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# INCLUSIVITY & ACCESSIBILITY of Historic Public Spaces

Approach & Digital Tool





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# **Inclusivity and Accessibility of Historic Public Spaces**

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# I INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Beyond Definitions: Inclusion and Accessibility Relationship in The Architectural Project

Those who approach an architectural handbook generally do so with well-defined expectations, and similarly, those who write such manuals proceed from clear assumptions and precise notions. However, when it comes to inclusive design, this apparent clarity of intent tends to fade.

The first prominent evidence of this complexity is the lack of a single and shared definition of the term inclusion in the architectural field. Although on one hand it is used to convey a conceptual framework aimed at overcoming all forms of exclusion, on the other hand it translates into diverse actions and responses to specific circumstances, originating from profoundly different social, economic, environmental, and cultural contexts. If we look at the whole cultural debate surrounding the topic of inclusion, it often emerges as the target of policies and initiatives aimed at various social groups, such as the elderly, immigrant communities, children, and young people, without forgetting people with disabilities, of course. From what has been pointed out, therefore, there is an apparent understanding that the action of “inclusion” is often referred to as the integration of a specific group. Besides, it's the same general definition you find in dictionaries, which highlights its additional and compensating character in relation to a pre-existing condition of marginality or exclusion:

The act of including, that is inserting, comprehending in a series, in a whole (often opposed to exclusion) [...]<sup>1</sup>

Considering these premises, one might ask: what is the precise focus of this manual? How does it attempt to address the semantic and operational complexity of the concept of inclusion in architectural design?

Here, it's necessary to clarify the starting point of this handbook: to foster a multifaceted discussion on the attributes that a built environment should have to provide effective accessibility, with a specific focus on its fruition by people with disabilities. This brings us to another key term, which is often used interchangeably with inclusion and frequently assimilated into its objectives and operating practices: the concept of accessibility. But are these two terms truly interchangeable, or is there a more complex relationship between inclusion and accessibility? It is precisely this question that we will attempt to answer first, in order to continue with the considerations presented in this manual, and to clarify their respective areas of application and the resulting implications in terms of design.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition taken from the Italian Treccani dictionary, originally written as: *inclusione* s.f. [dal lat. *Inclusio* -onis]. -1. a. L'atto, il fatto di includere, cioè di inserire, di comprendere in una serie, in un tutto (spesso contrapp. a esclusione)

With the purpose of clarifying the conceptual perimeter within which the discussion on inclusion takes place, while highlighting connections and differences with accessibility, it is useful to refer to the definitions of the latter and its adjectival version, as explained in the main vocabulary references:

Being accessible, opportunity for easy access.<sup>2</sup>

Which can be accessed, which is easily accessed.[...]<sup>3</sup>

This inevitably leads to the legislative definition, which in Italy is formalized in Ministerial Order DM 14 June 1989, n. 236, which defines accessibility as:

“The opportunity, even for people with limited or non-existent physical or sensory abilities, to reach the building and its individual units and rooms, to access them easily, and to use the spaces and equipment in conditions of adequate safety and autonomy”<sup>4</sup>.

Such definitions immediately highlight some fundamental traits of accessibility. First, they identify its physical and operating dimensions, meaning that optimizing its performance in the built environment is only possible through a series of technical design measures. Subsequently, the legislation specifies in detail the recipients of the actions for better environmental accessibility, making a priority mention of people with physical and sensory disabilities. It is this very subdivision of user categories that has been the target of criticism from numerous experts and advocates of “universal” design models. The main objection to these strict groups’ identification (such as people with physical or sensory disabilities) is the risk of presenting dedicated design solutions, thereby reducing the broader participation originally sought. The implementation of an inclusive design approach is therefore essential to ensure the acknowledgement of all forms of diversity; at the same time, however, there is a threat of designing for “everyone” with a “neutral” approach to disability, or any other users’ category, thereby disguising their specific needs. It is specifically in the tension between expanding the target audience of the project and recognizing the unique characteristics of everyone that the relationship between accessibility and inclusion can be understood. By acknowledging differences, it does not imply neutralizing them but rather valuing them through design solutions that can meet a variety of demands without compromising fairness in access and user experience of spaces and services.

The aforementioned allows us to portray the relationship between accessibility and inclusion as one of interdependency and mutual reinforcement. Accessibility - defined, as in the rest of this discussion, as the physical condition of spaces, and the goods that occupy them, that allows for independent accomplishment of various daily activities and the enjoyment of the services provided therein - is a

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<sup>2</sup> Definition taken from the Italian Treccani dictionary, which translates as: *accessibilità* s.f. [dal lat. *Tardo accessibilitas -atis*]. – L’essere accessibile, possibilità di facile accesso.

<sup>3</sup> Definition taken from the Italian Treccani dictionary, which translates as: *accessibile* agg. [dal lat. *tardo accessibilis*, der. di *accessum*, supino di *accedere* «accedere»]. – 1. A cui è possibile accedere, che è di facile accesso.

<sup>4</sup> Definition taken from the Italian legislations on accessibility, specifically the Ministerial Order DM 14 Giugno 1989, n. 236 “Prescrizioni tecniche necessarie a garantire l’accessibilità, l’adattabilità e la visitabilità degli edifici privati e di edilizia residenziale pubblica, ai fini del superamento e dell’eliminazione delle barriere architettoniche”. The definition of accessibility translates as: la possibilità, anche per persone con ridotta o impedita capacità motoria o sensoriale, di raggiungere l’edificio e le sue singole unità immobiliari e ambientali, di entrarvi agevolmente e di fruire spazi e attrezzature in condizioni di adeguata sicurezza e autonomia.

necessary and non-negotiable requirement for making any form of inclusion effective. Inclusion - meant as a social, cultural, and relational process that takes shape through diverse actions, including intangible ones, aimed at building environments that are welcoming, fair, and meaningful for all people - embodies the goal of valuing diversity. Within this perspective, it promotes the active, conscious, and equal participation of everyone in community life, valuing the pluralism of experiences as a resource for building more equitable and cohesive communities. In conclusion, if, in this relationship of mutual interaction, the physical accessibility of the environment serves as an essential prerequisite for the implementation of inclusive processes, the inclusive perspective has contributed to broadening the very meaning of accessibility. The latter is no longer understood solely as the removal of physical, sensory, and cognitive barriers, but as the ability of the environment to offer spatial and functional qualities, responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse user base that is not necessarily linked solely to the realm of disability.

Stemming from these premises, the handbook aims to offer a structured and multidimensional reading of the issues addressed, balancing the contents between a technical-operational approach and a critical methodological reflection. The aim is not only to provide practical tools for the application of standards and best practices, but also to prompt a rethinking of the design questions themselves, challenging established models and opening new perspectives on the role of design in the construction of environments that are truly equitable and accessible to all.

## **1.2 Historic Cities and Inclusive Public Spaces: Towards a Renewed Design Approach**

The framework within which this handbook is developed is the historic city. Firstly, this choice responds to the urge to deal with the most complex scenario, which is characterized by unique physical assets, and the need to balance the instances of inclusion with those of the preservation of the built heritage. Secondly, it is fundamental to act specifically in these settings, which are a central component of the European territory and provide the stage for the daily life of the communities that inhabit and pass through them. The underlying assumption is that historic cities cannot be viewed solely as repositories of memory or static witnesses of the past but must be acknowledged - and designed - as living, dynamic environments. It is, in fact, a space of everyday life, where history intertwines with the contemporary needs of communities. From this perspective, cultural heritage is not only an asset to be preserved, but also an active resource capable of fostering inclusion, social cohesion, and new forms of participation.

The historic city is shaped like a layered set of spaces which, despite their diversity, together form a coherent and recognizable system. It is precisely this complexity that makes it necessary to identify each of its components, since only through an integrated and aware approach is it possible to establish targeted and, at the same time, cohesive interventions. In this perspective, detailed understanding of the spaces that comprise it is a fundamental requirement in order to lead transformations towards the ultimate purpose of inclusion. Public spaces - such as squares, streets, alleys, and arcades - are the framework of social life, places for meeting, exchange, and identity recognition (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 1971; Porta, 2022; Carmona et al., 2010). Alongside, private spaces - consisting of residences, shops,

and buildings - define the minute network of the urban fabric and fuel its daily vitality (Whyte, 1980; Carmona & Tiesdell, 2007, Gehl, 2010). Monumental and cultural ensembles - like churches, museums, theatres, and civic buildings - condense symbolic and identity values, becoming landmarks for collective memory (Lynch, 1960; Lynch, 1981; Carmona et al., 2010). Finally, natural and integrated spaces - such as gardens, parks, and riverbanks - attest the inextricable link between cultural and natural heritage, giving the historic city environmental qualities and everyday life scenarios (Palazzo & Steiner, 2012; Ganis, 2015).

Although the above is only a brief overview of the complexity of the historic city and the variety of spaces that shape it, we suggest seeing the bibliography for more in-depth analysis, it clearly outlines the areas of intervention covered in this manual. It is precisely the identification of such constituents that serves as the starting point in orienting strategies and actions aimed at building urban environments that are more inclusive and able to meet the needs of a heterogeneous community. The macro-objectives to be pursued for the development of an inclusive public space can therefore be summarized in five fundamental areas:

1. **Development of a broader accessibility:** ensuring minimum and universal access conditions for all potential users, allowing them to enjoy public spaces autonomously and facilitating processes of integration and social cohesion.
2. **Reinforcing the identity of the place:** sustaining people's need to recognize themselves as part of a community while expressing their own individual selves. Enhancing identity traits also fosters intercultural exchange and the development of shared beliefs.
3. **Enhancing urban vitality:** increasing usage opportunities and time spent in public spaces, a condition that boosts the establishment of social interactions and sustains the development of local economies, which rely on the continuous attendance of people in urban areas.
4. **Promotion of slow mobility:** prioritize pedestrian and bike traffic, reducing the impact of vehicular transportation. This encourages people to spend time in public spaces and promotes the growth of social activities.
5. **Increased sense of security:** improving conditions for safe fruition, a decisive factor for the daily use of public space and for maintaining its vitality. A positive perception decreases the risks of social decay and enhances the quality of urban life.

