



THE POTENTIAL OF DISABILITY EXPERIENCE FOR HERITAGE: LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH USER/EXPERTS

EISAZADEH Negin¹ HEYLIGHEN Ann² HOUBART Claudine³

¹ Negin Eisazadeh, Université de Liège (Belgium), Faculté d'Architecture, UR-AAP, DIVA; KU Leuven (Belgium), Department of Architecture, Research[x]Design

² Ann Heylighen, KU Leuven (Belgium), Department of Architecture, Research[x]Design
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6811-3464>

³ Claudine Houbart, Université de Liège (Belgium), Faculté d'Architecture, UR-AAP, DIVA
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7037-5815>

ABSTRACT: The relation between accessibility and conservation is often contested, resulting in tensions between accessibility and heritage advocates. While the importance and necessity of accessibility and gradually the broader notion of inclusivity for diverse users (e.g. people with different abilities) is becoming more evident, existing discussions mainly focus on the problems and constraints of accessibility in the heritage context. Instead, in this article, we present disability as a generative resource.

People with disability experience, referred to as 'the other' and 'strangers in their own land', similar to people with different ethnicities, cultures and genders, have been subject to discrimination. In the heritage field, the notion of self and other is mainly focused on colonial and occupied heritage. Additionally, it can be seen in the division between heritage experts and the others. Nowadays, the conservation practice is gradually moving towards collaborative approaches involving diverse others. Our research on inclusive built heritage acknowledges the existing challenges at the crossroad of accessibility and conservation. Following the example of research that rethinks disability's meaning and its impact on architecture, we build upon methods used in the context of inclusive design and adapt them for the heritage context. In order to gain insight into how different bodies and minds experience built heritage, we collaborate with user/experts on multiple case studies in diverse heritage sites. We observe the potential of the theoretical and methodological output of the research for the broader conservation practice. The approach put forward by our research provides an opportunity to rethink normative approaches in heritage conservation, questioning assumptions and habits (in e.g. heritage evaluation) and challenging prevailing preconceptions.

KEY WORDS: accessibility, conservation, disability, inclusive heritage, user/expert

1. Introduction

The relation between accessibility and conservation is often contested. The usual heritage versus access approach is rooted in the “*common belief that making historic buildings accessible inevitably destroys heritage*”¹, which places the accessibility and heritage advocates in confrontation.

Gissen shows how inaccessibility is even integrated in the conservation practice: “*a monument might have been more accessible (by some contemporary standards) in its historic state than in its contemporary preserved condition*”. He refers to cases such as the Acropolis of Athens (dating back to fifth century BCE), which historically was accessible by a ramp (destroyed in first century BCE). He states:

*More significantly, these examples demonstrate the shallowness of contemporary theorizations of disability and preservation— where disability appears as a technical problem to be solved, versus an integral aspect of a monument’s histories*².

Many discussions on this topic mainly focus on the problems of accessibility in the heritage context. Some frame this ‘issue’ as an opportunity, yet giving priority to the heritage asset and its values while pointing out the necessity of seeking a balance between heritage conservation and accessibility:

*...when the aim of removing architectural barriers is integrated and framed within the macro restoration project, it represents a stimulating opportunity to connect ‘old’ and ‘new’ in the uniqueness of our cultural heritage. By doing so, enhancing accessibility becomes simply one of the numerous issues to be dealt with during architectural restoration*³.

Furthermore, in the heritage context a very limited notion of accessibility is often pursued, as reflected in the frequent use of terms such as ‘barrier-free’ and ‘access for disabled’⁴. The 2008 Italian ‘*Guidelines for the elimination of architectural barriers from places of cultural interest*’⁵ is an example of the former.

Gradually, the importance and necessity of accessibility in heritage is becoming more evident. The many national guidelines that have been prepared to improve the accessibility of historic

¹ Liebermann W. K., Whose Heritage? Architectural Preservation and Disabled Access in Boston and San Francisco, [in:] *Future Anterior*, 16(1), 2019, pp. 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.5749/futuante.16.1.0035>

² Gissen D., Disability and Preservation, [in:] *Future Anterior*, 16(1), 2019, pp. 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.5749/futuante.16.1.0iii>

³ Picone R., Spinosa A., Vitagliano G., Wide Accessibility and Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Italy: Problems and Methodological Guidelines, [in:] *Conservation/Transformation*, 2011, pp. 393–398.

⁴ For example, see: Goodall B., Disabled Access and Heritage Attractions, [in:] *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, 7, 2006, pp. 57–78.

⁵ Picone R., Spinosa A., Vitagliano G., Wide Accessibility and Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Italy: Problems and Methodological Guidelines, [in:] *Conservation/Transformation*, 2011, pp. 393–398.

buildings and landscapes are a clear indication of this⁶. Furthermore, in 2013, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) France organized a symposium on “*Heritage and Accessibility: How to make protected towns, monuments and sites in Europe barrier-free?*”⁷.

