OCHRONA DZIEDZICTWA KULTUROWEGO

AUTHENTICITY AND INTERPRETATION FOR PERSONAL APPROPRIATION OF HERITAGE IN MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT This chapter discusses theoretical approaches to accessibility, and transitions to the broader topic of inclusion, specifically referring to museums. The contribution stresses knowledge about audiences, which is necessary to foster inclusivity and overcome "dedicated" mediation tools and activities, aiming at (re)conquering disaffected and unused publics. It also identifies certain misunderstandings, e.g. regarding "cultural accessibility" and "persons with difficulties."

This chapter underlines the following constraints and opportunities in access to culture: authenticity and interpretation; interpretation as a hermeneutic circle involving different configurations of the sender-receiver-context triad; importance of the spatial context of communication as the first element in interpretation or mediation; accessibility to cultural contents (importance of the physical, social and economic context; the role of cognitive processes; the importance of the individual's cultural background; emotional involvement; and finally, references to recent neurophysiological research conducted by the authors.

In this contribution, authors argue cultural accessibility to be a self-appropriation process, both intellectual and emotional: predominantly individual but closely interconnected with relational processes. Cultural appropriation intended in this way has nothing to do with political and social claims but should rather constitute the ultimate goal of heritage communication.

Finally, the chapter highlights possible perspectives that require dedicated professional paths, updated composition of staff (the figure of architects-museographers as a permanent presence, since communication cannot be separated from the space in which it takes place); and new good practices.

1. Introduction: access and accessibility to CH

Over time, the public has lost sight of the historical and cultural values of Cultural Heritage, which is no longer considered a resource. One of the reasons why Cultural Heritage has lost its appeal is that it often does not appear accessible to all. Although this discussion might seem obvious, our first question is: What does access and accessibility to Cultural Heritage mean?

Analysis of Charters and Declarations reveals a complex picture. The difference between access and accessibility is a long-standing question. Actually, the two are not synonymous. While access implies that one simply can go near Cultural Heritage, accessibility implies that one can encounter Cultural Heritage and partake in its meaning. Moreover, the situation is further complicated if we consider introducing the third term: participation. It approaches accessibility as an individual, subjective and active experience.

Enshrined in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights[1], the recognition that everyone has the right to participate freely in cultural life has been adopted and expressed in different forms: from facilitating access in the 1954 European Cultural Convention[2] to promoting actions that improve access to cultural heritage in the 2005 Faro Convention.[3] Emphasis on participation is placed in documents such as the Amsterdam Charter[4] and the Burra Charter[5], which emphasise participation and inclusion. In addition, in 1960 UNESCO introduced the concept of accessibility along with recommendations regarding the most effective means of making museums accessible to all, "regardless of economic or social status."[6] However, accessibility has been soon associated exclusively with disability, being at the heart of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Accessibility for people who do not usually visit museums was again asserted and clarified in 2015, with focus on the role that museum collections play in society and the importance of promotional activities.[7] The primary role of displaying and, above all, interpreting museum collections and their values has been recognised, thus opening new horizons beyond mere cultural transmission: not only intercultural dialogue, discussion and training, but also education, social cohesion and sustainable development.

Integration, access and social inclusion[8], which necessarily require the involvement of the public, bring back the centrality of individual participation through careful communication policies.

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1   UN, *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, 1948.

2   CoE, *European Cultural Convention*, 1954.

3   CoE, *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, Faro, 2005.

4   CoE, *European Charter of the Architectural Heritage*, Amsterdam, 1975 and CoE, *Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe*, Granada 1985.

5   ICOMOS, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance,* 1979 and its updates of 1999 and 2013.

6   UNESCO, *Recommendation Concerning the Most Effective Means of Rendering Museums Accessible to Everyone*, 1960.

7   UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and collections, their diversity and their role in society*, 2015.

8   UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2003 and UNESCO, *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, 2005.

