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A "Best Practice" for Inclusive Art Cities: The Case Study of the I-Access Project

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Abstract. The essay aims to illustrate the results of the I-Access Interreg Italia-Malta 2016-20 project, carried out by a partnership led by the Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo with the scientific coordination of Renata Prescia. The project involved the Vucciria district in Palermo and the Bijcceria district in Valletta. Within the framework of the products created (database, web platform, mobile apps, protocol, etc.), we would like to explain in this paper the measures taken to facilitate physical and cultural accessibility from the integrated point of view of restoration and exhibition design, that is, in particular measures to overcome architectural barriers, measures for cultural dissemination and measures of a museographic-communicative nature, including re-evocations of lost or dislocated monuments and artistic works. The proposal is designed as a method for historic urban areas that have similar problems to the district under study. The Vucciria, for example, despite its high density of monuments, has a low quality of life because many of its monuments, especially churches, are closed and therefore unusable and because there is little motivation for local people to engage with these monuments, partly because it is an evolving community. The proposal, therefore, provides for concrete actions to restore the memory of the inhabitants and to reestablish an identity bond with the context, with concrete implications for attracting widespread tourism to provide opportunities for renewal for the district. Project proposals included the installation of three urban totems, ten tactile maps associated with as many churches, and the design of two new access ramps to two churches. By being realized as smart additions in a contemporary and stimulating way compared to the interventions characterized by a solipsistic retour au passè and previously carried out in accordance with the philosophy of the current urban plan, they also become an educational opportunity for a dialoguing community.

Keywords. restoration, physical and cultural accessibility, exhibition design

1. Introduction (A.R.D. Accardi, R. Prescia)

This paper aims to illustrate the results of a project carried out over the last three years under the INTERREG Italy-Malta Programme (Notice 1/16) on the theme of accessibility to historic cities. It was intended to help develop a methodology for areas of historic cities facing similar problems to those of the districts studied: structural and social decay, mutation of inhabitants, and poor quality of life, while at the same time the presence of heritage values is high. It was about the Vucciria district in the historic centre of Palermo and the Biċċerija district in the historic centre of Valletta. The latter,

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consecrated as a tourist site since its approval by UNESCO in 1980, still has dilapidated areas around it, especially near the harbour. In both cases, it was hoped that by solving the problem of accessibility, the restoration of monuments could be stimulated, which in turn could trigger wider urban regeneration processes.

Palermo is an important city (the fifth Italian capital), but there is still much to be done in terms of the physical preservation of pre-existing buildings but also in terms of quality of life. This is partly because a population in transition lacks the grounds for a relationship with the buildings, including affective ones, and partly because many of the monuments that should be the engine of this affection are closed and therefore cannot be used.

Certainly, the UNESCO awards, such as the recent one given to the Arab-Norman itinerary for Palermo (2015), represent an important act for the rehabilitation of the cities, but almost exclusively from a tourist point of view, while the I-Access project was primarily aimed at the inhabitants and envisaged concrete actions for them to recover memory and build an identity bond with the context, but which had a cascading concrete impact on the attraction for "broad" tourism.

2. The I-Access project: intertwining Restoration and Museography (R. Prescia)

The project has matured in the field of architectural culture and restoration principally, understood in the sense of an active activity in the study of cultural heritage, using on the one hand the tools and skills of architecture and on the other hand the dialogue with the communities that use them. The role of the architect today, exercised through thought and concrete action, requires the assumption of responsibility, because we know that with our work we can change places and the people who live there. We are also convinced that today more than ever, monuments have an undisputed educational function, and we think that contributing to the development and communication of this educational power is one of our most current tasks, in a cultural, social, and political climate that needs above all new/old values [1].

It was a challenge to develop this action within the framework of a European project that would transform the widespread opinion that it is just a way to spend money into an outcome that instead considers scientific research as an indispensable prerequisite for real innovation, which is often only announced. An innovation that is not only technological and digital, as the Call required, but is also specifically cultural and expresses a different vision of the current generation. An innovation that must necessarily go hand in hand with conservation, collective memory, and social progress.