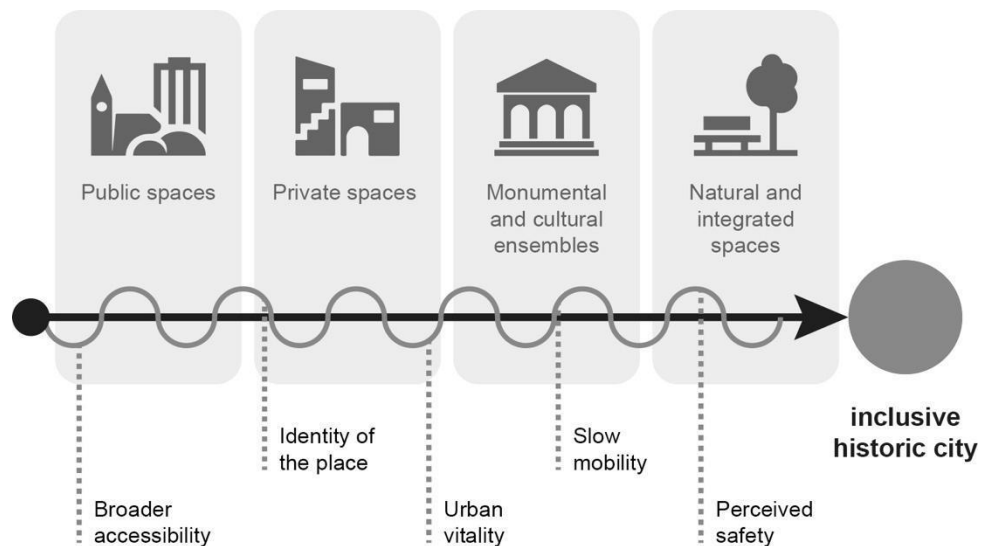


Figure 1. Inclusion as a transversal quality of the design approach for the Historical City (Authors' work)

The statement of these macro-objectives further emphasizes how inclusion should not be viewed as an additional outcome, but rather as a structural and transversal principle. It becomes the binding element that can drive the several design actions towards a renewed quality of public space, where equity, identity, and social vitality are integrated in a coherent way within the urban transformation processes of the historic city. This approach is in line with international references, especially the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which promotes the reduction of inequalities in Goal 10 and aims to build inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities in Goal 11. From this perspective, inclusion becomes not only an ethical and social concern, but also an operational strategy for enhancing urban design and strengthening its consistency with global sustainability policies.

It is exactly in this approach grounded in the acknowledgement and enhancement of diversity that inclusive design assumes the role of key interpretation of project performance and effective response to the different needs of the community. With this in mind, the handbook aims to develop a methodological reflection based on a shared knowledge and awareness, which are essential requirements in promoting the design quality now demanded in the transformation of historic cities, while adapting to the specific characteristics that each city presents to designers.

# II INCLUSIVITY OF PUBLIC SPACES IN HISTORIC CITIES

## 2.1 Contemporary Requirements for Public Space Inclusivity

### 2.1.1 Inclusivity, a Possible Definition

Today, the fundamental definition of inclusivity in the Oxford English Dictionary (2016) is classified as *“the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those having physical or intellectual disabilities or belonging to other minority groups.”*

As the definition suggests, the role of inclusivity in spatial studies stemmed not without the presence of exclusion or marginalization, but rather as a counteracting response to such phenomena. While it is unclear when *inclusivity* as a term was introduced, its theories developed from several subthemes that challenged this exclusivity by resituating the individual and community's role in cities' public spaces. Most prominently, Henri Lefebvre's notion of the Right to the City (1996) gave way to themes of Public Participation which have become increasingly popular in recent literature, where the user of a public space becomes its agent and can identify with it, enabling inhabitants to integrate more closely with their urban environments (Gaventa, 2003), or to perform a democratic practice (Bodnar, 2015; Ploger, 2021). Lefebvre initially argued for the city to be a space for exercising citizenship and shared authority, and for the city to reflect its inhabitants' varying needs more appropriately (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2013). The popularisation of this theme can be seen through its repurpose in the World Charter of the Right to the City in 2004, and later the UN-Habitat's<sup>5</sup> report of the Right to the City in 2010, tackling issues of gender and racial inequality, and representation in cities' governing institutes. David Harvey also echoed these ideas in more recent years by stating:

*“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.”* (Harvey, 2003, pp. 939)

Considering this collective power, Dolores Hayden focused on marginalized communities in this process in the Power of Place (1995), particularly through the role of place memory in creating shared public histories of urban settings, such as the early example of the Black Heritage Trail in Boston in the 1980s of documenting underrepresented stories in the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) focuses on all urbanization and human settlement concerned with the United Nations in over 90 countries. More information can be found at <https://unhabitat.org/>

*"[Place memory] is the key to the power of historic places to help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present."* (Hayden, 1995, pp. 46)

As a melting pot of migration for peripheral and neighbouring rural territories, large urban territories historically presented a promise of opportunity and are often shaped by the very diversity they initially welcomed, such as the case of New York, London, Milan, Paris etc. (Carrera, 2022). However, as intentionally designed settings for mass influx, cities' advent of planning also enabled division; the possibility to dictate which neighbourhoods each social group belonged to, the conditions of their living standards and the public spaces they could access (Carrera, 2022; Hayden, 1995). For instance, 20th century American cities saw the segregation of races, genders, and classes through their urban patterns, effectively altering their encounters and their memories of a shared 'place' (Hayden, 1995):

*"Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes. Decades of "urban renewal" and "redevelopment" of a savage kind have taught many communities that when the urban landscape is battered, important collective memories are obliterated."* (Hayden, 1995, pp.9)

In historic cities, this type of planning also allowed the identification, preservation and enhancement of what could remain as a historical public space to preserve and what may be changed. ICCROM's<sup>6</sup> report on Cultural Heritage in Post-War Recovery describes the rebuilding of heritage as a *thread of continuity*, or a method of rebuilding society (Stanley-Price, 2005), displaying an intrinsic link between storylines, identities, and physical markers of history and heritage. However, what was deemed as heritage or historical often reflected a wealthier, upper class, or denoted power (Avrami, 2021; Hayden, 1995; McDowell, 2008), automatically excluding a wider populace.

For this reason, public space holds different meanings to varying social groups. Jane Jacobs' *Eyes on the Street* theory discussed how easily accessible spaces such as streets naturally evolved as incubators for building trust within working class neighbourhoods (Jacobs, 1961). In contrast, English coffeehouses allowed for the wealthy to debate intellectual and cultural matters, but remained exclusive to the upper class (Madanipour, 2010). Similarly, riverbanks and major streets served the Italian practice of the *passeggiata* which was a form of expression reserved for the upper class towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Chiari, 2019). Considering that we exist within the same urban models today, the same exclusion may linger even if subliminally cloaked in indifference towards one another.

In European cities where there is a current accumulation of diverse dwellers, shared public spaces are nodes of connection and expansion. However, as places nestled within a wider ecosystem rooted in individualism and remoteness, public spaces in cities also represent a point of tension by confronting us with the physical proximity of our neighbors (Bodnar, 2015), which some may consider as a *mirror*

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<sup>6</sup> The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) located in Rome is an intergovernmental organization focused on the protection of cultural property. More information can be found at <https://www.iccrom.org/>

of our perceptions towards one another (Madanipour, 2010). More overtly, European historical cities today face these encounters more than ever in the era of migration, where 42.4 million people living in Europe in 2023 were born outside of the EU<sup>7</sup> (European Commission, 2025). Studies have shown a reduced sense of safety and disinterest in public spaces due to a decrease of ‘civility’ or adherence to social norms (Bodnar, 2015; Haselbacher et. al, 2024). Contrastingly, 56% of those who identify as minorities within the EU have experienced discrimination within the last year (Hardy and Schraepen, 2024).

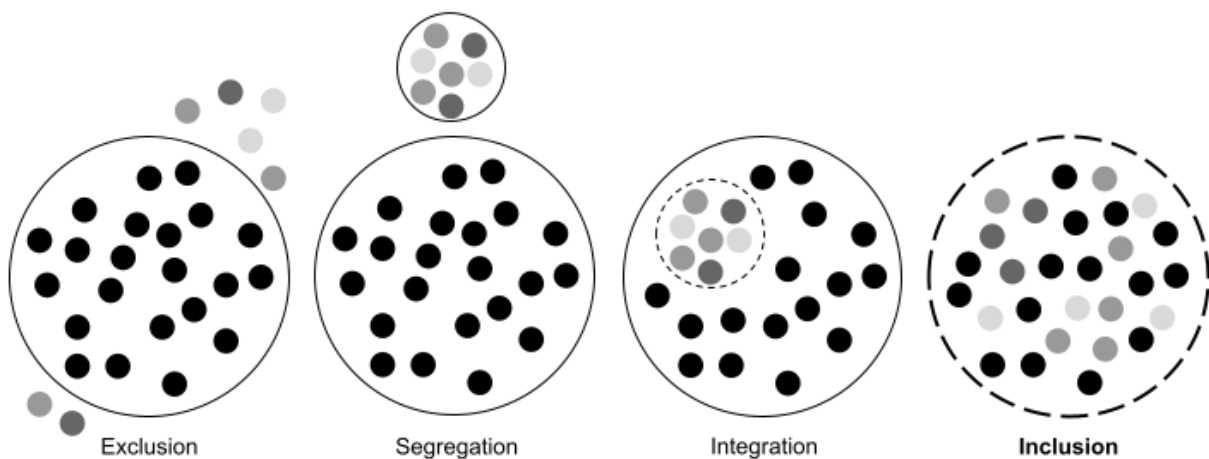


Figure 2. From Exclusion to Inclusion (Authors' work)

A recent survey by UNICEF<sup>8</sup> of 1000 adolescents throughout Italy also revealed that up to 55% of respondents have witnessed some form of discrimination towards foreigners. Its findings also found that 42% of respondents did not find migration to be positive for the country's culture (UNICEF, 2024). Not only does this reflect certain racial and social prejudices towards ethnic minorities, but it further displays an *"implicit assumption that there is nothing to learn from the Other and that mutual interaction is worthless. This cultural assumption can lead to both social separation and mutual indifference between different ethnic groups, as well as to forms of latent or overt conflict."* (Carrera, 2022, pp. 146). Nevertheless, there have been attempts towards finding a correlation between the acceptance of minorities and social cohesion, and the overall impact of these themes on the well-being of residents both socially and economically. For instance, a recent study discovered that EU countries with a higher acceptance towards minorities had a higher GDP<sup>9</sup> per capita, demonstrating the value of social cohesion (Hardy and Schraepen, 2024).

