successful venture, it must be perceived as equal to other departments, its staff must be involved in strategic meetings and there must be clear communication.

- 1 Previous academic research, as well as this study, stress the importance of the perception of the museum library within the organization. It is a key factor that the library is perceived as an **integral part** of the museum, peer to other departments.
- 2 If a misalignment in perception occurs, communication issues may arise which could lead to **inefficiencies and poor service**.
- 3 Involving the head of the library in strategic meetings serves two purposes: first, it ensures that the department is **perceived** as equally important as others; and second, it keeps the department **informed** about the institution's ongoing activities.

Regular check-ins with the Curatorial and Educational departments are also advisable as to **develop a common direction** and align the various branches of the museum.

“Make sure that the person who is running the library and is buying for the library is involved in the program of the library, in those programming meetings around the table of curators so that you are always involved in what's happening. And [the exhibition programme] will inform what you're buying, and this will kind of ultimately keep those the exhibition spaces more connected with the library. And ultimately, that makes the collection stronger and makes it more relevant for it to be existing in the same space” – Interviewee 1

The Library is Not Independent in Fundraising

Libraries might attract collection donations or one-time refurbishing donations, but they do not generate income or attract donors on a regular basis. Their funds come from the main organization's which, in their turn, depend on the organizational type (e.g., governmental, private foundation, etc.). Similarly, the library's activities do not generate income which, instead, come from other departments within the museum (e.g., parking, cafeteria, bookshop, etc.). However, in collaboration with the main institution, libraries can adopt various fundraising strategies.



Establishing collaborative partnerships with the main organization to **target specific funds** and grants



Starting a **corporate and foundation giving program** to collect funds and enhance the reputation



Creating a **Planned Giving** program for private citizens



Charging **research fee** or membership dues to help maintain the space and the collection



Launching a **publishing venture** that align with the mission of the organization

The Mission - And Available Budget Determine - The Size and Makeup of the Library Staff

Considerations on staff highly depends on the budget allocated by the main institution. The organizations we interviewed go from 1 to 7 people dedicated to the library and archives. Here are the two most interesting conclusions about staff we have drawn from our conversations.



If your budget doesn't allow to hire enough full-time professionals, consider launching internship programs in partnerships with universities.

Alternatively, consider making the library self-service or open by appointment only.



The library's mission should inform the profile of the librarians. If your sole focus is research, you might recruit cataloguers only; but if you plan to organize activities within the community, you need someone who can collaborate and communicate efficiently with other departments and external partners.

Library Budgets Are Generally Set by the Museum, but There Is No Single Way in Which This Is Done

Three are the approaches to budgeting that emerged from our interviews. In most cases, the budget is allocated by the main institution while the library staff do not participate in the decision.

No Set Budget

There isn't a set yearly budget. The money allocated for expenses are defined by the museum's needs and activities during the ongoing fiscal year. While the allocation for acquisitions and the list of items to be acquired are subject to the administration's approval.

EMST

This policy is seen by EMST's library staff as an important issue since they always need to negotiate with the administration the expense items. When applied, new regulations about the library having its own budget will help to build a more systematic programme of acquisitions and will help to strengthen the collection.

One Budget Category

The allocated yearly budget is not divided into categories. It is responsibility of the library staff to allocate it wisely.



At Fundación Juan March, the yearly budget is divided between the library and the Data Lab because of the expensive shared technological setup.

Two Budget Categories

The yearly budget is divided into budget for acquisitions and budget for expenses, with the former being usually higher than the latter.

BALTIC



While the staff at MACBA is more concerned with the amount for expenses, the staff at the BALTIC highlight the fact that the library material must be always up to date.



Pilar Cárdenas
Managing Director
pilar.cardenas@advisoryarts.com

Steve Sacks
President, ABA Europe
steve.sacks@advisoryarts.com

Clara Zampedri
Research Analyst
clara.zampedri@advisoryarts.com

APPENDIX

- Organizations Profile

Appendix – Organizations Profile

| | National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) | Baltic Center for Contemporary Art |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Opening | 2000 | 2003 |
| Renovation | 2014-2020 | 2015 |
| Collection Size | 10.000 books 50 periodicals 10 prints subscriptions in German | 14.000 books 5.000 periodicals |
| Collection Topics | Contemporary Art; Museology; Art-related fields (for interdisciplinary approach) | Contemporary Art; visual culture; current topics of interest |
| Funding | Government; (one big donation from Niarchos for reopening) | Art Council UK; City council; Northumbria University |
| Budget | No yearly budget | Acquisitions: £4000 Equipment: £500 |
| Staff | 4 FT | 0.25 FT + casual help |

Appendix – Organizations Profile



Fundación Juan March

Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA)

| | | |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Opening | 1955 | 1995 |
| Renovation | 2018 | 2007 |
| Collection Size | 250.000 volumes | 95.000 publications 27.500 files |
| Collection Topics | Music, theater, art and curatorial studies; Magic collection; Julio Cortazar collection | Contemporary art (specifically Catalan art after '60s); Activism, artistic, decolonial, trans-feminist, anti-racist practices. |
| Funding | Banca March | Spanish State; Catalonian Government; City council; MACBA own income |
| Budget | € 100.000 | Acquisitions: € 40.000ca Expenses: € 37.000ca |
| Staff | 7 FT | 6 FT (currently 5) |