Furthermore, there is a shift to the broader notion of inclusivity for diverse users based on ‘welcoming all possible users’:

*The term accessibility refers to the physical component and specifically to people with disabilities and in particular mobility difficulties. It is necessary, instead, to shift the attention to a more inclusive approach, based on welcoming all possible users*⁸.

In an ongoing research project on “*An Inclusive Approach to Built Heritage Values*”, we explore a different approach in the relation between accessibility and conservation. Rather than focusing on the constraints, in this article we reflect on our experiences of collaborating with people with different bodies and minds for the past few years.

In this research, we integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines; aiming towards making heritage spaces more inclusive, we look beyond the heritage field and explore complementary fields of inclusive design and disability studies to gain a better understanding of notions such as inclusivity, disability and its changes through time. Then moving on to the specific heritage context, we look into the notion of self and other in both the disability and heritage field. Finally, we argue that this specific approach and methodology in collaboration with disabled people reveals the potential of disability experience for an inclusive conservation approach, in process and as much as possible in outcome, that responds to contemporary needs and reality.

⁶ Some examples are: Martin E., Australian Heritage Commission, Australian Council of National Trusts, *Improving Access to Heritage Buildings: A Practical Guide to Meeting the Needs of People with Disabilities*, 1999; The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, *Access: Improving the Accessibility of Historic Buildings and Places*, 2011 (by the government of Ireland); Historic England, *Easy Access to Historic Buildings*, 2015; Historic England, *Easy Access to Historic Landscape*, 2015; Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, *Guidelines to Overcome Architectural Barriers in Cultural Heritage Sites*, 2008.

⁷ Tilmont M. (ed.), ICOMOS France, *Heritage and Accessibility: How to Make Protected Towns, Monuments and Sites in Europe Barrier-Free? / Patrimoines et Accessibilité : Comment Rendre Accessibles à Tous, les Villes, les Monuments et les Sites Protégés en Europe ?* (actes du colloque), [in:] *Les Cahiers d'ICOMOS France*, 27, ICOMOS France, 2013.

⁸ Benente M., Minucciani V., Roccella G., *Accessibility to Cultural Heritage from the Urban System to Museums. Innovative Solutions*, [in:] *Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing*, 1202, Springer International Publishing, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51194-4_24

2. Points of Departure

Inclusive design

Even though accessibility/inclusivity is a rather new point of attention in the heritage domain, which in the past few years has become more in focus, its presence in design fields such as architecture predates that of heritage⁹. Inclusive design has been around for a few decades and can offer an entry point to further define what accessibility and inclusivity entails and how it can be achieved.

Inclusive design (here considered synonymous with design for all or universal design) is one of the developed design approaches that aims to consider the diversity of human abilities and conditions in the design process¹⁰. 'Universal design' has been defined as “*the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design*”¹¹. The European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD) defines ‘*design for all*’ as designing for “*human diversity, social inclusion and equality*”¹².

The relevance of the universal design approach in resolving accessibility issues in the heritage context has been pointed out¹³, mainly focusing on the Universal Design principles¹⁴, but not fully developed and explored.

⁹ For example, in Italy, accessibility in architecture dates back to mid-1960s whereas, three decades later in the 1990s, “*accessibility became directly associated with the field of architectural restoration, and that the need to reconcile conservation of architectural heritage with wider public accessibility was finally taken into consideration*”, Picone R., Spinosa A., Vitagliano G., *Wide Accessibility and Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Italy: Problems and Methodological Guidelines*, [in:] *Conservation/Transformation*, 2011, pp. 393–398.

¹⁰ Heylighen A., Van der Linden V., Van Steenwinke I., Ten Questions Concerning Inclusive Design of the Built Environment, [in:] *Building and Environment*, 114, 2017, pp. 507–517, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2016.12.008>

¹¹ According to definition of the Center for Universal Design as cited in: Hamraie A., *Universal Design and the Problem of ‘Post-Disability’ Ideology*, [in:] *Design and Culture*, 8(3), 2016, pp. 285–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1218714>

¹² The European Institute for Design and Disability EIDD, *The EIDD Stockholm Declaration*, 2004.

¹³ Picone R., Spinosa A., Vitagliano G., *Wide Accessibility and Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Italy: Problems and Methodological Guidelines*, [in:] *Conservation/Transformation*, 2011, pp. 393–398; De Siqueira Duarte C. R., Cohen R., Biocca L., *Universal Design as an Added Value for Heritage Valorization: The Cases of Brazil and Italy*, [in:] *Assistive Technology Research Series*, 35, 2014, pp. 317–326, <https://doi.org/10.3233/978-1-61499-403-9-317>; Benente M., Minucciani V., Roccella G., *Accessibility to Cultural Heritage from the Urban System to Museums. Innovative Solutions*, [in:] *Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing*, 1202. Springer International Publishing, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51194-4_24; Barbi V., Ginocchini G., Sponza C., *Co-Designing the Accessibility: from Participatory Mapping to New Inclusive Itineraries Through the Cultural Heritage of Bologna*, [in:] *European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes*, 3(2), 2020, pp. 127–146, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2612-0496/12587>

¹⁴ The seven principles of Universal Design were developed in 1997 by a group led by Ron Mace. (See: <https://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/The-7-Principles>).