Hence, where exclusion in public spaces has accrued over time both intentionally and passively, inclusivity is an active, holistic tool in spatial design to combat this. More specifically, inclusivity can be understood in spatial terms as a process of a local community altering its environment's components

<sup>7</sup> European Union (EU). The European Commission works alongside the EU's Member States as a politically independent executive arm. More information can be found at [https://commission.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/index_en)

<sup>8</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is an international organization within the UN focused on protecting children's rights across 193 member states. More information can be found at <https://www.unicef.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

to include marginalized individuals or groups, rather than asking them to change themselves (Carnemolla et. al, 2021).

### 2.1.2 Heritage as a Tool for Inclusivity

In the discussion of urban development and management strategies, culture acts as a central player, especially in today's globalized context that regularizes cities in terms of finance, technology or development patterns. Culture and heritage allow distinction by enhancing their unique character, raising local populations' awareness of their cultural identity, reinforcing their sense of pride, and therefore fostering local resilience. Moreover, heritage often translates elements of a culture to an incoming group of visitors or residents in a new urban environment, making them feel included in the place's history. This was stressed in the New Urban Agenda, which followed the 2016 conference Habitat III. Within the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UNESCO<sup>10</sup> also states that culture, with the multiplicity of its expressions from cultural heritage to creative industries and cultural tourism, is an enabler and driver of sustainable development in the three aspects of sustainability: social, economic and environmental (UN, 2015).

Specifically, the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Goal 11 to 'Make Cities And Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient And Sustainable' combines Inclusivity In Cities (11.3) and Preserving Cultural Heritage (11.4) within this overarching goal, denoting a synergy between inclusivity, culture and heritage (UN, 2015).

This perspective becomes critical when considering current public heritage in Europe which can foster present memories in addition to its past by connecting to a wider audience. The concept of heritage evolved over time with various fundamental stages before reaching a pivotal moment of its evolution in 1994, when its debate expanded to an international scale. Prior to this, only tangible assets were inscribed on the World Heritage List<sup>11</sup>, while for intangible heritage, an international protection convention was not yet foreseen and therefore its survival was at risk. Considering inclusivity, intangible heritage within urban contexts is an imperative asset because it embodies historical activities, oral traditions, rituals, and performances that can be easily forgotten without a physical monument in place of this memory, which can result in the erasure or exclusion of some cultural practices.<sup>12</sup> Regarding the relationship between tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage, Jokhileto reports the words of Nobuo Ito:

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<sup>10</sup> The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focuses on international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture across 194 member states. More information can be found at <https://www.unesco.org/en/brief>

<sup>11</sup> The UNESCO World Heritage List features sites that embody an outstanding value for human life. This list is a result of an international treaty called the Convention of the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The current list can be found at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

<sup>12</sup> This issue was addressed by clarifying and enhancing the concept of *authenticity* of heritage during the Nara Conference in Japan in 1994 through the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, which led to new conservation ethics and an understanding of the different premises with full respect to cultural differences of varying places.

*“Intangible culture<sup>13</sup> is the mother of all cultures. As etymology shows, culture is the human product moulded and matured in an inspired or cultivated brain. In this sense, all kinds of culture are, in the earliest stage, intangible, and, therefore, extremely private in nature. So, many intangible cultures are apt to disappear or change to another one.”* (Jokhileto, 2006, pp.10)

Bidirectionally, physical and intellectual access to intangible heritage in public spaces also enables marginalized users to regain a sense of social capital, or confidence through newfound shared knowledge that generates a sense of belonging and assimilation between an individual and their surrounding community (Murzyn-Kupisz and Dzialek, 2013). In Italy, a recent study found a link between higher education, frequency of visiting museums, archaeological sites, and monuments, and social capital indicators (Fiorillo and Ofria, 2024), revealing not only the impact of cultural heritage on gaining social capital but also the limitations of heritage spaces in encouraging less educated groups to attend them.

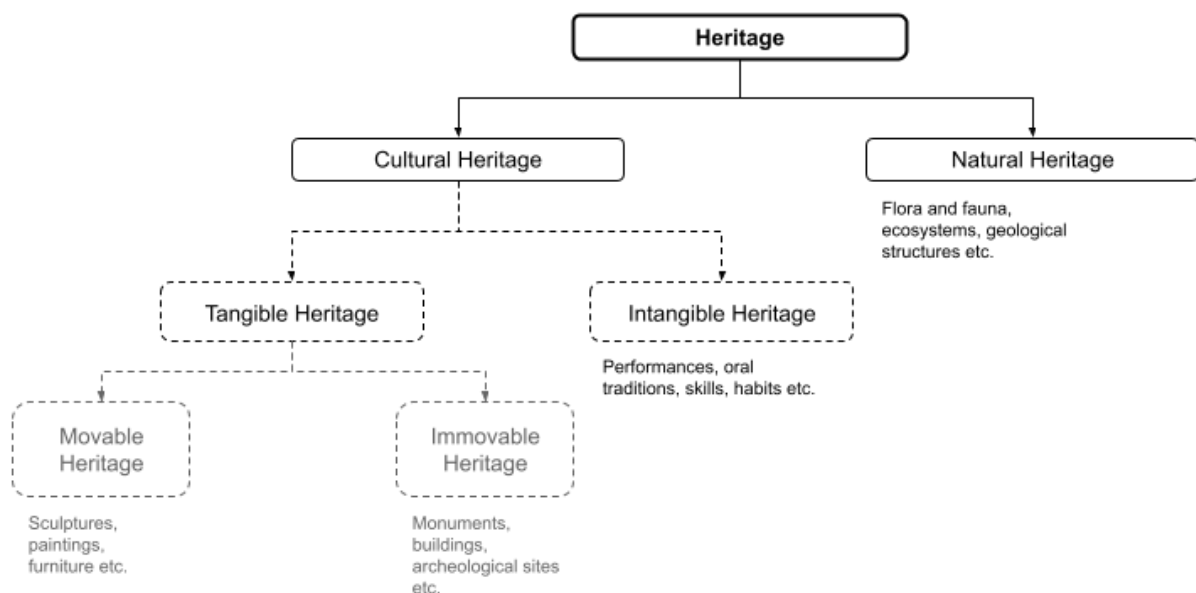


Figure 3. UNESCO's Classification of Heritage Typologies (Authors' work)

Inviting marginalized communities to historic public spaces today can also offer a space of reconciliation for a previous lack of representation (Hayden, 1995), offering their own histories to the public space they inhabit. However, as inclusivity begins to widen towards new users of a public space, it is also

<sup>13</sup> In 2003, the importance of the issue of intangibility was formally approved with the *UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. In its article 2.1 the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage is expressed as:

*“The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”*

Working on its conservation is therefore even more imperative, whereby its lack of an easily detectable material deterioration makes its protection more complex and requires identification, documentation, research, conservation, protection, promotion and enhancement.

easy to schematize this as a threat of impersonality (Madanipour, 2010) against an intangible heritage's authenticity. Yet, this perception depends on the false perception of new spatial users as valueless to the culture (Carrera, 2022). Moreover, it confuses interculturalism as the dilution of one culture rather than an intersection and expansion of the two. Madanipour (2010) also refers to the simple yet complex fact of change; that we have changed and the activities we perform in public spaces have changed, which is important to consider for historic public spaces as they may be redundant in meeting our contemporary needs, leading to their imminent disuse.

Consequently, history itself bears a greater remembrance and preservation by allowing a wider community to seek connection with it. The Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe consortium initiated by the Cultural Programme of the EU in 2015 demonstrated this through the positive impact of cultural heritage on the economic, social, cultural and environmental sectors, which contributed to the creation of a European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018. More recently, the Creative Europe Programme of the EU published a programme entitled Cultural Heritage in Action which documented 60 successful functional cultural heritage spaces that combat social exclusion (Eurocities, 2022). One of the examples included Piazza Rossini in Bologna, Italy, a culturally significant yet neglected site that was transformed into a participatory-designed green space through the local university's involvement of students and teachers who self-built the project (Longo et. al, 2022). Through a "living lab" ideology, passerbys and neighbourhood residents were able to get involved during the construction phase of the project, garnering such a high interest in the space that compelled the municipality to designate the intervention as permanent.

Ultimately, it is contended that heritage alone does not carry meanings of the past without a present populace ascribing a value to it (Crouch and Parker, 2002; Graham and Howard, 2008; Hayden, 1995). Some argue that cultural landscapes and their representations of history act a practice rather than a backdrop, *"through practice that is at once mental and embodied, individuals reflexively refigure their worlds, interacting contexts that include their own action,"* (Crouch and Parker, 2002, pp.400). As products of their time, monuments, plazas, markets, and other historic public spaces naturally cannot inclusively engage the public during their conception stage, but they can be reinterpreted by their contemporary spectators through active participation and agency in their daily use. These encounters, while seemingly minute, possess the possibility to give new meaning to heritage that can sustain its preservation by fostering interest and care towards them.

### **2.1.3 Historic Public Spaces and Inclusivity: The Case of Italy**

Italy exemplifies a significant way of living intertwined with a constantly evolving urban fabric, in which its public and private spheres often interact through public spaces. This is due to its climatic conditions and its geographical location in the middle of the Mediterranean sea that historically made it a place of meeting and exchange for many populations arriving whether by land or sea. This allowed Italy to welcome various diverging cultures into its urban centers over time, both temporarily and permanently. The success of its historic public spaces is demonstrated through not only their heritage status but their continuous use today. From ancient forums, colonnades, medieval *piazze*, Renaissance marketplaces

to modern civic squares, such public spaces have therefore mediated processes of inclusion, conflict, negotiation, and integration. Italy became a place with an enormous legacy in historic public space with relevance recognized at world wide level, being the country with the highest number of UNESCO WHS<sup>14</sup> in the world (UNESCO, 2025A).