The issue of accessibility seems obvious, but, despite the strong commitment of the European Commission, which has already developed a second cycle of the Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030 (www.ec.europa.eu), it still needs to be assimilated and understood in its deepest values in our southern territories, not as a necessity, but as a social and economic resource to improve the quality of life. Its complexity requires a coherent ethical profile to achieve protection that becomes an integral part of economic and social development policies and urban planning (Washington Charter, Icomos 1987) and guarantees the conservation of heritage as a constitutive resource of the ecosystem urban (Valletta Principles, Icomos 2011).

With reference to the full report on the project [2], we would like to focus in this essay on the interweaving of the disciplines of 'restoration' and 'exhibition design', whose knowledge was applied to the work carried out synergistically in the superintendency

BB.CC. AA., to carry out the two interventions to access the churches, and the design of urban totems and tactile maps, in the historic centre of Palermo, where for the first time we tried to offer solutions within an architectural research, leaving out the recourse to the use of technological products such as stairlifts, ephemeral and reversible elevators or ramps, usually used by the Superintendency because they are considered more convenient, both in terms of cost savings, and project time [3].

The two skills, in the logic of a more democratic dissemination and widespread awareness, are directly confronted with the knowledge of buildings of monumental value, with the aim of experimenting on the necessary opportunity to engage in historicized contexts, manifested in the proposals of innovative signage and, also, in those of the new 'facilitated' accesses to the churches of S. Maria la Nova and S. Maria in Valverde.

The decision to intertwine with Museography [4], for the aforementioned purposes, instead of the Architectural Design *tout court*, was considered the most suitable for its disciplinary and professional characterization, to work on the relational functions between things rather than on things in themselves, and because it allowed us to insert ourselves in the groove traced by Cesare Brandi with the assimilation between Preventive Restoration and Museography which saw, in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century, exemplary realizations, including the most emblematic, in the context of our reasoning (and above all here in Sicily) are those arising from the historian's meeting with the architect Franco Minissi,

per significare che le operazioni museografiche hanno come oggetto la conservazione attiva di testimonianze del passato inalienabili ed irripetibili per le quali il museo si pone come restauro preventivo [5].

This juxtaposition, however, had also found confirmation in the didactic system with the placement of Museography within the disciplinary field of Restoration from which, unexpectedly, it detached itself in the following years and is today indiscriminately assembled in the context of the Architectural Design.

The progressive clarification of architectural restoration as an operative-design discipline interested in the monument in its unity with the environment, on the one hand, and the current development of the concept of musealisation towards new areas extended and expanded to urban spaces and places of everyday life, on the other [6], has brought the two insights closer together in the sign of a renewed Everyday Aesthetic [7].

Now, if we assume that restoration interventions are intended to preserve not only the physical consistency of buildings and objects, but also the meanings, we can argue that with this variability of different purposes it is not always possible to apply a general rule, but certainly one must expect a wise competence in the relationship with the property to be restored, in the ability to question it and to question oneself about its future.

The opportunity or not to add a new structure to a building of historical-monumental importance characterized by historicized stratifications and the ability to control the intervention cannot be resolved univocally but must be chosen from a range of solutions developed in a real and its own process of "ethical adaptation" of any form of intervention on ancient pre-existing structures [8].

In a European reconnaissance of best practices, it was found that not many permanent architectural interventions have been carried out, because the D.P.R. 24/07/1996, n. 503 has clearly directed towards removable solutions, finding support in the principle of reversibility, recognized by those who work in the restoration [9], but

which today is subject to a process of verification that greatly limits its necessity [10]. The cases of the Cathedral of Grosseto seemed interesting to us, with a concrete and marble ramp integrated into the steps of the parvis, and that of the Ravenna National Museum [Fig. 1].









Figure 1. Grosseto, Ravenna and Palermo compared: on the left group, the Cathedral of Grosseto and the disabled access ramp 'landing' in the churchyard, compared to the Church of S. Maria la Nova in Palermo and the construction of the ramp with the same strategy used in Grosseto; on the right group, the National Museum of Ravenna and the new access with the disabled access ramp, compared to the Church of S. Maria in Valverde and the construction of a new churchyard incorporating the disabled access ramp.