Inclusive design is more than creating accessible design for disabled people. It searches for resonance between their needs and those of non-disabled people. As awareness is growing about this diversity of human abilities and conditions, across both people and the lifespan, this design approach is becoming more and more in focus¹⁵.

Understanding disability

Over the years, several models of disability have been developed that reflect how its understanding has changed over time¹⁶; from being considered as a characteristic of an individual in medical/individual models of disability, to a disabling situation that can occur in a(ny) person's interaction with the environment in social/interactive models of disability that were introduced in the 1970s.

Traditional conceptions consider disability as an individual physiological disorder, situated in a person's body. Accordingly, problems caused by the disorder are solved by restoring the body's function through treatment or cure¹⁷.

However, in the post-modern view of disability, "*disability is no longer found, rather it is socially and culturally constructed*"¹⁸. Social models of disability distinguish between impairment and disability.

Disability is no longer seen as an attribute of a person, but instead as an effect that results from a person's interaction with their surrounding environment such as a heritage space, which can lead to disabling situations. As Moser states: "*Disabled is not something one is, but something one becomes*"¹⁹. In line with such an understanding of disability, legislations like the American with Disabilities Act focus on remaking environments, not people, "*the making of a new ecology in which disability is present and announced for*"²⁰.

¹⁵ Heylighen A., Van der Linden V., Van Steenwinke I., Ten Questions Concerning Inclusive Design of the Built Environment, [in:] *Building and Environment*, 114, 2017, pp. 507–517, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2016.12.008>

¹⁶ There have been many models of disability, however, in this article we focus on the most prominent ones relevant to our research. (see: Kille-Speckter L., Nickpour F., The Evolution of Inclusive Design: A First Timeline Review of Narratives and Milestones of Design for Disability, [in:] Lockton, D., Lenzi, S., Hekkert, P., Oak, A., Sádaba, J., Lloyd, P. (eds.), *DRS2022: Bilbao*, 25 June - 3 July, Bilbao, Spain, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2022.690>).

¹⁷ Heylighen A., Van der Linden V., Van Steenwinke I., Ten Questions Concerning Inclusive Design of the Built Environment, [in:] *Building and Environment*, 114, 2017, pp. 507–517, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2016.12.008>

¹⁸ Devlieger P., Rusch F., Pfeiffer D., *Rethinking Disability: The Emergence of New Definitions, Concepts and Communities*, Garant, 2003.

¹⁹ Moser I., Disability and the Promises of Technology: Technology, Subjectivity and Embodiment within an Order of the Normal, [in:] *Information Communication & Society*, 9(3), 2006, pp. 373–395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180600751348>

²⁰ Devlieger P., Rusch F., Pfeiffer D., *Rethinking Disability: The Emergence of New Definitions, Concepts and Communities*, Garant, 2003.

The cultural model of disability embraces medical and social models of disability, yet goes a step further and emphasizes disability's potentiality and transformation²¹; its potential to question normative practices and prevailing frames of reference in society²², for example in architecture or heritage.

Disabled people as user/experts

A user/expert, a term coined by Elaine Ostroff, “*can be anyone who has developed natural experience in dealing with the challenges of our built environment*”²³. A user/expert can range from an aging person, over parents pushing a pram, to a child. Through interaction with the built environment, a person living with an impairment gradually acquires a unique expertise-by-experience and has a specific critical capacity to evaluate it from a different perspective. These users/experts can offer insights to better understand the built environment. Hence, they can play an important role in the design process, however:

*In architectural design, involving users as experts currently is not a common practice yet. This situation can likely be improved by using methods from participatory design or co-design more commonly used in other design disciplines such as product design or service design*²⁴.

Some existing research attempts to benefit from this expertise in architecture, to better understand the relation between architecture and disability (experience)²⁵ and mobilize “*disability experience to inform architectural practice*”²⁶, reporting on the results of field studies conducted with diverse user/experts. The latter shows how disability experience can “*add nuance to the existing accessibility standards, but also offers architects rich insights into building qualities that surpass these standards*”.

Building upon these, our research shifts the attention from the standardized human body as the source of proportion and measures for architecture²⁷ to how (heritage) spaces are experienced by these user/experts.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Heylighen A, Challenging Prevailing Ways of Understanding and Designing Space, [in:] *Spatial Cognition for Architectural Design SCAD 2011 Symposium Proceedings*, January 2012, pp. 23–40; McDermott R., Varenne H., Culture as Disability, [in:] *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 1995, pp. 324–348.

²³ Ostroff E., Mining our Natural Resources: The User as Expert, [in:] *Innovation*, 16(1), 1997, pp. 33–35.

²⁴ Heylighen A., Van der Linden V., Van Steenwinke I., Ten Questions Concerning Inclusive Design of the Built Environment, [in:] *Building and Environment*, 114, 2017, pp. 507–517, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2016.12.008>

²⁵ Heylighen A., Doren C. Van, Vermeersch P., Enriching Our Understanding of Architecture Through Disability Experience, [in:] *Open House International*, 38(1), 2013, pp. 7–19.