*Figure 4. Rialto Bridge in the 1700s. (Francesco Guardi, 1700s)*

Historic Italian public spaces, many of which are now featured in the UNESCO WH List, served as nodes of information for current socio-political affairs. For instance in Venice, a UNESCO WHS since 1987, the Rialto Bridge was a polyfunctional public infrastructure by acting firstly as physical connection, a market, and as a platform for issuing decrees, market prices, and various news whether by pinning them onto the bridge or announcing them at the bridge's peak (Cossar et. al, 2016), acting as a representative place for the transaction of knowledge. The public nature of this transaction created an inclusive space that made information accessible to a wide range of the public, including merchants, locals within Venice who utilized the bridge, as well as those transiting through. It also made the space participatory and interactive, where news was live and could be reacted to by a collective in real-time, allowing connection to build between community members. Similarly in Florence, a UNESCO WHS since 1982, with the Ponte Vecchio built in the late 14th century, the bridge was originally constructed to facilitate the flow of trade between Florence and other cities in Tuscany (Flanigan, 2008) and therefore represented a vibrant hub of merchants and buyers from all over the region communing in this central node to exchange goods. The bridge provided a multilayered function by enclosing a sheltered space above the bridge, whereby a corridor known as the Vasari corridor was created by the Medici<sup>15</sup> family to allow a passage for their everyday transit from their residency (Palazzo Pitti) to their work place (Palazzo Vecchio) that prevented direct contact with other locals (Treccani, 1937). Therefore, the public space combined an overlying space that was especially exclusive.

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<sup>14</sup> The UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) are inscribed locations that embody an outstanding value for human life. The list of WHS is a result of an international treaty called the Convention of the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The current list can be found at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

<sup>15</sup> The Medici were a Tuscany-based banking family whose financial mastery enabled them to dominate Florentine and Tuscan politics from the 15th to the 18th century. Their lavish patronage was central to the birth of the Renaissance, leaving an unparalleled legacy in art, architecture, science, and governance.



Figure 5. Ponte Vecchio Today. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2019)

Moreover, the emblematic example of the *piazza*, an open space within a dense urban fabric, reveals the resilience of an inclusive communal space through its resurgence throughout centuries. For a region rooted in trade, Italian *piazze* origins can be traced back to Roman forums which acted as spaces for political, religious, commercial, educational, and recreational life, before the mediaeval period when these spaces were reappropriated by the Christian church to act as a marketplace for merchants and for religious ceremonies (Treccani, 1935; Fusch, 1994):

*“In all historical periods [the piazza] has served as a place and center of gathering of citizens, performing these functions to the maximum: political (rallies, parliaments), commercial (fairs, markets), religious (processions, sacred representations, churchyards). The history of urban planning therefore shows squares created and organized in their structure to perform one of these three functions, or two of them, or sometimes all three together; it also reveals to us a constant effort and a progressive tendency in every urban civilization towards specialization.”* (Treccani, 1935).<sup>16</sup>

Piazza Santa Croce in Florence is a historic and vibrant public square, renowned for its architectural beauty and as the site of the Basilica of Santa Croce. Historically, the piazza has served as an important gathering place for diverse social groups, hosting markets, festivals, and public events that brought together residents from various backgrounds.

Today, Piazza Santa Croce continues this tradition of inclusivity by functioning as a dynamic civic space open to all. Its benches that line the square, along with the church’s stepped facade, encourage people to pause and gather, while the large open space at the center fosters spontaneous activities and social interactions in the public realm. The square hosts cultural events such as the Calcio Storico Fiorentino

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<sup>16</sup> Original Quote: *In tutte le epoche storiche la piazza ha servito come luogo e centro di riunione dei cittadini disimpegnando massimamente queste funzioni: politica (comizî, parlamenti), commerciale (fiere, mercati), religiosa (processioni, sacre rappresentazioni, sagrati). La storia dell'urbanistica mostra quindi piazze create e organizzate nella loro struttura per disimpegnare una di queste tre funzioni, oppure due di esse, o talvolta tutt'e tre insieme; essa ci rivela inoltre un costante sforzo e una tendenza progressiva in ogni civiltà urbana verso la specializzazione.* Translated by Authors.

(Historical Florentine Football)<sup>17</sup>, concerts, and public celebrations, fostering community engagement among locals and visitors alike. Although it is not located on Florence's primary tourist axis—typically centered around Ponte Vecchio, the Duomo, and the Galleria dell'Accademia—the piazza is nonetheless highly frequented by tourists. Despite this, it remains loved by Florentines for its rich traditions and its role as a symbol of local identity and communal heritage.



Figure 6. Past public activities in Piazza Santa Croce. (Pietro di Lorenzo Bini, 1688)



Figure 7. Piazza Santa Croce on a regular afternoon. (Noora Alhashimi, 2023)

<sup>17</sup> The *Calcio Storico Fiorentino* is a traditional historic game played every June in Piazza Santa Croce and ending for the Patron, San Giovanni, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June. Dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it combines elements of soccer, rugby, and wrestling, with teams representing the city's historic districts. The match is accompanied by ceremonies and celebrations honoring Florentine history and culture.

Today, many WHS share the issues related to overtourism<sup>18</sup>, devoting most of their attention to receiving masses of tourists. However, tourists represent only one layer of the users of the city, while the other permanent or temporary residents are often living a process of exclusion from heritage and of its communication. Tourists represent a privileged segment of users of the city's historic spaces and heritage. Indeed, they are those who have the time, knowledge, and financial resources to engage with urban identity. In reality, however, it is knowledge of heritage that is crucial for the inclusion of the most marginalized segments of the population into the social fabric, yet they face many barriers and few programs dedicated to accessing urban historical heritage.

Venice and Florence are among the most critical examples of overtourism in Italy. Like Venice, Florence was historically a popular cultural destination for travellers, but in the last decades with the widening of tourism affordability, the city started welcoming masses of travellers and losing the attention towards local residents. This process led to the depopulation of its historical urban core which was no longer attractive and affordable. Contemporary residents in historic centers went from 66.447 in 2019 to 64.427 in 2021<sup>19</sup> compared to 376.450 inhabitants within the whole Municipality in 2019 and 365.315 in 2021 (Municipality of Florence, 2023). The city centre is no longer inclusive for its own residents. This issue is now one of the crucial points in which the Florence UNESCO WHS Management Plan 2023 is dealing with, especially since one of the outstanding universal values for which Florence was listed as a WHS is its local community, which in time was able to produce an urban fabric with tangible and intangible assets that made its context unique (Del Bianco, 2023).

Gentrification<sup>20</sup> frequently poses significant challenges to the inclusivity of urban public space projects, often hindering their capacity to accommodate diverse social groups. The following are two examples of historic public spaces in the city of Florence that have successfully adapted to evolving demographics, emerging communities of users, and shifting functional demands.

The first example, towards rectifying this relationship with historical public *piazze* include the recent intervention of regeneration and conservation of Piazza Santa Maria del Carmine. This piazza is located in the Oltrarno (southern bank of the Arno river) and has always been a relevant public space, also because of its connection to the Basilica of Santa Maria del Carmine, renowned for housing the Brancacci Chapel, a masterpiece of early Renaissance fresco painting by Masaccio and Masolino. The square was originally created as an open space in front of the church, in an area that during the Middle Ages was more peripheral and less developed than the northern part of the city. Over the centuries, it became a focal point for religious and local community life. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it underwent various urban transformations and it had been reduced to a car park for the past decades. Through a

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<sup>18</sup> The acceleration and growth of tourism supply and demand, the use of tourism destinations' natural ecological goods, the destruction of their cultural attractions and negative impacts on their social and economic environments (Mihalic, 2020).

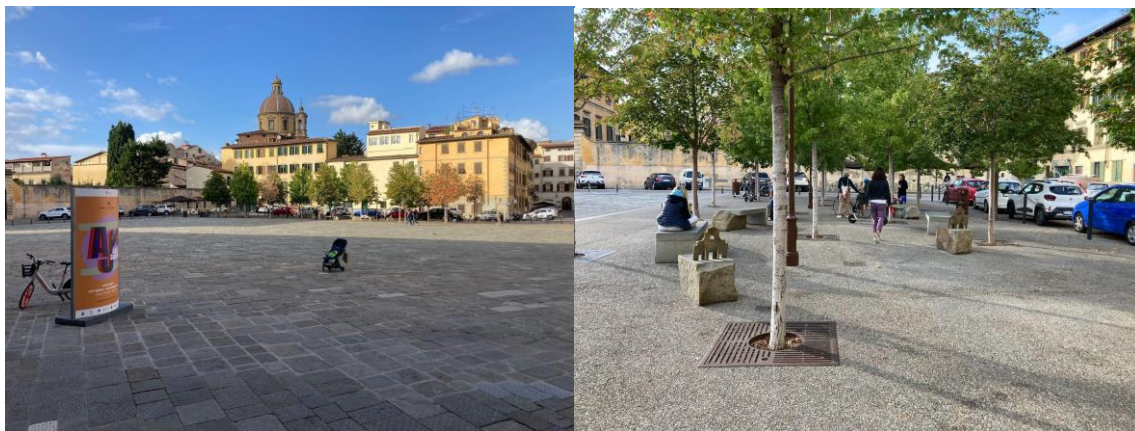
<sup>19</sup> Open Data Comune di Firenze <http://opendata.comune.fi.it>

<sup>20</sup> Gentrification is a process in which urban neighborhoods experience renovation and increased investment, often leading to rising property values and living costs. This transformation typically attracts more affluent residents, which can result in the displacement of lower-income communities. While it can bring economic development and improved infrastructure, gentrification also raises concerns about social inequality and loss of cultural diversity.

participatory process that consulted all the neighborhood residents, including new communities, a local project focused on its recovery by drastically reducing the space for parking, increasing its green areas to allow residents to meet and relax under shade trying to avoid the gentrification process characterizing many interventions in the city, and by following an accurate conservation project specifically in regards to the repaving of the piazza with the Roman technique of permeable stone paving (Del Bianco, 2023). Today, the area has been revived and has therefore invited its residents, both adults and children, to repossess it throughout the day, ultimately creating more inclusive public spaces.



