

Valentina Perciavalle

Education Sciences Department, University of Catania

valentinaperciavalle@unict.it

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ABSTRACT

This article was born from a reflection conducted as part of the Piaceri project, called Visinmusa, of which the writer is the local contact person for the input and intent is to carry out a reconnaissance of the key concepts of the issues that arise when investigating the field of study of goods of cultural interest and the possibility of their universal enjoyment. In doing so, it places the theoretical orientation of Universal Design within an inclusive framework. The possibility of overcoming architectural barriers is often understood only as an obligation deriving from a legal provision, and the resulting structural interventions very often seem partial and not very functional for the diverse needs of users. It is therefore not enough to simply guarantee the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Italian Constitution, but it is equally important to verify that visitors can actually access and enjoy what is provided for in these rights, making the artistic experience of disabled users meaningful and qualitatively better.

Il presente articolo nasce da una riflessione condotta nell'ambito del Progetto Piaceri, denominato VISINMUSA, di cui la scrivente è il Referente locale per il DISFOR e l'intento è quello di effettuare una ricognizione, in merito ai concetti-chiave delle tematiche che si rilevano quando si approfondisce l'ambito di studio dei beni di interesse culturale e della possibilità di fruirne a 360 gradi, inquadrando l'orientamento teorico dell'Universal Design, in una cornice inclusiva. L'opportunità di superare le barriere architettoniche è sovente intesa meramente come un dovere derivante da un dispositivo normativo e gli interventi strutturali che ne conseguono sembrano, molto spesso, parziali e poco funzionali alle variegate esigenze dei fruitori. Non basta, dunque, soltanto garantire diritti alle persone, come sancito dalla Costituzione italiana, ma è parimenti importante, verificare che i visitatori possano effettivamente accedere e fruire di quanto è contemplato nei medesimi diritti, rendendo l'esperienza artistica dei fruitori con disabilità, pregnante e qualitativamente migliore.

KEYWORDS

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accessibility, universal design, inclusion, disabilities, cultural heritage

Italiano

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Introduction

From the research conducted within the Visinmusa project, financed by the University of Catania, we wanted to reflect, first, on the state of the art of the main Italian cultural heritage and, then, on the opportunities related to them, for visitors (Mulè, 2023), reaching the conclusion that In order to outline the state of the art of the most important Italian cultural heritage sites and the opportunities they offer to visitors, it is necessary to rethink two central themes: the first is accessibility and the second, no less important, is use. Accessibility makes it possible to actively involve disabled and non-disabled visitors in our cultural heritage, enhancing the characteristics of each person, promoting care and a sense of belonging to the artistic and cultural heritage of our country.

The use is designed as the best way to promote a harmonious development of the cultural, artistic, and personal dimension of each visitor. It guarantees a real participation of people with disabilities in the main sites of the Italian cultural and artistic heritage.

These sites should therefore be contexts of encounter with the other, open to the particular normality, personal maturation and development of citizenship skills, capable of welcoming in an inclusive way every type of visitor, disabled or not. It is therefore essential to rethink the accessibility, for all and for everyone, of every cultural and artistic heritage and, consequently, of the places in which they are located (Regione Veneto, 2011). People with disabilities, whether sensory, intellectual, or motor, also have the right to be enriched by the artistic and cultural splendour of our heritage. It is equally important to promote active participation on a large scale. This is an essential starting point for inclusive horizons and traces of self-awareness in encounters with others.

It is equally important to promote active participation on a large scale. This is an essential starting point for inclusive horizons and traces of self-awareness in the encounter with the other.

1. Sites of interest accessibility and serviceability

The aim of this article is therefore to carry out a synthetic analysis of the literature in the sector, on the fundamental cornerstones of the issues relating to the functional characteristics of the artistic and cultural sites of our country and the

usability and accessibility of the same, which must also be guaranteed to visitors with special needs, from an inclusive perspective.

The central importance of the assumption of people with disabilities, which, on the basis of the assertions of the *International Classification of Disability and Health* (ICF, 2001) developed by the *World Health Organization*, places the person at the centre of the issue, that is, disability is no longer seen as a disease, but as a product of internal factors, but also external to the individual, such as environmental and social factors, and contextual responses that the community provides inadequately to people with disabilities (Galesso, 2006). The ICF approach promotes a greater sense of responsibility on the part of museum or cultural heritage managers and combines a vision of places and services that are accessible and usable, to be designed in a bio-psycho-social and multidimensional perspective. This new vision of the assets of interest, accessible and usable by everyone and everyone, and the need to shape and update the opera continuously and permanently museum rates, finds concrete application in the so-called universal design (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, 2018). The design of an accessible and usable site of cultural and artistic interest is undoubtedly of central importance to guarantee the participation of visitors with disabilities. The possibility for everyone to visit the sites of our cultural heritage would be tantamount to making every environment hospitable and welcoming, breaking down architectural and cultural barriers and promoting full and functional use. If accessibility is an essential link to assert the rights of all and everyone, it becomes fundamental to extend the social model of disability to formulate a social model of accessibility. Therefore, if accessibility is a means to promote and support the implementation and respect of human rights, then access is a key objective to be safeguarded by the competent bodies to ensure accessibility and shared participation in full respect of the rights of each person. The lack of accessibility is therefore due to a lack of the whole of society, which wants to fulfil its duty to guarantee the accessibility and usability of places, goods and services, which are fundamental for the life and the experience of existential and functional well-being of each person (Greco, 2017).