²⁶ Vermeersch P., Heylighen A., Mobilizing Disability Experience to Inform Architectural Practice: Lessons Learned from a Field Study, [in:] *Journal of Research Practice*, 11(2), 2015.

²⁷ Imrie R., Architects' Conceptions of the Human Body, [in:] *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 21(1), 2003, pp. 47–65, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d271t>

3. Self and Other

Other(ness) is a notion that is present both in the disability and heritage field and can also help in exploring the potential contribution of disability experience to the heritage field.

*Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination*²⁸.

Otherness is created by “applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us”²⁹, usually placing one (us) in a more superior position compared to the other (them).

Disability and otherness

Disabled people – i.e., those with diverse sensory, mental or mobility abilities differing from “the standard” – have been described as “*strangers in their own land*”³⁰ and “*the other*”³¹. This results from a normative thinking that assumes bodies to be able-bodied. Hence those who are “*not in line with normative physical, mental or behavioural ideals*”, are labeled as ‘others’³².

Similar to people with different ethnicities, cultures and genders, people with different abilities have also been subject to discrimination. For example, ‘*oppression*’ which is a core concept in the development of women and ethnic minority group studies, is also present in the development of disability studies³³. Furthermore, in critical disability studies, “*disability is recognized as a cultural identity*”³⁴ comparable with other minority identities”:

*Recognizing disability as a valuable cultural identity to be proud of, similar to other minority culture identities, such as race, class and gender, has brought disability into a new discussion within the past two decades*³⁵.

²⁸ Staszak J.F., Other/Otherness, [in:] *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, Elsevier, 2009.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Quoted from Malu Fontes in Garland-Thomson R., *The Case for Conserving Disability*, [in:] *Bioethical Inquiry*, 9(3), 2012, pp. 339-355. DOI 10.1007/s11673-012-9380-0

³¹ Murphy R. F., *The Body Silent*, Phoenix House, 1987. Also see: Clapton J., Fitzgerald J., The History of Disability: A History of 'Otherness', [in:] *New Renaissance Magazine*, 7(1), 1997, <http://www.ru.org/index.php/human-rights/315-the-history-of-disability-a-history-of-otherness> (accessed 11 May 2022)

³² Kallio-Tavin M., Disability Studies as a Site of Knowledge in Art Education, [in:] *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 16(1), 2020, pp. 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1386/eta_00013_2

³³ Devlieger P., Rusch F., Pfeiffer D., *Rethinking Disability: The Emergence of New Definitions, Concepts and Communities*, Garant, 2003.

³⁴ An example of this is Deaf culture.

³⁵ Kallio-Tavin M., Disability Studies as a Site of Knowledge in Art Education, [in:] *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 16(1), 2020, pp. 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1386/eta_00013_2

Self and other in heritage

In the heritage practice, this othering of disabled people in comparison to the general non-disabled public can also be observed, yet the notion of self and other is mainly focused on colonial and occupied heritage. This otherness results from “matrices of power” in the context of museums that for example position heritage “as a display of an ‘Other’ to the progressive settler colony”³⁶, or in the conservation of (indigenous) heritage sites.

Otherness can also be seen in the division between heritage experts and the others in the heritage field. With social and political changes leading to a more participatory conservation practice³⁷, the challenges of power sharing and collaboration for conservation professionals have been pointed out³⁸.

The authorized heritage discourse, coined by Smith as the dominant Western discourse in national and international debates on the nature, value and meaning of heritage³⁹, places the heritage experts as the heritage authority and “legitimate spokespersons of the past”. She further elaborates:

...this dominant heritage discourse works to exclude, despite the intentions of individual practitioners, non-expert views about the nature and meaning of ‘heritage’⁴⁰.

Smith played an important role in the development of the interdisciplinary field of critical heritage studies⁴¹, “the critical turn” in heritage studies, which emphasizes cultural heritage as a political, cultural and social phenomenon⁴². Her work has drawn attention to the knowledge/power effects of heritage and has led to many debates that seem to redefine the role of experts in the heritage practice, seeking inclusion of others in this process. For example, Harrison puts forward the “dialogical model of heritage and a more democratic approach to heritage decision-making” for the twenty-first century⁴³.

³⁶ Tolia-Kelly D. P., Waterton E., Watson S. (eds.), *Heritage, Affect and Emotion*, Routledge, 2017. For example, see: McCarthy C., *Exhibiting Maori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display*, New York: Berg, 2007.

³⁷ Heritage A., Copithorne J., *Sharing Conservation Decisions*, [in:] *Current Issues and Future Strategies*, Rome: ICCROM, 2018, https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/sharing_conservation_decisions_2018_web.pdf

³⁸ de la Torre M. (ed.), *Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2002, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/values_cultural_heritage

³⁹ Smith L., *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, 2006.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Harrison R., *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Routledge, 2013.

⁴² Smith L., *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, 2006.