Of course, the decisions taken are the subject of a debate that has its points of friction with the bodies responsible for protection, which still too often prefer to confine themselves in their enclosure of alleged incompatibility, and with a community that has not yet been sufficiently warned against a debate that too often takes place in the academic enclosure alone.

3. Outcomes of the I-Access project, between restoration and musealisation projects in historic centres (A.R.D. Accardi)

In terms of accessibility to cultural heritage, the strategy of "architectural addition" proves to be the most appropriate, as it offers itself as a new design practice and at the same time presents itself as a determined democratic act [11]. The culture of the museographic project, including that of restoration, can thus be understood as a unified approach to pre-existence, aimed at preserving and enhancing the historical-architectural heritage.

Starting from the reflections made so far in Palermo with the project I-Access to overcome architectural barriers and improve accessibility, it was decided to provide answers in terms of "architecture", besides a new architecture to the pre-existing one, as a crucial orientation aimed at eliminating the "transient" character that a ramp (metal or wooden) can express, also due to the fact that "removable" structures reinforce in people with disabilities the feeling of being identified as different and therefore discriminated against.

L'idea della reversibilità, soprattutto in questo ambito del progetto, dimostra tutta la sua inconsistenza. Laddove ragionevolmente possibile, si tratterebbe di superare questi logori luoghi comuni e sviluppare invece un'attitudine al progetto di accessibilità che programmaticamente prescinda dal carattere di reversibilità. Del resto, drammaticamente irreversibili sono i motivi che inducono ad adottare questi provvedimenti [12].

An installation perceived as "temporary" creates a psychological implication of inequality towards different types of users and conveys the message of a continuing separation between healthy and disabled people, which is reinforced by the suggestion of an "alternative" path that generally remains so. When these paths lead to secondary entrances instead of main entrances, this sense of inequality is further reinforced [13].

Therefore, the main objective of the design of the ramps and churchyards of the churches of Santa Maria in Valverde and Santa Maria la Nova was to allow access to every user through a single "shared" entrance without any differentiation [14]. The sense of proposing a new churchyard for Santa Maria in Valverde, in which the ramp for the disabled will be inserted, is also due to the desire to restore the original level of the ground of the "Largo Cavalieri di Malta", where today the secondary façade of the church is located, which in the last decades of the century XIX has undergone a lowering as part of the general urban road rehabilitation works [15]. The obvious signs of this change in height, overcome by the installation of three steps, suggested the creation of the access level of the portal at the exact height that the floor of the "Largo" originally had [Fig. 2]. In the intervention on the church of Santa Maria la Nova, on the other hand, the side door was modified to create a new facilitated entrance, and the new churchyard, connected by the ramps to the two levels of possible pedestrian access, that is, on the sidewalk and on the street, is protected by a railing of successive frames, adapted according to the decorative division of the facade with which it is compared [Fig. 3].



Figure 2. I-Access Project outcomes: Palermo, Church of Santa Maria in Valverde: the ramp for the disabled that engages in the new churchyard, which evokes the original level of the Largo Cavalieri di Malta floor.



Figure 3. I-Access Project outcomes: Palermo, Church of Santa Maria La Nova: the double access ramp to the churchyard, through the side gate modified for this purpose.

We have tried to avoid the concepts of 'physical accessibility' and 'cultural accessibility' appearing as two separate and unrelated areas. Instead, as indicated in the theories of Universal Design [16] and in the statements of ICOM (2014) and ICOMOS (2020), they were part of a single planning consideration aimed at providing a response to overcoming physical and cultural barriers and, in this holistic perspective, leading to the creation of common communication strategies and tools.

The intention to identify an exploratory-cognitive itinerary through the Vucciria area between the spaces of urban life and the monuments highlighted the conditions of accessibility to the different sites, which in most cases are prohibitive and which initially revealed the objective need to intervene with projects to overcome architectural barriers. In a later phase, therefore, the possibility of planning a system of cultural signage and interactive stations that could improve cultural accessibility and favour the overcoming of cognitive barriers was evaluated, so that users with visual impairments or other types of disabilities could also move independently and interact with 'smart objects' located along the itinerary and able to provide all kinds of information and historical-cultural insights about each of the monuments [17].