The 21st century is characterised by a profound transformation that is still in progress and that is shaping today's society. Accessibility and usability concern and involve different contexts and knowledge, such as pedagogy, psychology, architecture, jurisprudence, sociology, museology, and many others.

This transformation of places and services into an inclusive perspective has been a real revolution aimed at change, or rather renewal. It has promoted a new vision, methodologies and models aimed at making goods truly accessible and usable, and

at analysing the social dynamics underlying this phenomenon to design a renewed society (Black, 2012). It is an influential change, the genesis of which can be traced back to the social movements that, since the 1960s, have been central actors in a process that, in the United States of America, has promoted the resolution and strengthening of the concept of "disability rights". The Acme of this process was the approval in 1990 of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (Ada, 1990); In Britain, a first phase of critique of ADA and a later phase of absolute rejection of medical model of disability led to a social model of disability (Hasler, 1993; Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). A process that culminated in 2006 with the adoption by the UN of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, in which accessibility occupies a central place and is outlined as a fundamental cornerstone of the same instrument. Among the results of this process, it is certainly noteworthy that it has led the international debate on the broad concept of accessibility in a dominant way. Culture is only one of the many contexts in which accessibility is in decline, but among all of them it is perhaps one of the most crucial, for at least two reasons: the centrality that culture and art cover in the growth of individuals and society, and the advanced state of development that accessibility has reached in the cultural fields (Greco, 2017).

The United Kingdom was characterized by an aspra criticism, in a first phase and the absolute rejection subsequently, of the medical model of disability, which led to the conception of the social model of disability (Hasler, 1993; Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). A process that saw its peak in 2006, in the approval of the *Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities by the UN*; In this regulatory device, accessibility occupies a central place and is outlined as a founding cornerstone of the same device. Among the results of this trial, it was certainly noteworthy of having brought the international debate on the wide *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognises that culture and art are among the goods necessary for a quality life. It is therefore important to outline what constitutes a tangible barrier to full and free participation by all visitors, including those with special needs. An architectural barrier is "any structural element that prevents, limits or makes difficult the movement or use of services, especially for people with limited motor skills". This obstacle reduces or prevents people with disabilities from accessing a place or benefiting from a service, and consequently from exercising the individual right to accessibility. This right is recognised by the *United Nations General Assembly* (2006) and sanctioned by the Italian Constitution. In a more detailed way, the *Decree of the President of the Republic n. 503* (DPR, 1996), specifies in 2 points.

"By architectural barriers we mean:

- 1. Physical obstacles that are a source of discomfort for the mobility of everyone, and in particular for those who, for whatever reason, have a reduction in motor capacity or a permanent or temporary disability;*
- 2. The obstacles that limit or prevent the easy and safe use of spaces, equipment or components by anyone;*
- 3. The lack of precautions and reports that allow. For everyone, and especially for the blind, the visually impaired and the deaf, to orient themselves and identify places and sources of danger. "*

The elimination or reduction of architectural barriers is often interpreted as a regulatory duty. The resulting structural interventions are often partial and not very functional, and do not seem to meet the specific needs of many visitors. In fact, it is precisely because of these architectural barriers that many visitors to sites of cultural interest in the past, but also in the present, are confronted with limits and boundaries. They often find that the only solution is to build ramps to replace stairs and toilets specially designed for the disabled.

These structural aids tend to promote a stereotypical representation of the person with a difficulty, bringing it back to a person in a wheelchair or with a motor disability. The disabled person can be any person, from childhood to adulthood, who has temporary or permanent functional limitations in the area of movement (wheelchair users, cardiopaths, pregnant women or pram users, convalescents, obese people, etc.) or in the area of sensory perception (blind and partially sighted people, etc.) or sensory (blind and visually impaired, deaf and hard of hearing), as well as people with intellectual disabilities or mental disorders. Therefore, it cannot be considered sufficient to limit oneself to guaranteeing the rights of members, as sanctioned by the Italian Constitution, but it is absolutely necessary also ensure that individuals can genuinely and fully enjoy all that these rights protect.