⁴³ Harrison R., *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Routledge, 2013.

However, critical heritage studies itself has led to another “othering” and divide between such scholars and the heritage practitioners⁴⁴ as many of the works of these scholars criticize professional practice and organizations such as UNESCO⁴⁵. This has led to the marginalization of the voice of practitioners to an extent that Winter warns that without “*a more productive engaged dialogue with the heritage conservation sector*”, critical heritage studies will become marginalized and further alienate the practitioners in the heritage sector. As Wells and Stiefel state:

...the critical heritage perspective, which gives power to the ethnographic voice and emic understanding/empathy, ought to be setting the example in productively engaging with the “Other”...⁴⁶.

Aiming towards bridging the gap between theory and practice, Wells and Stiefel advocate a “*Human-centered built environment heritage preservation*” by giving “*voice (and respect) to multiple perspectives without losing sight of our goal that heritage conservation practice should, fundamentally, benefit all people*”.

And yet, as pointed out by Liebermann, “*Few if any critical heritage scholars who write about the need to include the ‘Other’ in heritage discourse and practice consider people with disabilities in this category*”⁴⁷.

4. Inclusive Built Heritage

This research on inclusive built heritage seeks an inclusive approach in conservation of the historic architecture and urban spaces. To this end, to understand how disabled people experience built heritage, methods used in inclusive design are adopted and adapted for the heritage context. Through multiple case studies, the historic built environment is analysed by attending to the user/expert’s experience aiming to learn about the space from their unique perspective⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ This can also be explored in the fabric-centred versus human-centred approach in heritage conservation. (See Wells J. C., Stiefel B. L. (eds.), *Human-Centered Built Environment Heritage Preservation: Theory and Evidence-Based Practice*, Routledge, 2019).

⁴⁵ Winter T., Clarifying the Critical in Critical Heritage Studies, [in:] *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19(6), 2013, pp. 532-545, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.720997>

⁴⁶ Wells J. C., Stiefel B. L. (eds.), *Human-Centered Built Environment Heritage Preservation: Theory and Evidence-Based Practice*, Routledge, 2019.

⁴⁷ Liebermann W. K., Whose Heritage? Architectural Preservation and Disabled Access in Boston and San Francisco, [in:] *Future Anterior*, 16(1), 2019, pp. 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.5749/futuante.16.1.0035>

⁴⁸ Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., Learning from Disabled People about Qualities and Obstacles in Historic Cities; The Case of Liège, [in:] *6th Unesco UNITWIN Conference 2019: Value of Heritage for Tourism*, Leuven 8-12 April 2019, pp. 55–65.

The main objective of this research is to take fundamental steps in making built heritage inclusive, i.e. “*reachable, hospitable, accessible, understandable and usable for as many people as possible*”⁴⁹.

Changing notion of values

Since the start of the 20th century, heritage values are a key-concept for assessing, protecting, restoring and reusing heritage. Along with the constant broadening of what is intended as heritage, new policies and tools have extended the initial values-system theorised by Riegl in 1903⁵⁰, in order to further develop and integrate concepts such as authenticity⁵¹ and social value⁵² in the conservation of heritage sites. These concepts continue to be widely debated in value-based conservation.

Decision making in the heritage field is based less on “*a set of fixed values reflected in fabric and is increasingly influenced by a broader range of values reflective of contemporary society*”⁵³. Values once considered as an intrinsic and universal state are now generally considered to be a social construction in its specific cultural context:

*At the heart of contemporary, interdisciplinary, critical research on heritage is the notion that cultural heritage is a social construction; which is to say that it results from social processes specific to time and place*⁵⁴.

This changing notion of value in which societal value is gaining ground and values are more and more seen as socially constructed, is leading to a rise in participatory conservation practices⁵⁵ that redefine the relation between (heritage) experts and public and engage more diverse stakeholders (Fig. 1). Gradually there is a shift from a heritage predominantly defined by professional experts to a more collaborative approach where the public also plays a role in (re)defining and constructing heritage.

⁴⁹ Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., *Cité Miroir: Reflections on the Experience of Disabled Persons*, [in:] *Inheritable Resilience: Sharing Values of Global Modernities - 16th International Docomomo Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings*, 4, 2021, pp. 1342–1347.

⁵⁰ See: Riegl Wicczorek, D., Choay F., *Le Culte Moderne des Monuments: Son Essence et Sa Genèse*, Seuil, 1984.

⁵¹ The *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) is a turning point in (re)defining authenticity, introduced in the *Venice Charter* (1964), as “*the essential qualifying factor concerning values*”, acknowledging the role of cultural context in authenticity judgements.

⁵² The *Burra Charter* (1979) is a key document in the inclusion of social value in the conservation process (in addition to the aesthetic and historic value present in the *Venice Charter*).

⁵³ Avrami E., Macdonald S., Mason R., Myers D. (eds.), *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2019.

⁵⁴ Avrami E., Mason R., de la Torre M. (eds.), *Values and Heritage Conservation*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000.