Two types of aids were thus conceived: 'urban totems' to provide general information, such as identifying the district and the monumental itinerary with its landmarks; 'tactile maps' to provide more detailed information about each monument. As these tools are intended for outdoor use, we have been concerned about the type of materials to be used, potential damage from vandalism and the necessary maintenance of the supports themselves. The need to find a compromise between the means of communication for special needs (visually impaired, blind, dyslexic, etc.) without neglecting the expectations of non-disabled users, the sense of graphic-aesthetic composition, the impact of the supports on the urban decorum and the control of visual interference between the supports and the monuments has led to creative choices aimed at reconciling this infinite number of needs.

In this perspective of social inclusion - with 'tactile maps', through calibrated graphics, with descriptive texts integrated through the Braille code - the visitor is offered not only a brief history of the development of the various sites, but also a reconfiguration (partial or complete) of buildings and monumental sites, sometimes recovering the memory of what has disappeared, or even showing a complete reconstruction of the surrounding context.





Figure 4. I-Access Project Outcomes: the monumental signage with tactile map installed at the church of Sant'Antonio Abate.

Both the general historical context and the architectural specificities of each monument inevitably 'influenced' the design of the dissemination tools, forcing a work that selected the most appropriate formal and material features of these supports and also met the precise intention of making them recognisable, 'standardised' and perceptible as part of a coherent and coordinated communication system. The bilingual information text of these supports is also translated into Braille and flanked by the relief drawing of the building fronts or the city layout. A human silhouette flanked by the drawing of the monument provides the reference scale, which is useful for all types of users, especially the blind. In addition, a code QR, which refers to the official site of the I-Access project (www.iaccess.eu), provides the opportunity to learn more about the buildings depicted, while a pictogram for motor disabilities indicates that access, if available, is via an inclined ramp [Fig. 4].

In the case of the orientation totems, on the other hand, the structuring of their content was mainly based on offering passers-by information about the urban location of the Vucciria district, the reference to the monumental exploration itinerary, 'Vucciria Walking' and the location of ten monumental buildings and three squares integrated into them. The totem, with its urban scale planimetry, allows the analogy between the city and the district to be grasped and, with the Braille code, offers users a tactile experience essential for blind users, alongside the more traditional bilingual didactic texts [Fig. 5].

The maps and totem boards with contrasting colours, useful for perception by the visually impaired, and showing a text with a legible font, the 'biancoenero' font (www.biancoeneroedizioni.it), to facilitate reading for dyslexics, complete the level of inclusive communication. The use of Cor-Ten steel for the bases of the maps and the supporting structures of the totem is based on the conviction that this material is very versatile in adapting to different contexts, whether ancient or contemporary [18]. The rust effect and the resulting colouration are easy to blend into the environment, especially if it is characterised by stone material, dilapidated walls, earthy contexts and vegetation. However, a decisive factor in choosing Cor-Ten is its very long resistance to weathering, a characteristic that helps to reduce maintenance costs once it has oxidised.



Figure 5. I-Access Project Outcomes: on the left, the totem project; on the right, an example of location in the city (close to church of San Giorgio dei Genovesi).

4. Conclusion (A.R.D. Accardi, R. Prescia)

Most cultural landmarks in Italy and internationally refer to the overcoming of cultural barriers, which takes place mainly indoors, probably because the introduction of the 'contemporary' is perceived as troublesome in direct comparison with buildings of historical-architectural value, mainly because of the 'not easy' proxemic relationship between 'new' and 'pre-existing'. The current need for a more democratic involvement in art cities dampens the traditional caution in interventions in Italian historical centres and welcomes architectural and restoration projects in favour of a more mature sense of responsibility in overcoming the so-called cognitive barriers that significantly affect the visit to cultural sites and the knowledge of the historical-architectural heritage itself. The intervention strategies implemented with the I-Access project are offered to the city of Palermo as the first organic solution to an issue that has not yet been addressed in its complexity and offer themselves as a pilot project for the entire historic city.

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