The subject of identifying what can be specifically defined by the term architectural barrier is therefore much broader and more complex than it might seem at first sight. It includes, among the most varied elements, those that can cause perceptual, physical, or specific limitations: the shapes of objects and the structuring of environments that can cause disorientation, fatigue or even danger to the person with special needs. Architectural barriers can therefore be considered not only scales or narrow corridors, but also slippery floors or poorly maintained paths, stairs without handrails to support oneself, ramps with a high gradient or too impervious, waiting rooms without meeting points or shelter from rain or snow; in the open air, the billboard containing the information is positioned too high or too

low, or the lack of signs to help orientation in places of interest or to identify sources of danger.

2. A cultural heritage that is designed for all and for everyone

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006), the *key principles for the promotion of quality in inclusive education* (EU, 2009) have noted the importance of inclusive education as a carrier of educational horizons, promoting a high quality teaching e Therefore inclusive for learners of all orders and degrees. It is therefore acknowledged that active participation in the relational sphere is a central human right, which notes the primary need to review the concepts of accessibility and use of cultural heritage sites, in an inclusive key. For some time now, a significant trend towards increasingly culturally diverse and multilingual businesses has been noted in the data obtained from surveys of the Italian and European populations (Santerini, 2001; Annino, 2013). Consequently, societies characterised by limitations in the accessibility and use of goods, due to linguistic and communication difficulties of a numerically relevant and increasing part of the aforementioned societies (Annino, 2022).

Alternatively, think of the difficulties of enjoying content and communication, people with sensory disabilities of the auditory type. In order to create truly inclusive cultural and artistic contexts for everyone, it is not enough for a local authority to break down architectural barriers, but it must also be able to overcome those related to linguistic differences and communication limitations. A similar curvature can be applied to the field of cultural and artistic heritage (Roberts, 1989). There is an urgent need for deaf and hard of hearing people to be able to take full advantage of all services. This is precisely because the elimination of architectural barriers is not enough to guarantee the usability of cultural heritage, but only accessibility for people with physical and motor disabilities. In the case of people with compromised communication, it becomes essential that the local authority has specially designed services and aids to allow different ways of communicating, informing and using the asset, such as subtitles or the presence of Sign Language interpreters (Greco, 2017).

Devices and assistive technologies also concern the blind and visually impaired. For these categories of disabled people, it is proposed to enlarge the captions and translate them into Braille, audio-descriptions, tactile reproductions of

monuments, which are currently available in some, but not all, Italian heritage sites. The guidelines of the "*European Standards for Making Information Easy to Read and Understand*" (Inclusion Europe, 2021) are often used to simplify digital and analogue content. The aim is to improve the quality of textual use in museums or other places. It is essential to deepen the level of accessibility of a place, according to the *World Health Organization's World Report on Disability* (WHO, 2011). It is a crucial aspect because it highlights how the dichotomous terminology of accessible/non-accessible is only superficially different. Defining an accessible context or presentation is a simplification. It would be entirely appropriate to clarify 'for which categories of people' and 'to what extent' can be defined as accessible. It would return a duty of truth to express ourselves in terms of partial or gradual accessibility. To say: "An Italian film with Italian subtitles is accessible" is partial and reductive. It can be considered accessible for a group of viewers with special needs (the third and fourth age population and, to some extent, deaf users), but it can certainly not be considered accessible for a different group of users (the blind and visually impaired, for whom it is important that the film be supported by audio description in order to guarantee accessibility). The element of gradualism is fundamental because it shows that the concept of accessibility is a process of continuous evolution, but also one of change, improvement and innovation (Bandelli et al., 2009). It is a journey in which we are essentially pursuing the goal of complete accessibility of spaces and goods for everyone. Only by moving in this direction can we think concretely about planning a truly inclusive society (Greco, 2017).

The inclusive innovations that characterise this transformation of spaces, tools and materials are in line with the principles of *Universal Design* (U.D.) (Mace, R.L., et al., 1998). The programmatic aim is to include all types of disability. The architect Ronald L. Mace (1941-1998) can be regarded as the founding father of U.D. He was paraplegic as a result of polio. He was a major designer and founder of the *Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University* in 1989. Mace conceived both the name of this Universal Design and the seven cornerstones that guide U.D. Mace developed the U.D. in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team of architects, designers, engineers and researchers specializing in the design of spaces and contexts. Mace conceives the U.D. as a design of spaces, tools and aids that are important for all people, but indispensable for some. This innovative design does not provide for special adaptations or tools, as it is already designed to be accessible to all users. In any case, Mace does not exclude from its innovative design the possibility of providing aids for the specific needs of users with disabilities, if indispensable. For Mace, therefore, U.D. is not a theoretical orientation aimed at

designing aids specifically for visitors with disabilities, but rather a trend of studies aimed at creating aids and services that can be used by the greatest number of people.