⁵⁵ Avrami E., Macdonald S., Mason R., Myers D. (eds.), *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2019.

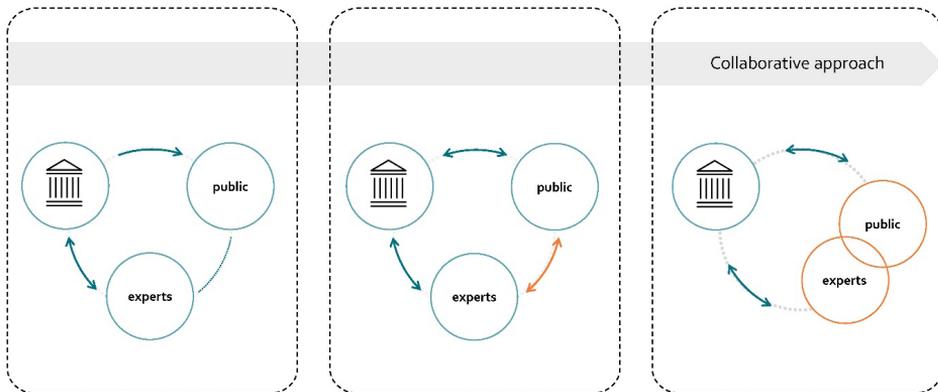


Fig. 1 The changing relations in the heritage field

Those other than the heritage experts are gradually finding their voice in heritage related matters:

Cultural significance for the purposes of conservation decision making can no longer be a purely scholarly construction but, rather, an issue negotiated among the many professionals, academics, and community members who value the object or place—the “stakeholders”⁵⁶.

With this participatory and collaborative shift and the presence of others in the meaning making process, the traditional approach to heritage is gradually changing. Such changes make way for what our research seeks and goes hand-in-hand with the potentially significant role of user/experts.

5. Methodology

In situ go-along interviews

Over the years, we conducted multiple case studies of heritage sites and their urban context using a qualitative approach. We observed how user/experts interact with the built heritage, aiming to identify the qualities and obstacles in this interaction.

We are interested in grasping the embodied and situated cognition/knowledge of user/experts, which extends the location of the knowledge to the body and the surrounding environment. Therefore, our main method to collect empirical data was *in situ* semi-structured go-along interviews: during field visits, we asked open-ended questions focusing on how the user/experts experienced the spaces (Fig. 2).

⁵⁶ Avrami E., Mason R., de la Torre M. (eds.), *Values and Heritage Conservation*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000.

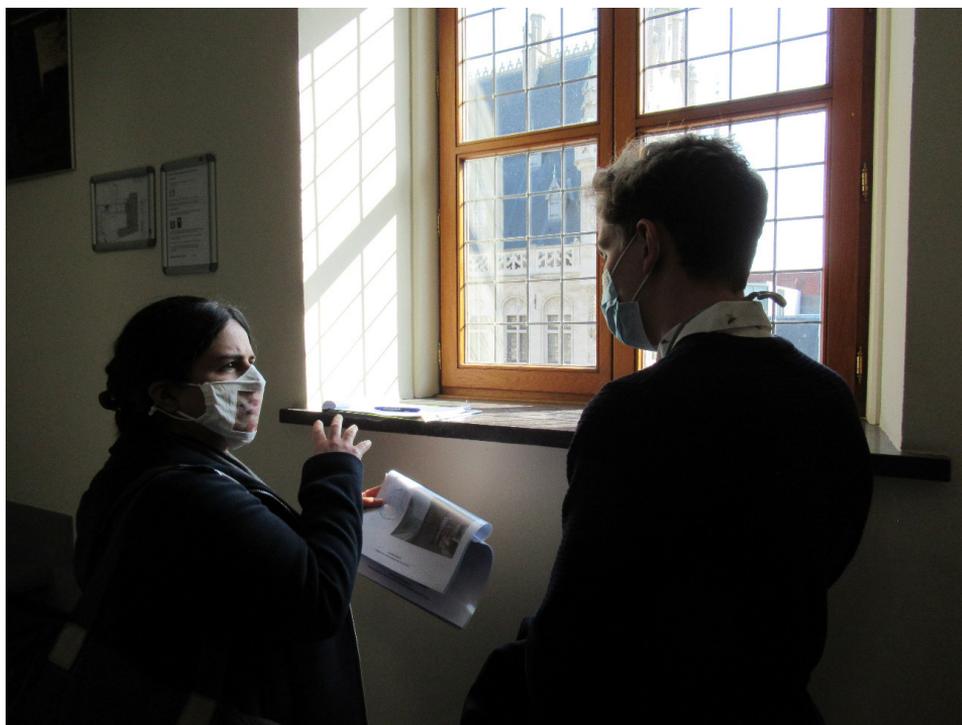


Fig. 2 *In situ* go-along interview with user/expert (Kobe) at the Stadhuis Leuven (© Piet Tutenel, 2021)

The participants in each visit included one user/expert, a researcher (the first author), and a person assisting in data collection (mainly by taking photographs). The data collected included photographs, audio recordings (voice recorder), video recordings (GoPro mounted on the user/expert) and observatory notes. Audio recordings were transcribed and pseudonymized.