*Figure 8. The Santa Maria del Carmine Basilica and Square. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2023)*



*Figure 9. Piazza Santa Maria del Carmine with the Basilica on the back and detail of the new green area. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2023)*



*Figure 10. Permeable pavers at Piazza Santa Maria del Carmine. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2023)*

Another typology showing visible examples of inclusivity in public spaces are public parks. Within the example of Florence, Le Cascine Park, which is considered the city's "green lungs"<sup>21</sup> (Citta di Firenze, 2025) – exemplifies how a historic green public area can be successfully adapted to serve new functions and diverse urban populations. Originally a hunting and agricultural estate owned by the Medici family, the park was transformed into a public space as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Città di Firenze, 2025), offering an early example of accessible green areas in an urban context. Today, Cascine Park is freely accessible and serves as a shared space where both temporary and permanent residents engage in a wide range of activities. It has become a key gathering place for Florence's foreign communities—such as Peruvian and Romanian groups—who use the space for sports, picnics, dance and musical activities during their leisure time. Local residents also frequently use the park for recreational and athletic purposes. Furthermore, the park regularly hosts public concerts, outdoor exhibitions, and other cultural initiatives, and hosts one of the main street markets of the city reinforcing its role as a dynamic and inclusive urban commons.

This stands in contrast to other parks in the city, such as the nearby Boboli Gardens<sup>22</sup>, which—although offering free access to residents—primarily serve tourists through ticketed entry.

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<sup>21</sup> The Cascine Park is made up of 130 hectares and is the biggest park of the city along the Arno river.

<sup>22</sup> The Boboli Gardens is an historic park in Florence and one of the earliest and most important examples of Italian Renaissance garden design. Commissioned by the Medici family in the 16th century behind the Pitti Palace, the gardens feature a formal layout, symmetrical patterns, classical sculptures, fountains, and architectural elements. They represent a model of landscape architecture that influenced garden design across Europe.



*Figure 11. An event at the Parco delle Cascine (Corinna Del Bianco, 2023)*



*Figure 12. An internal alley of the Parco delle Cascine. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2020)*



*Figure 13. Sunday main park alley. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2020)*



*Figure 14. Sport events. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2018)*



Figure 15. Festival and concerts at the Parco delle Cascine at night. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2019 and 2016)



Figure 16. Summer milk shop at the Parco delle Cascine. (Corinna Del Bianco, 2017)

Not only do these traditions display a consistent relationship between inclusiveness and public space, they also exemplify how our contemporary use of public spaces are informed by their history but with the ability to transform for today's needs while still retaining the *Genius Loci*<sup>23</sup> of a place.

## 2.1.4 Diversified Solutions for a Diverse Population

Ironically, obtaining inclusivity within public spaces is complex because it requires designing universally while recognizing that there is not one universal element that everyone can relate to, which is often described as an *inclusive design paradox* (Heylighen and Bianchin, 2018). Recognizing users may also be misinterpreted as the categorization or labelling of people when we are constantly-changing beings. Achieving true inclusivity therefore involves acknowledging such trade-offs and seeking solutions that recognize multiple needs.

While 20<sup>th</sup> century architects focused on creating average or universal norms for design, such as Corbusier's *Modular Man*, the one-size-fits-all narrative failed to consider marginalized users. This was followed closely by a catering towards the disabled community by primarily addressing wheelchair users in the 1960s and 70s when protests across the UK, US, and Europe occurred for the recognition of the disabled community (Schianchi, 2014). However, the broader spectrum of race, gender, and age was not accounted for in public space design until much later. The Charter of Public Space today refers to its users by stating "*all citizens, regardless of their role, are users of public spaces. All of them have the right to access and enjoy it in complete freedom within the rules of civic coexistence. In cities ever more complex and diverse, this requires democratic processes, dialogue and regard for diversity,*" (Garau, 2016A, pp. 5).

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<sup>23</sup> *Genius Loci*, meaning Spirit of the Place, was a term coined by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his 1979 book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* although it was first conceptualized by the Roman Empire as the protective spirit of a place. In modern architecture, it represents the collective perception and atmosphere of a place.

For public spaces in historic sites, addressing its users becomes a greater challenge as many of these spaces were designed prior to the creation of modern national building regulations or policies such as today's European Accessibility Act. As discussed in the previous section, these spaces also often signify cultural or historical events that exclude certain social groups, or carry technical meanings that are difficult to discern by the passerby. This therefore requires targeted efforts to ensure an inclusive experience for users who have been historically neglected from such sites.

People with disabilities represent one major user profile of those historically excluded from public spaces. While this topic is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 regarding physical accessibility of historic public spaces, people with disabilities can also face difficulties in terms of social inclusivity. According to the EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2010-2030 (2021), 52% of persons with disabilities felt discriminated against at the time of the publication, which may deter them from public or other inherently social spaces in addition to the physical obstacles they may face. Cultural heritage may inadvertently partake in this exclusion if it is unclear in its communication and representation of heritage for those with intellectual disabilities. A primary study on the Roman archaeological site of Aquileia, Italy found that participants with intellectual disabilities experienced difficulties in decoding the ambiguous language and symbols offered as accompanying information on-site which led to a difficulty in comprehending the content, aside from physical obstacles to reading this information such as poor lighting and small fonts (Mastrogioseppe et. al, 2021). Solutions that address people with disabilities must therefore consider not only the physical realm but the social and cognitive.

Another vulnerable group is the elderly or older people. By 2019, the EU's population of people above the age of 55 accounted for 33.6 % of the total population, and the EU's 2020 Eurostat revealed that the population of older people is expected to grow to 40.6% by 2050 (Eurostat, 2020). In many cases, older people prefer to continue residing within the historical cores of ancient cities that they already own property in as opposed to young people with entry-level jobs, resulting in an ageing population within some historic cities (Prabowo and Temeljotov-Salaj, 2023). As central nodes, urban historic cities offer a walkable scale and familiarity to the ageing population. Italy, which is considered one of the oldest countries in the world with its ageing population, exemplifies this phenomenon where 45% of those aged above 65 currently live in capital municipalities, and are projected to constitute 27.3% of the total population in metropolitan cities by 2031 (Bellafore et. al, 2024). Meanwhile, UNESCO's publication on Inclusive and Resilient Societies (2022) depicts culture as a stimulus for the well-being of elderly people. Historic public spaces within the cores of these metropolitan cities, for instance the Piazza Navona of Rome, the Castello Sforzesco of Milan, or the Piazza di Santa Croce of Florence, therefore require the ability to physically adapt to their ageing demographics to promote an inclusive environment.

Migrants represent a considerable vulnerable group in European public spaces due to perceived discrimination and social exclusion, despite constituting 9% (41 million people) of Europe's total population according to the EU's 2023 Eurostat (Eurostat, 2024), including humanitarian and political refugees and asylum seekers. However, the word 'migrants' represents an immense pool of people from all sociocultural and geographical backgrounds with varying levels of vulnerability, some who may not be vulnerable in public spaces at all. In this case, we consider those particularly entering from outside the EU (6% of the total population), where perceptions of such immigrants can often be reduced

to an identity of an incomer entering an existing culture, therefore being pushed in a one-sided effort to assimilate and adapt. This extends to social norms, placemaking tactics, and behaviors in public spaces that can vary greatly in various parts of the world. In Italy, Cancellieri and Ostanel state, *“the level of visibility of their different bodies as well as of their unconventional uses of the urban space challenge a ‘spatial order’ which is essentially taken for granted as the ‘right way’. Migrants have entered into a realm of hypervisibility in which any action they undertake is overly visible as it is excessively noted. This is an affective and emotional perception intimately bound up with patterns of belonging and with inclusion and exclusion narratives,”* (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015, pp.500). The same study found, through interviews with local police officers in the city of Padua, that native Italians sometimes perceive the gathering of Middle Eastern foreigners around kebab shops close to public plazas as a security threat merely due to their aggregation. As these prejudices exist toward migrant communities in Italian urban settings, solutions towards resolving this must begin with an acknowledgement of these perceptions. Efforts towards including migrant communities in public spaces require fostering a social cohesion with native residents which can arise by connecting and sharing a common humanity, which cultural heritage can act as a platform for through its storytelling of histories.

Moreover, historic public spaces are also tasked with appealing to the youth who will act as the next generation responsible for the safeguarding and activation of their communal heritage. UNESCO's Inclusive and Resilient Societies (2022) publication identifies participation in cultural activities as a mode of self-acceptance and confidence-building, which can prevent the development of mental illness in adolescence. It also regards engagement with cultural activities as a stimulant for cognitive, linguistics and emotional development. For migrant youth, access to historic public spaces can also generate a sense of belonging with their new surroundings at an early age, offering an easier process of social cohesion.

Finally, women and LGBTQ+ communities, having experienced universal long-standing social inequalities, are often excluded from historic narratives and spaces. It is argued that current depictions of heritage are male-focused and selective in their storytelling, when a more holistic representation of the past can allow women and others to connect and identify more deeply to heritage contexts (Smith, 2008). In public spaces, these users are additionally subject to explicit verbal and physical harassment as well as implicit perceptions of fear and a lack of safety. A 2020 survey found that 4 out of 10 women in the EU avoid public spaces with no people and avoid using particular streets due to fear, while 1 in 7 women prefer not to leave home alone at all (Moreno et. al, 2020). It is therefore imperative for historic public spaces to consider elements of safety for women to encourage an inclusive environment.

Inclusivity users are also time-sensitive, requiring constant re-evaluation with our transforming ways of living. Some users may be temporary visitors while others may be permanent residents, while others may have a temporary disability that affects their experience of a public space. For this manual, the identified vulnerable users in inclusivity are therefore represented in the matrix below considering both locality/globality and the aspect of time, of which the underlined users will be focused on in the upcoming chapters:

|                 | Short Term                                        | Long Term                                                                                          | Timeless                                                                                                |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Local</b>    | People With Temporary Disabilities                | Native Residents<br><u>Migrant Communities</u><br><u>Refugees</u><br>Expatriates<br>Local Students | Women<br><u>Elderly</u><br><u>People With Permanent Disabilities</u><br>Families And Children<br>LGBTQ+ |
| <b>Visiting</b> | Visiting Professionals<br>Researchers<br>Tourists | International Students<br>Seasonal Workers                                                         |                                                                                                         |

Table 1. Types of Users in Historic Public Spaces (Authors' scheme)

## 2.2 Barriers to an Inclusive Legacy

### 2.2.1 Public Space Barriers, a Holistic Approach

Public spaces are subject to numerous multidisciplinary constraints including their governance, commoditization, and urban design and planning, which altogether can directly or indirectly influence their inclusiveness. For instance, a public space can lose users in the case of its wider neighbourhood becoming gentrified and driving its lower-income residents to relocate. Similarly, poorly designed paths within these spaces can prevent people with disabilities from accessing them. These barriers afflicting the use and enjoyment of public spaces fundamentally refer to the ability of a space to communicate, represent, and engage with a wide variety of users.

The EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2010-2030 affirms the importance of a barrier-free and inclusive Europe across all sectors, including "*improving access to art and culture, recreation, leisure, sport, and tourism,*" (European Commission, 2021, pp.20) for both disabled children and adults. However, beyond physical access, people with disabilities can also face social barriers such as alienation or exclusion, which is shared by other vulnerable users including migrant communities, refugees, and women, and it is these invisible barriers that are often disregarded. Within the UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Assessment Kit, such barriers are identified as "*perceived or real insecurity in public spaces, with consequent effects of limited use, abandonment and decline [...], weakening of social cohesion [...], absence of directions and references, which may cause a condition of deep disorientation in users of urban space,*" (Garau, 2016B, pp.30-31).

At historic sites, these constraints are augmented for their difficulties in adapting to both modern needs and audiences. Much of Europe's Cultural Heritage currently operates under restrictive preservation guidelines that do not enable physical transformation for greater accessibility. In Italy, the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities stresses the importance of preserving the historical and aesthetic values of its heritage (DPR 1996, Art. 19). A recent study on the city of Trento revealed multiple physical

barriers including the inefficiency and danger of cobble stone paving in its historic centre, but also the difficulty in altering these spaces whose aesthetics are protected by heritage law (Pretto, 2020). On a global scale, while the UNESCO Operational Guidelines (2024) allow minor modifications for World Heritage sites, it is unclear what constitutes a minor or major modification without altering its 'Outstanding Universal Value.' These changes also require notifying the competent authorities and obtaining permissions. As a result, many significant heritage sites avoid physical alterations due to a difficulty in balancing authenticity with inclusivity (Prabowo and Temeljotov-Salaj, 2023), such as the Acropolis in Athens which only recently instituted lifts for accessibility measures (ENAT, 2020).

In addition to these physical barriers, historical public spaces often carry cultural and intellectual significance that is not often conveyed effectively to all its users, consequently isolating some and prioritizing others. A recent study on intellectual disabilities in schoolchildren analyzed information text at the National Archeological Museum of Aquileia, which received a low Gulpease<sup>24</sup> index score of 45.9, representing a readability measure equivalent to requiring higher education knowledge to understand it fully (Bortolotti and Paoletti, 2021). Even for neurotypical users, particularly in the case of architectural sites or monuments, it can appear unclear why a site is heralded as cultural heritage to the passerby in the case of weak communication. This may be due to obstructed or too few signage, or technical jargon associated with the site such as construction details that are not obvious to non-architects. This can cause alienation and a lack of interest in a public space from a potential user. For museums in Italy, a proposed assessment of information accessibility and the communication of historical themes is divided into 3 areas (Ricco, 2023), which can also apply when approaching historic public spaces:

1. when it does not reach the recipient, who is unaware of its existence because it is not present in the media that they usually consume (information level),
2. when the recipient is unable to understand the information due to its level of complexity or for linguistic reasons if it is written in a language unknown to him (cognitive or inter-linguistic level),
3. when there are perceptual barriers, either situational or due to the characteristics of the person, such as by the lighting or noise conditions of a given environment (sensory/perceptual level).

Beyond individual understanding of cultural heritage, Hall's seminal work on representation (1997) also argues that culture represents a shared meaning among a populace, in which access to language provides the ability to discover and integrate with this shared meaning. However, this requires a representational system whereby language, beyond mere translation, includes the ability to comprehend the same visual images, body language, and expressions to enable a dialogue between diverse individuals and ultimately a more complete understanding of culture and thereby of heritage. For instance, certain icons or colours may symbolize different meanings to people who originate different parts of the world. This acts as part of a wider circuit of culture, whereby representation allows for a sense of identity, which inspires the production and consumption of culture, followed by the

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<sup>24</sup> A Gulpease index measures a text's readability based on word length, number of words and the length of sentences.

regulation of culture, and vice versa (Hall, 1997). If certain individuals do not possess the tools to engage in the shared meaning of a cultural heritage site, they are prevented from participating in this circuit of culture, resulting in a lack of connection or sense of belonging with the historical place.

Similarly, there are arguments that a lack of representation is a common barrier in historic sites due to their controversial pasts and contextual underpinnings, where monuments of past imperialism and colonization can bring discomfort in some users of public spaces. A powerful example of this includes the destruction of several American monuments of prominent historical figures who carried a legacy of slavery in 2020 during the George Floyd protests (Avrami, 2021). While opinions on maintaining or changing these legacies are contested, there is an importance in acknowledging racialized and problematic legacies and rather utilizing examples of such heritage for a culture to evaluate and interrogate its history while championing its present users (Littler, 2008).

### **2.2.2 Types of Inclusivity Barriers in Historic Public Spaces**

There are many methodologies for categorizing public space barriers. One example is presented through three themes: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural barriers (Noël et. al, 2021). While intrapersonal barriers relate to oneself including personal desires to attend a public space, linguistic or psychological concerns, interpersonal barriers are those related to how we interact with other people, such as difficulty in socializing or not enjoying crowded spaces. Structural barriers refer to external physical barriers such as lack of car parking, reduced facilities etc. Another way of classifying public space barriers is by assessing its availability, accessibility, and attractiveness, although these fail to consider the socio-cultural dimension (Noël et. al, 2021).

The socio-cultural dimension of barriers is imperative to consider when discussing shared spaces. As mentioned previously, cultural representation or lack thereof is a recurring indicator of a sense of belonging, or social capital. Where cultural barriers represent one's relation with the heritage at hand, social barriers concern the role of community relationships and social interactions occurring in real time at these public spaces. Social barriers include the feeling of alienation or judgement whether due to race, ethnicity, religion, or physical or mental disabilities. A recent study across 28 European countries found that the greatest obstacle to cultural participation for people with disabilities, in both attending cultural content and creating it, was a negative or ableist attitude from others (Leahy and Ferri, 2024). Similarly, the previously mentioned study by UNICEF revealed that 93% of young people in Italy either witnessed or experienced discrimination for reasons related to religion, ethnicity, or migrant status (UNICEF, 2024). Another study discusses *cleavages* or historically determined lines of division between groups of residents and citizens, with ethnicity being the greatest cleavage, particularly in recent immigration countries such as Italy and Spain, which can impact hostilities at public spaces when different groups are mingled (Pastore and Ponzio, 2016). Other identified cleavages include socio-economic conditions, religion, and interestingly length of stay, in which older immigrants have a harder time integrating into the public realm after years of exclusion (Pastore and Ponzio, 2016).

Particularly within historic public spaces, the European Parliament studied the structural and financial barriers to accessing culture in 2018. From a policy perspective, the report identified that “*financial*

barriers still prevent citizens, especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged groups, from fully enjoying their fundamental right to participate in cultural life and access to culture, and that this hinders the effective realisation of that fundamental right,” (Zdrojewski, 2018, pp.11). The report adds that public funding towards historic sites is usually the first to be cut in cases of economic downturn due to their high insurance costs, resulting in the increase of entrance tickets and reduction of activities with audiences, which limit the type of users able to attend such spaces and render them not public.

The report also tackles educational barriers to cultural sites and events by noting that lack of interest is the predominant reason behind low cultural participation and consequently calls for building interest through educational programs and allowing students free access to historic sites such as museums and exhibitions. Although these places may not be described as public spaces, they are often adjacent to public squares or streets of historical importance, which impacts attendance in these secondary spaces as a byproduct. Other aspects mentioned in the report include “that language barriers can have an adverse effect on cultural demand, and calls, therefore, for greater multilingualism in cultural productions,” (Zdrojewski, 2018, pp.16). The report also encourages its member states to “undertake the necessary measures to facilitate transport and access to cultural institutions for disabled people and people with reduced mobility,” (Zdrojewski, 2018, pp.16). Finally, the report acknowledges the role of digital media in overcoming the above-mentioned barriers either in person or remotely, however simultaneously stressing the importance of avoiding digital exclusion for vulnerable users such as the elderly.

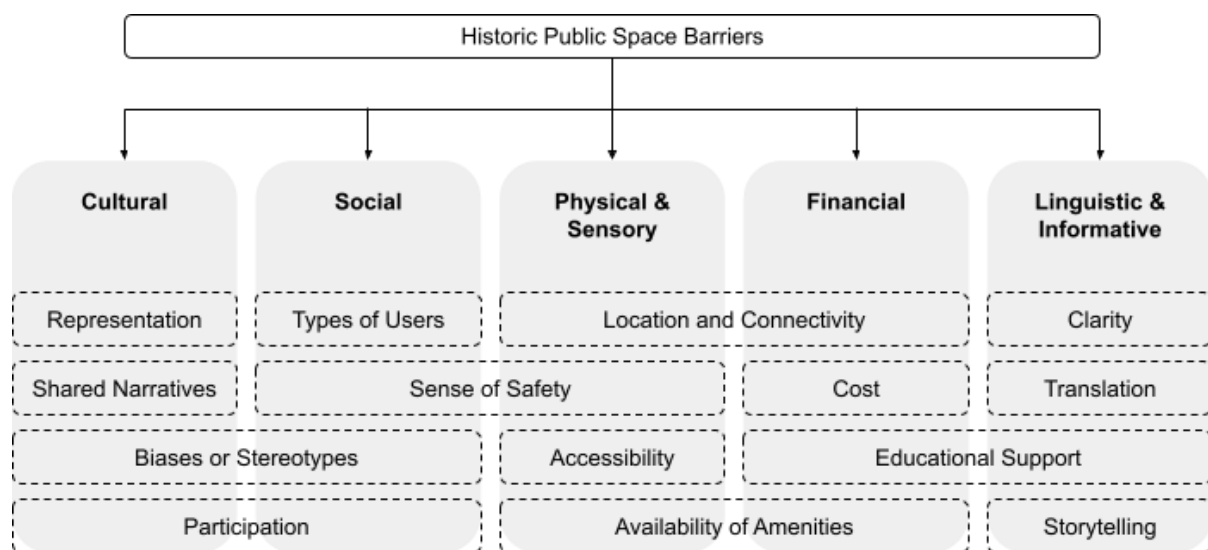


Figure 17. Schema of Inclusivity Barriers for Historic Public Spaces (Authors' scheme)