For a long time, access to Cultural Heritage has been discussed in terms of accessibility, specifically regarding disabled people or, more generally, people experiencing certain difficulties. In other words, it was a question of remedying a situation of actual exclusion of certain sections of disadvantaged publics. Overcoming this condition initially led to partial solutions that, in any case, could not avoid "segregation" by implementing support tools, and above all – developing itineraries exclusively dedicated to people with difficulties. This approach, however, is reductive, as the expression "person with difficulties" is as ambiguous as it is generic: Do "people without difficulties" exist? What are the difficulties one may encounter in accessing cultural heritage? Indeed, these could be not only physical or sensory. People may experience social, financial, and cultural difficulties, even if they are perfectly fit and healthy. Dwelling on physical difficulties, as if everyone else did not face any obstacles in accessing Cultural Heritage, has often led to insufficient consideration of the needs of visitors who are apparently free of difficulties, such as young people.

In museums, cultural access has to be approached in terms of *individual access*, implying that each person ought to be included and enabled to enjoy their individual encounter with heritage. By analysing audiences of museums, exhibitions and archaeological sites, it was found out that most of the population is excluded from enjoying them due to various barriers and obstacles, which prevent not only physical or economic access but also, above all, cultural ones that exclude them from participation.

2. From accessibility to integration

Understood in the above way, accessibility is an important step but is limited to anticipating the specific needs of those identified as "different" and providing them with support and assistance. The shift to integration, however, consists in attempting to reduce the gap between "normal" and "dedicated" routes, and in taking into account the needs of different groups: not only disabled people but also ones who are different in terms of culture or their social and economic position. However, they usually have to adapt to the approach of the quantitatively dominant group (defined by curators). Thus, such perception can only involve partial acceptance. In many cases, this can alienate the part of the public that does not identify with this model.

3. From integration to inclusion

The conceptual evolution that moves beyond simple physical accessibility and integration stresses the audiences' *knowledge*. To include everyone and enable them to partake in the same experience, it should be acknowledged that all people are different and, in some way, all have certain difficulties. Design efforts should cater for all senses, seeking connections rather than differences. For instance, tactile experiences could be formative for all visitors, not only blind people, by foregrounding other senses besides the vision (fig. 1).
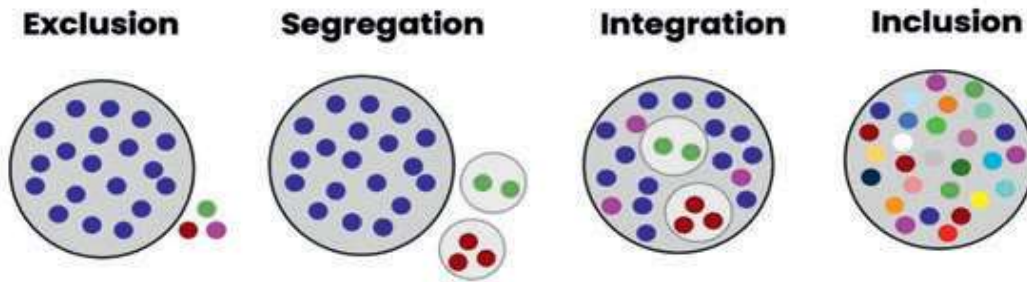
Fig. 1. Different levels of visitor participation: from exclusion to inclusion.

Furthermore, inclusive approaches tend to overcome *dedicated* mediation, even if included in the same path and expected to be meaningful for all other visitors (fig. 2). Moreover, they should aim to draw *disaffected and excluded publics* because cultural heritage belongs to them too, or even *mainly* to them.

Fig. 2. Displays conceived for younger visitors yet appreciated by adults (left: Lungdunum Museum, Lyon; right: Musée Vesunna in Périgueux).

It thus emerges that conditions of *accessibility* are actually prerequisites for real and transformative encounters with heritage, with the real core consisting in *communication*.