Case studies

Three case studies were conducted; The pilot study focused on the historic centre of Liège (a city located in the Walloon region of Belgium) and guided visits were conducted with three volunteer user/experts: Martin who is autistic, Sara who has a visual impairment that allows her only to distinguish between light and dark areas, and Clara who is a wheelchair user (Fig. 3)⁵⁷. Clara and Martin have a background in architecture⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ The participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

⁵⁸ The findings of this case study were presented at the 6th Unesco UNITWIN Conference (Leuven, Belgium) and have been published in the conference proceedings. (See Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., Learning from Disabled People about Qualities and Obstacles in Historic Cities; The Case of Liège, [in:] *6th Unesco UNITWIN Conference 2019: Value of Heritage for Tourism*, Leuven 8-12 April 2019, pp. 55–65).



Fig. 3 Visit of the historic centre of Liège with Clara (© Negin Eisazadeh, 2018)

The second case study focuses on the Cité Miroir, a modern heritage site in Liège formerly known as *la Sauvenière*, a public swimming facility that has been converted into a cultural space. Here four visits were carried out with four volunteer user/experts: Martin (Fig. 4), Sara, Clara and also, Samuel who has a mobility impairment and uses a walker⁵⁹.



Fig. 4 Cité Miroir visit with Martin, the autistic user/expert (© Maxime Coq, 2020)

⁵⁹ The findings of this case study were presented at the 16th International Docomomo Conference (Tokyo, Japan) and have been published in the conference proceedings. (See Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., Cité Miroir: Reflections on the Experience of Disabled Persons, [in:] *Inheritable Resilience: Sharing Values of Global Modernities - 16th International Docomomo Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings*, 4, 2021, pp. 1342–1347).

The third case is the *Stadhuis* Leuven, the historic Townhall of Leuven (a city located in the Flemish region of Belgium) dating back to the 15th century. In this case, there is an ongoing project for the conservation and adaptation of this heritage site, therefore in collaboration with the city of Leuven, the experience of diverse user/experts in this heritage site were communicated to the relevant professionals and stakeholders. These field studies were conducted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The user/experts who collaborate in this case are Martin, Sara (Fig. 5), Ben who has a mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair but is also able to walk (for short distances with support) and Kobe, who is deaf in his right ear and also has ADHD.



Fig. 5 Stadhuis visit with Sara, user/expert with a visual impairment (© Peter-willem Vermeersch, 2020)

6. Reflections

In the pilot study on historic Liège, the methods and approach for data collection were tested and fine-tuned. For each user/expert, the qualities and obstacles in their specific experience of the historic city were identified in order to investigate its potential contribution to creating inclusive historic cities. Interestingly, several of the existing barriers and hindrances are not directly a result of the heritage fabric itself, but arise from external elements, spaces, and policies in the immediate heritage context. Hence, measures to reduce or eliminate these issues are not expected to raise concerns about negative impacts of accessibility-driven interventions on the heritage material. This emphasized the need for informing professional experts' decisions⁶⁰.

In case of the modern heritage of Cité Miroir, our analysis of the qualities and obstacles as experienced by diverse user/experts allowed identifying some main themes that have a significant impact on their experiences of a heritage site. These include the importance of wayfinding, feeling welcome and carefully designed details in order to free users from potential barriers, enabling them to engage with and appreciate the heritage site. It was again observed that many obstacles arising during the visits relate to interventions rather than the original building⁶¹.

The two first case studies allowed a better understanding of user/experts' experiences and their relation with heritage. The final case study, Stadhuis Leuven, provided the opportunity to investigate how to apply such insights in an ongoing conservation project in collaboration with project architects and city officials. Hence, not only linking the research to practice, but also raising the need to mediate these connections between theory and practice and likewise, between user/experts and professional experts; for example, by defining the suitable means to communicate the insights to the architecture team.

Through these case studies, we have observed the potential of the methodological and theoretical output of the research for the broader conservation practice.

The *in situ* go-along interview is a valuable method that can be also used for collaboration with diverse 'others' in the heritage context, such as people with diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing to gain insights into their (situated embodied) experience and interaction with a heritage site. This method also supports a case-by-case approach to heritage, allowing to take into account the specific characteristics of each site, whether for example, a historic urban space, a modern or more historic heritage building.

Regarding the theoretical output, by including 'the others', we shift the starting point of the conservation process from viewing inaccessibility as its intrinsic part, to an inclusive approach in which through collaboration and dialogue with diverse others (for example, people with

⁶⁰ Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., Learning from Disabled People about Qualities and Obstacles in Historic Cities; The Case of Liège, [in:] *6th Unesco UNITWIN Conference 2019: Value of Heritage for Tourism*, Leuven 8-12 April 2019, pp. 55–65.