3. Principles of Universal Design for an inclusive society

Sheryl Burgstahler (2015), in *DO-IT Programs and Resources*, cites a team of architects, product designers, engineers, and environmental design scholars, which has conceived universal design cornerstones to create an inclusive vademecum for designing contexts and services. The principles identified by the research team can also be applied to Italian art and cultural sites.

U.D. promotes the inclusive revolution of spaces and goods through seven guidelines:

1. *Equitable use*. The design is useful and marketable for people with different abilities. EXAMPLE: A makerspace that has equipment and furnishings that can be used by students with a wide range of characteristics, including disabilities.
2. *Flexibility of use*. The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. EXAMPLE: A design that allows a museum visitor to choose to read or listen to the description of the contents of display cases.
3. *Easy and intuitive to use*. The use of the design is easy to understand regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills or current level of concentration. EXAMPLE: 3-D selection printer that is easy to use and includes clear instructions.
4. *Noticeable Information*. The design communicates necessary information effects to the user, regardless of environmental conditions or the user's sensory abilities. Example: dormitory: An emergency alarm system with visual, auditory and kinaesthetic features.
5. *Error tolerance*. The design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintentional actions. EXAMPLE: Software controls that provide guidance if the student makes an inappropriate selection.
6. *Low physical effort*. The design can be used efficiently and comfortably with a minimum of fatigue. Example: Doors with sensors that open automatically for everyone.
7. *Size and space for landing and for use*. Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of the user's height, posture or mobility. Example: A work area in a science laboratory that can be used by

students who are right-handed or left-handed and who have a wide range of physical characteristics.

Italy has been the protagonist of numerous workshops on *Universal Design Week* (2020) to raise awareness of the theme of universal design in an inclusive perspective. Most of the interventions concern projects aimed at the elimination of architectural barriers, the promotion of full usability and the guarantee of necessary safety standards, such as evacuation plans for users with physical or motor disabilities.

In order to facilitate the identification of the reception, with specialised operators, on the sites of the cultural heritage, appropriate measures are conceived to encourage the insertion of tactile devices, video panels with information provided both in Italian of signs and with subtitles or audiodescriptions. Cionondimeno, design or choice of simplified texts, it cannot be defined as "easy" and empirical research becomes essential to conceive and evaluate the adequacy of the contents and the usability of the same for disabled visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 1993). This central question becomes particularly important in the case of users with intellectual disabilities or blindness, who should therefore be personally involved and directly involved in the design phase (Van Dergeest and Velleman, 2014; Mastrogiuseppe et al., 2021). As argued by *Marilina Mastrogiuseppe and collaborators* (2021), the direct involvement of people with disabilities could allow them to gain a full understanding of the barriers and facilitators that can be highlighted in the use of textual content, with the aim of designing different ways of presenting the content in a simple and intuitive way, thus making the places of interest more inclusive.

Conclusions

The need to preserve and protect the historical quality of sites and objects must be reconciled with the need to increase the number of visitors and make museums, churches, libraries, archives, gardens and other places of interest fully usable and accessible in order to enhance, promote and disseminate the art, culture and beauty of Italian heritage. What has been said finds confirmation in national and international laws and legal instruments that aim to guarantee the implementation of the right of everyone to have access to cultural heritage, as sanctioned in *art. 12 of the Faro Convention* (Council of Europe, 2005). This Convention stresses the paramount importance of "promoting actions to improve access to cultural heritage, in particular for young people and disadvantaged people, in order to

increase awareness of its value, the need to preserve and conserve it and the benefits that can be derived from it".

The elimination of the barriers of our cultural heritage should not be interpreted as miraculously designed for users with disabilities, but to be accessible and usable by any type of visitor. It is based on this assumption that the social community moves to understand and fully promote the need for change and awareness in the construction of new sites and the modification of existing ones from an inclusive perspective. To this end, it may be useful to draw up a list of priorities for the planning of interventions, considering the economic resources available, and with a view to short and long-term programming. It is therefore necessary for all the actors to have a common understanding of some of the key points laid down by international and national legislation.

The *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF, 2001) for this purpose changes the visions of the previous interpretative models of disability, no longer considering the disabled person "sick", but characterised by a set of environmental, physical, and social factors that contribute to the configuration of his adaptive functioning and, consequently, his level and degree of disability.

A greater sense of responsibility on the part of territorial authorities is required by the awareness of the need to carry out an inclusive transformation of spaces, goods, and services. In conclusion, a design of spaces and goods that is accessible and usable by all and everyone must be understood from a conceptual point of view, in its amplitude and multi-dimensionality, considering fundamental parameters for this purpose, such as mobility, orientation, ease of use, autonomy and others essential for a truly inclusive design. These parameters, to be validly implemented, require the application of the theories of universal design and the permanent training of museum operators, essential to ensure the adequate analysis of the issues related to the renewal of spaces and goods in an inclusive perspective (Ministry of Cultural Assets and Activities, 2018).

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