4. Broadening the meaning of cultural heritage

Communication is the crucial mission of museums. Nevertheless, they are often overwhelmed by the concern to focus on messages that "objectively" describe the presumed "authenticity" of heritage instead of creatively searching for new ways of reaching different publics and recognising the "subjective" value and potential of cultural heritage.

Concerning cultural heritage, authenticity and values refer to the Venice Charter.[9] Maintaining

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9   ICOMOS, *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites. The Venice Charter*, 1964.

both historical and aesthetic components ensures the authenticity of an object. However, the evolution of the cultural context and the social role of heritage have broadened concepts related to its cultural significance. In particular, according to the Burra Charter of 1979 and its updates, "cultural significance" is linked not only to aesthetic and historical values but also to scientific, social and spiritual ones, relating them to individuals or groups connected with heritage.[10]

The Nara Charter of 1994 takes one step further by linking the concepts of value and authenticity with cultural diversity.[11] The centrality of artefacts increased through better understanding of the broader meaning conveyed by Cultural Heritage. Comparison with non-Western cultures requires overcoming the approach that focuses exclusively on form and substance, and considering the broader sense of its function, tradition, spirit, meaning, as well as consulting documents, places and other objects. This marks a significant shift from previous positions on Cultural Heritage. In particular, the introduced concepts are crucial in dealing with the issue of access to Cultural Heritage and its relationships with individuals and groups.

Cultural diversity and new types of heritage come into play, requiring us to look at new ways in which Cultural Heritage is used and transmitted, placing "each and every one" at the centre of attention.

It becomes essential to strengthen communication and participation, increasing the capacity to expand communal knowledge of heritage and its values. As indicated by the 2005 Faro Convention[12], citizens partake in participatory processes, sharing cultural heritage values. In this way, they become more aware of the need to preserve it and pass to future generations. Culture is no longer just a privilege of select few but a right of all.[13] Presentation and interpretation thus become "essential components of heritage conservation efforts and as a means of improving public appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage sites."[14]

The evolution of the Charters shows how the attribution of values is at the heart of Cultural Heritage in its real meaning for individuals and communities. If they are not appreciated, grasped and made as one's own, the encounter with heritage remains sterile. As it emerges, objective values that allow for collective self-identification are flanked by subjective values linked to individual access to CH. Therefore, due to the plurality of users and the complexity of values, interpretation, mediation and communication efforts are required to facilitate intellectual and emotional appropriation. In terms of identity, heritage thus assumes a fundamental role as a factor of inclusion and social cohesion, making it crucial to strive for *accessibility, participation, interpretation* and *appropriation* of cultural meanings.

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10 ICOMOS, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance,* 1979 and its updates of 1999 and 2013.

11 ICOMOS, *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, 1994.

12 CoE, *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, Faro, 2005.

13 UN, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948 and UN, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 2006.

14 ICOMOS, *Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites*, The Ename Charter, 2008.

5. Participation: from interpretation to appropriation of CH

The terms *participation, interpretation* and *appropriation* need to be clarified. *Participation* in a cultural experience (in this case, the museum visit) carries profound meaning. To take part means to "become part" of an experience. As such, it can only be an active part (even if it requires nothing more than mere presence). In turn, participation or absence of one or more subjects transforms the experience, while the subject who takes part in the experience allows it to "become part" of himself or herself, and thus transform him or her.

The felicitous expression "transformative experience" matches the meaning of cultural "participation": it transforms the participating subject as well as the experience itself. Consequently, the museum transforms its visitors and is in turn transformed by them through their feedback, reactions and presence (conspicuous or rarefied; attentive, distracted or critical). In result, the museum is never the same. Unfortunately, the second sense of "transformative experience" is often underestimated by curators and museum staff, who tend to focus only on the first (i.e., the effects on the visitor).

The transformation takes place at the level of *interpretation*. As for actions that have progressive focus, reference to the 2008 Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites is fundamental. Museums play a key role in understanding, communicating and appreciating heritage values among a wide range of audiences. On the other hand, it is essential to recall that communication is never one-way. According to Freeman Tilden (1957), at its core we find *interpretation*. "Heritage interpretation," he argues, "is an educational activity, which aims to reveal meanings and relationships […] rather than simply to communicate factual information." Tilden underlines that information as such is not interpretation (although interpretation includes information). The contemporary concept of audience-centred experience reaches back to Tilden's definition.