### 2.2.3 Historic Public Space Barrier Indicators

Since historic public spaces can become vulnerable to both misuse and disuse, they require an identification of the barriers preventing their use to ensure their vitality. For this manual, the identified barriers are classified into 5 areas with underlying indicators intended to be used for assessing and/or designing an inclusive or exclusive historic public space:

### **1. Cultural Barriers:**

*Objective: To understand how heritage spaces include or exclude cultural narratives.*

- a. Identify which communities and historical narratives are represented by the given history or cultural heritage in the public space, and who may be left out.
- b. Check whether the historical and/or cultural significance of the site is clearly expressed within the public space;
  - i. If its significance is taught in schools,
  - ii. If its significance is communicated to tourists and migrants.
- c. Identify visible signs, information points, or guides to help users understand the significance of the site.
- d. Evaluate whether the given history or cultural heritage is presented in a biased way;
  - i. If users from different countries feel represented or included.
- e. Identify the interpretations of the history offered at the historic space;
  - i. If minorities' perspectives or contested histories are integrated,
  - ii. If there are opportunities for community participation or storytelling, where underrepresented voices can contribute to the cultural narrative.

### **2. Social Barriers:**

*Objective: To evaluate how inclusive spaces are across various social groups.*

- a. Observe who are the most frequent users of the historic public space;
  - i. Note which groups are missing (ex. youth, elderly, women, migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals).
- b. Identify any isolated groups on the periphery of the historic public space who appear disconnected or excluded.
- c. Investigate any observed or reported acts of discrimination or harassment occurring in the space.
- d. Assess how comfortable people feel visiting this space alone;
  - i. Which particular times in the day are preferred and reasons for this.
- e. Identify if the historical significance of the site targets a particular social group;
  - i. Look for colonial or stereotypical undertones to the cultural heritage on site.
- f. Look for programs for intercultural dialogue at nearby local institutions for diverse social groups to approach the site.

### **3. Physical and Sensory Barriers:**

*Objective: To assess the physical and sensory quality of historic public spaces.*

- a. Check if the historic space is accessible for people with mobility impairments;
  - i. Look for ramps in place of stairs, tactile paving, no narrow walkways or uneven surfaces.
- b. Identify whether the historic space is well-lit and navigable during both day and night.
- c. Check if there is frequent overcrowding, loud noises, or overstimulation at the historic space;

- i. Look for quiet “calm” spaces dedicated for those who need them.
- d. Evaluate the historic site’s connectivity to public transport services or bicycle infrastructure and its walkability in relation to the city center.
- e. Check for amenities such as resting points, shaded areas, or facilities such as water fountains and toilets in the space.
- f. Identify whether the historical and/or cultural significance of the site is expressed with accessible features (braille, speakers, large font etc.).
- g. Consider how well the site is maintained, especially signage and surfaces.

#### **4. Financial Barriers:**

*Objective: To understand how affordability affects access to historic public spaces.*

- a. Examine the location of the site, whether it is located in a high or low income neighborhood.
- b. Check the pricing of nearby facilities (restaurants, cafes etc.) for local use.
- c. Identify the cost of transportation to and from the public space for lower-income users in further regions.
- d. Identify if adjacent cultural institutions (museums, galleries etc.) are free to access or low-cost.
- e. Locate freely available public amenities (restrooms, seating, playgrounds) without hidden costs.
- f. Look for educational or interpretive programs, workshops, and tours that are free to access or low-cost.

#### **5. Linguistic and Informative Barriers:**

*Objective: To evaluate how well the site communicates across language/literacy levels.*

- a. Check whether descriptions of the historical and/or cultural significance are expressed in clear, understandable language.
- b. Identify if the historical and/or cultural significance of the site is offered in multiple languages, including local minorities’ languages.
- c. Assess the prevailing languages used by local groups of users in the city.
- d. Examine if technical, historical, architectural, or political terminology on site is easy to understand by people of all education levels?
- e. Assess whether oral traditions or community memories are acknowledged or integrated.
- f. Look for digital tools (mobile apps, websites, QR codes) to learn more about the space;
  - i. Check whether these tools are inclusive of users with limited digital literacy/access.
- g. Identify if there is an active outreach program (social media, school visits, community events) to inform all users about the space and its programs.

## 2.3 Methods and Practices for Ensuring Public Space Inclusivity in Historic Cities

### 2.3.1 Key Principles for Inclusive Design and their Practical Implementation

Existing principles for inclusive design are presented under several contexts and scales, be it for general urban planning, product design, architectural spaces, heritage sites, and public spaces among others which often intersect. Thematically, we can redefine the barriers discussed in the previous section as cultural, social, physical and sensory, financial, and linguistic and informative *principles*.

Similar principles can be exemplified by the 7 Principles of Universal Design (CEUD, 2025), created initially in 1997 at the North Carolina State University, which can be applied as overarching indicators to both products and built environments. The principles adapted to today's needs are divided as follows:

1. Equitable Use: to provide similar means of use to all visitors of the space without stigmatizing certain groups or individuals,
2. Flexibility in Use: to maintain an adaptable space with different methods of accessing and utilizing the space for different types of users,
3. Simple and Intuitive Use: to accommodate a wide range of literacy and language skills
4. Perceptible Information: to offer information in different formats, languages, and clear signage etc.,
5. Tolerance for Error: to prevent safety hazards for vulnerable users,
6. Low Physical Effort: to minimize sustained physical effort when using the space,
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use: to provide space for personal assistance, comfortable seating and standing.

Regarding other typologies of public spaces, the Oxford Brookes University's Streets for Life publication (Burton and Mitchell, 2006) focuses on streets, pathways, and alleys as opposed to more demarcated public spaces like piazzas and monuments. The Streets for Life project is directed towards aiding those with cognitive disabilities or illnesses such as dementia who are often overlooked as public space users, but it can also be useful for a range of social groups including newcomers to historic cities who require support in navigating them. The method provides 6 principles to consider when designing or adapting existing streets:

1. Familiarity: the ability to recognize a street due to its long-established presence within an urban fabric, or through its hierarchical formal qualities compared to other streets or distinct features,
2. Legibility: the extent to which the street is easy to navigate through its network of routes, connections, and junctions, as well as through clearly readable signage,
3. Distinctiveness: similarly to familiarity, it is the ability to distinguish one neighborhood from another through their streets' local character, built form, materiality, and colors to instantly comprehend where you are,

4. Accessibility: the ability of a street to enable residents to enter and walk regardless of physical and mental impairments, through clear and tactile pedestrian crossings, as well as flat and stable footways, and occasional seating,
5. Comfort: aside from meeting physical needs, it is the extent to which a street can withhold a calm, quiet and welcoming atmosphere to users with cognitive impairments, and the ability to feel independent in such spaces,
6. Safety: the extent to which streets are safe to move in and enjoy without the notion of fear, whether it is the fear of tripping by oneself or being attacked by another member of society. Safety is also concerned with physical elements such as barriers from cars, adequate lighting and smooth footways.

Streets for Life also encourages the use of landmarks to flank streets as reference points and to propose direction (Burton and Mitchell, 2006). This demonstrates the synergetic role of historic public monuments, as the monuments themselves act as a visual tool for those with cognitive impairments to navigate their surroundings, which further promotes their inclusion and participation in the civic and social sphere.

However, while many existing principles and literature focus on physical accessibility of historic public spaces and mobility for elderly users, there is a wide gap in the case of cultural involvement which incorporates migrants, refugees, and expatriates in an ever-globalizing world. The UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Assessment Kit (Garau, 2016B) presents diverse social interaction as the key principle to an inclusive public space, however efforts towards this interaction must be catalyzed by local initiatives. A recent study addressed Meerow's framework of social equity by adding the dimension of Transformation to the existing list of identity, placement, accessibility, and empathy (Harris et. al, 2023). The study presents a Value-Inclusive Design model for architectural and urban education and practice in which inclusivity is a mutually beneficial and transactional process for social equity, whereby:

- *"Identity recognizes individual human value and worth,*
- *Placement considers the quality of apparent relations,*
- *Equal distribution is made possible through accessibility,*
- *Empathy recognizes the presence of all beings in harmony,*
- *Both the micro and macro levels of 'transformation' within a community are present."* (Harris et. al, 2023, pp. 12)

Here, transformation is a significant asset for historic public spaces because it challenges their ability to adapt their urban environments to their changing users. Even if incremental, transformation can enable a consistent use of an environment, such as the previous case of the city of Florence and the Piazza Santa Maria del Carmine which has adapted its public space across centuries, resulting in continuous habitation. Transformation also acts as a tool for fairness and justice in public spaces (Harris et. al, 2023). As historic public spaces attempt to preserve the past, transformation through local policies and participation practices gives new incoming users the ability to co-create new meanings in an existing place, which allows a deeper connection with it.

For instance, a defined existing principle for historic spaces is UNESCO's notion of a *Historic Urban Landscape Approach* (HUL), which is a 'soft-law' implemented by Member States on a voluntary basis and contributes to existing doctrines or conservation approaches as an additional tool integrating policies and practices of conservation into the wider goals of urban development, whilst respecting the values of different cultural contexts (UNESCO, 2011). However, beyond existing cultural heritage management, HUL frames the management of historical urban heritage with a holistic approach by integrating the objectives of urban heritage conservation and those of economic and social development. This method highlights the crucial importance of recognizing the dynamism that the economic, social and cultural spheres impose on heritage. Therefore, the recommendation focuses on the entire human environment with all its tangible and intangible qualities, directing the design interventions to take into consideration the existing built environment, the intangible heritage, cultural diversity, environmental and socio-economic factors and the local community values.