⁶¹ Eisazadeh N., Heylighen A., Houbart C., Cité Miroir: Reflections on the Experience of Disabled Persons, [in:] *Inheritable Resilience: Sharing Values of Global Modernities - 16th International Docomomo Conference Tokyo Japan 2020+1 Proceedings*, 4, 2021, pp. 1342–1347.

diverse abilities, ages, cultures) resulting in informed decisions by professional experts, we aim towards making heritage spaces more inclusive. Such informed decisions can for example limit the obstacles that diverse users may face due to ill-suited interventions in heritage sites.

In this new mindset, rather than seeing a clash between conservation and accessibility, through collaboration with user/experts, the opportunities and the potential value of disability experience for conservation of built heritage is observed. In this reframing of accessibility, in-line with the cultural model of disability, disability experience is presented as an opportunity, a generative resource rather than a limit or a hindering liability.

Following the prevailing value-based approach in heritage conservation, our initial attempts were focused on fitting the disability experience into standard heritage evaluation approaches and framing it in the normative conservation process. However, through adopting a reflexive and critical approach in the research, we saw that these collaborations with user/experts provided an opportunity to rethink standardized approaches and for example, question assumptions and habits in heritage evaluation. What has started as giving insight into experiences of diverse users to the professional experts in order to inform design/intervention decisions in the conservation process can go a step further and be also seen as a tool to negotiate and discuss the values, meaning and even nature of heritage.

7. Discussion

Addressing matters related to accessibility or the broader notion of inclusivity in the heritage context requires an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the heritage and conservation field. Looking into related fields such as inclusive design and disability studies can help better understand what accessibility/inclusivity means and how it has been addressed.

Heritage conservation has been referred to as “*a practice in conflict*” with “*the need to understand and engage with the ‘other’*”⁶², which can include people with disability experience who have been widely subject to othering.

*In order to achieve some level of cooperation from a wider array of heritage conservation actors, there needs to be a greater attempt at understanding the “Other”*⁶³.

Our research on inclusive built heritage builds upon collaboration with disabled people as user/experts who can offer a fresh point of view to better understand the built environment such as heritage spaces, providing insights and even solutions for creating spaces that are suitable for more people.

Contrary to the existing critiques of the critical heritage studies approach and the said “*othering*” of practitioners by such scholars⁶⁴, we pursue a productive collaboration between academia and practice, linking theory and practice; as evident in the Stadhuis Leuven case study.

⁶² Wells J. C., Stiefel B. L. (eds.), *Human-Centered Built Environment Heritage Preservation: Theory and Evidence-Based Practice*, Routledge, 2019.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

Furthermore, in this researcher/mediator position, we facilitate the exchange between user/experts and architects as professional experts, not alienating either side. To this end, suitable methods to overcome potential communication barriers are created, for example translating the user/experts experience to the architects through a familiar language of graphical representations. Considering that nowadays collaborative methods in heritage for engaging people other than heritage experts are sought, this approach can be extended to facilitate collaboration with other “civil experts”⁶⁵.

As part of this attempt to include others in the heritage conservation process through understanding their diverse experiences, adopting the *in situ* go-along interview method, not only responds to the needs and reality of our time towards a more inclusive heritage but can also be a point of entry in a new area of heritage scholarship that examines embodiment and affect in heritage⁶⁶.

In line with discussions that question the constant balance-seeking approach between conservation and accessibility⁶⁷, building upon lessons learned from research on inclusive design and the changing understanding of disability, this proposed inclusive conservation approach is moving beyond ‘heritage versus access’ or the common accessibility-conservation balance, where there is an implication of a compromise by one and/or the other.

Through facilitating the collaboration of professional experts such as heritage experts and architects with diverse others, this approach allows bringing the diverse experiences such as the disability experience in the conservation process, towards a more inclusive conservation approach. On the one hand, this includes the diverse voices of the others to inform the conservation practice, potentially resulting in heritage sites that respond to the needs of a broader group of users hence reconnecting heritage sites to a broader public. And on the other hand, provides an opportunity to critically review and rethink the norms and habits in the heritage field which may no longer correspond with today’s reality and needs. Considering that “*the meaning of heritage can no longer be thought of as fixed, as the traditional notions of intrinsic value and authenticity suggest*”⁶⁸, this inclusive approach can challenge our preconceptions on concepts such as authenticity which is already being widely discussed nowadays and even help in redefining what heritage means.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ See: Tolia-Kelly D. P., Waterton E., Watson S. (eds.), *Heritage, Affect and Emotion*, Routledge, 2017; Smith L., Visitor Emotion, Affect and Registers of Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites, [in:] *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage*, 14(2), 2014, pp. 125–132. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1973-9494/5447>; Micieli-Voutsinas J., Person-Harm A. (eds.), *Affective Architectures: More-Than-Representational Geographies of Heritage*, Routledge, 2021.

⁶⁷ Gissen D., Disability and Preservation, [in:] *Future Anterior*, 16(1), 2019, pp. 3–13, <https://doi.org/10.5749/futuante.16.1.0iii>

⁶⁸ Avrami E., Mason R., de la Torre M. (eds.), *Values and Heritage Conservation*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000.

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