In this sense, interpretation is at the heart of the relationship between people and heritage. However, interpreting is how we interact with the world and people. Therefore, it is crucial to activate the hermeneutic circle in museums so that visitors can develop personal interpretations of heritage.

Museums propose one or more interpretations, while the visitor in turn interprets what he or she sees, reads, hears and touches, transforming it from the perspective of their background, personality, memories, inclinations and interests. Each interpretation is entirely personal. Otherwise, the encounter would have been neutral and futile for individual development.

As stated above, participation and interpretation always transform visitors. Sometimes, however, this transformation is short-lived and may even be superficial. At other times, the encounter with heritage can leave a strong mark on the visitor, imprinting itself in their memory and transforming them in a lasting way by stirring emotion, reflection, comparison and the desire to go deeper and explore further. This process can be defined as *personal appropriation* (Defner et al. 2015, Benente[1], & Minucciani[2] 2019). It constitutes the ultimate goal of cultural communication. It is intended as an individual and transformative experience, different from person to person and therefore not necessarily achievable through the same sensory perceptions by all, but nevertheless capable of generating a response from all, not only

cognitively but also emotionally. Appropriation (fig. 3) is both intellectual and emotional: it is exquisitely individual but closely interconnected with relational processes. For all that, it is important to learn about the audience (Benente[1], Minucciani[2], & Masino 2021), avoiding stereotypical categories and carrying out special surveys.
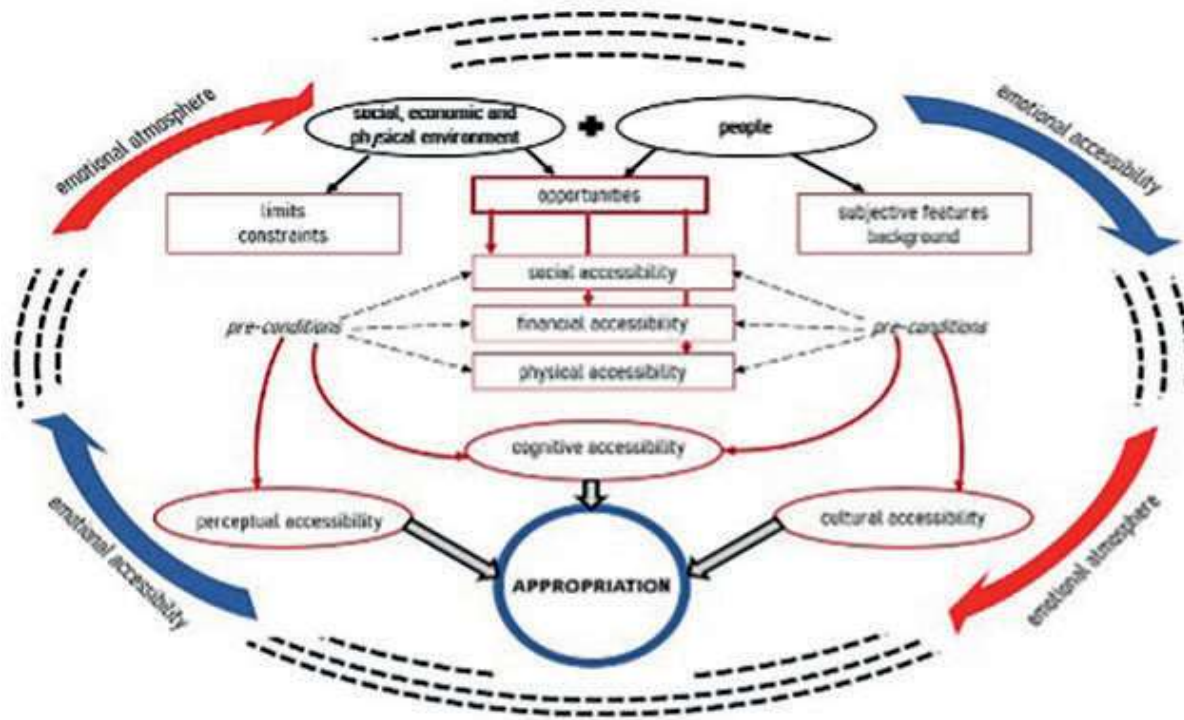

Fig. 3. The appropriation process (Benente[1], Minucciani[2])

6. The role of physical setting in cultural communication

Achieving appropriation is not a negligible goal and depends directly on the museum's communication strategies. Unfortunately, it is often the case that insufficient importance is given to the context of cultural communication, which concerns above all the spatial context of the display at the museum. We frequently seem to forget that all human experience, cultural or not, *begins and takes place in space*. Space is never neutral, and it contributes to the process of interpretation, both conscious and unconscious. It always implies some interpretations.

Moreover, when the context is designed in such a way as to contribute to the communication and interpretation of cultural content, each visitor will be able to find his or her own way – perceptive, cognitive and emotional – to experience his or her particular encounter with heritage.

Symmetrically to physical space and exhibition devices, effective mediation could also play a key role. For example, the small museum of Anteros in Bologna offers tactile translations of artworks from all periods. Although the models are theoretically intended for blind people, the experience of the visit can be very significant also for others. Through sensory mediation, the visitor can "see" works of art using their fingers, discovering their secrets differently than with sight. Moreover, guided by the mediator to assume the same postures as the ones depicted

in the painting, they identify with it, living an emotional experience worth remembering.

In this way, the same experience is shared among all visitors. Although these mediator-led experiences are positive and often preferred to others, it would not be correct to identify the mediator's support as the primary solution for interpretation, disregarding the role of space and its arrangement. On the contrary, the physical setting in museums is at the heart of communication. Still, comparison of several museums shows widespread lack of architects-museographers among staff members. Conversely, having such professionals clearly boosts the effectiveness of communication solutions. Communication cannot be separated from the space in which it takes place, and it is only through a continuous and constant synergy of competences that significant results can be obtained.

On the other hand, museum communication is often made textual through panels, captions, and other graphic elements that neither match or complement spatial solutions, nor exhaust communication itself. Crucially, space and its atmosphere are the first vehicle of meaning, which visitors grasps instantaneously and unconsciously (Minucciani[2] 2021). In a scenario where the museum experience is immersive, it tends to combine all components (objects, texts, displays, and physical environment as a whole).

7. Perspectives

Evolution in the field of cultural inclusion and accessibility requires, first of all, dedicated professional paths. It is now recognised that mere compliance with standards and rules does not guarantee inclusion or accessibility to cultural heritage (called *appropriation* here). Nor does it ensure full accessibility because regulations must always be interpreted correctly and cannot cover all possible cases. Therefore, sensitive and *empathic* design is needed, which involves putting oneself in other people's shoes and looking at the world through their eyes in the effort to develop solutions that are as inclusive as possible. Empathy should be combined with the right amount of creativity and open-mindedness, which can be taught and trained. Actually, even though documents and literature have progressively focused on the problem of accessibility of cultural heritage, professional sensitivity sadly remains limited. Some case studies[15] display greater sensitivity by devoting particular attention to cultural accessibility, but such good practices are certainly not widespread yet.

Acknowledgements

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15   See for example: Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark; MuséoParc in Alésia, France; RömerMuseum in Stadt Xanten in Germany; Ara Pacis Museum in Rome, Italy.

Author Contributions

Benente[1] addressed the evolution of focal concepts in international charters and their emerging principles. Minucciani[2] addressed the visitor's experience and the role of the physical setting. Both Authors developed the conceptual evolution from exclusion to integration to inclusion and the shift from accessibility to access and cultural appropriation.

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