A practical guide called the HUL Guidebook was launched in 2016 to assist stakeholders, local authorities, government officials, practitioners in the field of urban conservation or development, researchers, consultants and university and training partners in the application of the HUL Recommendation. The guidebook states that successful management of urban heritage should include interdisciplinary and innovative tools that can be organized in four categories adapted to the local application and to its changes evolving over time (UNESCO, 2016). The tools should:

- work on the *engagement of the community* with its different stakeholders, facilitating intercultural dialogue by learning from communities their history, traditions, values, needs and aspirations and facilitating the resolution of conflicts,
- help the protection of the integrity and authenticity of the urban heritage through *knowledge and planning* that allow the recognition of cultural significance and diversity and help the monitoring and managing process,
- recognize the local *regulatory systems* including both the formal tools of laws, regulation and policies and the informal ones such as the traditional and customary systems that should even be reinforced, if necessary,
- aim to develop *financial tools* to make the HUL approach process financially sustainable.

In this approach, the first point directly correlates with inclusive design whereby engaging with the community is a bifold solution. While it can be used to help manage heritage sites (Prabowo et. al, 2023), integration within these spaces for foreign individuals and communities can also promote social cohesion amongst themselves, each other, and the native local population.

More recently, digital practices have also been implemented in historic sites with the aim to increase accessibility and inclusivity. Access through Virtual Reality, which was popularized during the Covid-19 pandemic, created newfound levels of access for historical spaces, particularly those of a highly-protected status. This not only serves those physically unable to access cultural heritage, but also those with financial restraints or travel restrictions (Prabowo and Temeljotov-Salaj, 2023). Although this is an increasingly popular method of increasing the 'accessibility' of a site, when discussing public spaces, digital tools should act as a secondary support with the aim of physical access since public spaces are

meant to be enjoyed and attended by everybody equally (Garau, 2016A). These methods must consider the digital literacy of all users of public spaces, where in Italy for instance, 30% of the population had never used the internet by 2018 (Capasso, 2023), demonstrating a great digital illiteracy particularly among the elderly. Therefore, digital tools should accompany historic public spaces rather than entirely replace their physical presence.

In Italy, efforts in photogramming, 3D modelling of archeological sites and monuments among other digital tools have enabled a new model of access to historical spaces. *“In this context, the concept of heritage enjoyment has undergone a profound change: each person is increasingly an active subject, contributing to the construction of meanings, to the point of becoming a true cultural prosumer rather than a simple user,”* (Garofolo, 2023, pp.53). In the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia, a recent initiative included creating an audio-tactile path with a specific itinerary for those with sensory and/or cognitive disabilities to guide their experience throughout the museum independently (Novello and Braidotti, 2023). This also allows for multiple languages to be used at the same time and instant translations whenever necessary to counteract any linguistic barriers, which can be applied similarly in historically significant public spaces for any user to familiarize with their contexts, for instance through QR codes available on site. The process of digitizing these histories can also be an inclusive experience within itself, whereby the digitization of historic public spaces can act as a collaborative and educational process that involves students and volunteers residing in the area (Cook and Hill, 2019). One example of this is the Liminal Futures project conducted in Lazio, Italy which creates a year-long program for volunteer members to help digitize remote historical villages in the countryside of Rome. This includes documenting previously-unrecorded paths through Google Map Street Views, as well as recording the narratives and stories of the villages’ ageing residents among other initiatives, (Liminal Associazione di Promozione Sociale, 2025). The members, who are often international immigrants residing in Italy including students and young professionals, are simultaneously invited to interact with one other through team-building exercises across the cultural landscape they are preserving.

Overall, in a fast-paced technologically advancing world, the potential of digital tools must be leveraged to aid the experience of historic public spaces, in addition to the importance of physical interventions that can enhance inclusivity. Intangible social programs that bring these spaces to attention are also imperative, and it is ultimately the symbiosis of these various actions that enables the success of a historic public space.

### **2.3.2 Best Practices of Inclusive Historic Public Space Engagement**

Within the principles stated above, a less-discussed theme is the one of representation and interaction. In addition to the design of public spaces themselves, there is also the under-appreciated role of organizations and institutions in encouraging and welcoming a varied range of users. A recent research conducted by the Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation revealed that *“the available literature suggests that the need to represent diverse narratives and engage communities in heritage work is increasingly well recognized, even if practice and policy have not yet fully shifted to accommodate these changing perspectives. Much less research has been dedicated to the methods*

*employed to promote inclusive engagement and to probing the outcomes of this engagement and of preservation policy writ large,” (Avrami, 2021).*

Therefore, for this manual, a series of 4 best practices have been selected to depict an alternative form of inclusivity in historic spaces which not only utilizes the spatial qualities of historic sites but exemplifies methodologies of collective agency and social responsibility in creating targeted programs for inclusivity.<sup>25</sup>

## **1. Tessuti Sociali (Social Fabrics) - Prato, Italy**

Interviewee: Andrea Villarini

- **About the Project:**

The *Tessuti Sociali* (**SO**Cial learning **Al**lestimenti museali **L**ingue **I**nterazioni) (*Social Fabrics* in English) project, implemented between 2020 and 2022 in Prato, Italy, was conceived and led by a research team from the University for Foreigners of Siena including Andrea Villarini, in partnership with the Textile Museum of Prato. The project was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) through a regional call by the Tuscany Region and sought to address issues of linguistic and cultural exclusion by reimagining the museum not merely as a site of passive cultural consumption, but as an active, socially embedded learning environment. The city of Prato presented an optimal backdrop for this experiment due to its significant immigrant population, particularly Chinese, Albanian, Arab, and Urdu-speaking communities, whereby Prato is both a site of cultural convergence and social fragmentation. While its existing Textile Museum is nationally recognized, it remained largely inaccessible for a long time to non-Italian-speaking residents and visitors, who perceived it as culturally and linguistically distant.

At its conceptual core, Andrea explains that the project was grounded in a pedagogical vision informed by semiotics and language acquisition theory, whereby museums could function not only as repositories of historical artifacts, but as settings able to foster communication. This perspective is aligned with practices in second-language teaching, where simulated real-world contexts (ex. a post office or market) can be used for language learning. By adapting this method to the museum setting, *Tessuti Sociali* aimed to make heritage spaces both linguistically and socially accessible, especially for newly-arrived or marginalized populations.

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<sup>25</sup> For each project, an online interview was conducted with the program’s leader or founder through Microsoft Teams due to the varying locations of the projects within Europe. The participating interviewees were informed of the interview’s purpose and objectives as well as its recording and eventual transcribing. The results and key findings of these interviews are summarized below, although a full transcript of the interviews can be found in the annex section of the manual.



Figure 18. *The Tessuti Sociali project in practice (Villarini, 2025)*

- **Applied Tools and Target Audience:**

The initial plan envisioned a dynamic model of spontaneous visitor engagement. Museum-goers would encounter interactive QR codes next to textile exhibits, each linking to web-based activities designed to build vocabulary and grammatical structures in Italian. However, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly disrupted these intentions. With public access to museums suspended for extended periods, the project team was forced to rethink their approach. *“We really feared we’d have to return the funding. The whole thing was meant to be about physical interaction, and suddenly, no one could enter any museum. But with adaptation, it ended up exceeding our initial expectations,”* Andrea remarks.

Rather than halting the initiative, the team retargeted their audience towards children in school, reaching over 182 elementary school children through educational programs, many of whom came from immigrant backgrounds. Students participated in curated museum visits as an afterschool activity that combined creative activities—such as drawing and storytelling—with guided exposure to Italian language content. The QR code system was retained and repurposed for group instruction, allowing students to interact with museum exhibits in a socially distanced but still participatory way. The museum space thus became a semi-public classroom; a hybrid between cultural institution and community learning center.

- **Tackling Inclusivity Barriers:**

The project also highlighted barriers to access. Interviews and data collected during the project revealed that language remains the primary obstacle for immigrant communities, followed closely by perceived cultural distance and socioeconomic limitations. According to Andrea, *“museums in Italy are still seen as spaces of high culture, reserved for those with education, time, and money. People say, ‘I’m a worker, I don’t go to museums.’ Unfortunately, this is a very Italian attitude.”* This further represents the need to demystify museums and to display heritage in an approachable manner.

- **Success, Impact and Future Development:**

One of the project's most notable outcomes was a final celebratory public event held at the Textile Museum, "*The final event was very telling—it served as a real measure of [the project's] impact,*" Andrea remarks, This gathering brought together the participating students and their families, along with representatives from the city's immigrant communities. Families contributed food and shared stories, transforming the museum into a public site of conviviality and co-creation.

Although conducted within a museum, *Tessuti Sociali* demonstrates a potential that can be transcribed to other public heritage spaces by applying its instruments of social inclusion, particularly when considering these spaces as dynamic platforms for learning and intercultural dialogue through the integration of interactive learning gestures. The project's use of technologies within its practice also enables a wide outreach for users from all backgrounds, and attests to its adaptability and flexibility in the face of pandemic constraints. For this, the *Tessuti Sociali* was recognized by the Tuscany Region as a best practice within its ESF programming. The project's success also resulted in academic advancements, where monographic classes for the University's Semiotics course were conducted to further study museums as semiotic environments.

## **2. Gli Anelli Mancanti (The Missing Links) - Florence, Italy**

Interviewee: Diana Giudici

- **About the Project:**

Gli Anelli Mancanti is a community project founded in Florence in 1991 on Via del Palazzuolo, a vibrant hub for intercultural exchange. The project aims to promote inclusivity, social integration, and cultural exchange by creating accessible and welcoming spaces where people from different backgrounds can meet, learn, and share. The project's name, "The Missing Links" (Anelli Mancanti), signifies this mission to bridge cultural and social gaps through its focus on the Italian Language. Diana Giudici, who currently works within the project's intercultural department, explains how the provision of language can act as a powerful tool for social participation, "*it's really about communication. That's the foundation. The interesting thing is that our students come from all over the world so Italian also becomes the shared language between them.*" Language learning is positioned as a right and a necessity for social inclusivity, enabling migrants to navigate and adapt more swiftly to new contexts. Beyond the provision of an essential linguistic service for migrant communities, Gli Anelli Mancanti harnesses the full capability of language as an instrument for connection and belonging through active participation with Florence's heritage and with one another.

- **Applied Tools and Target Audience:**

The biweekly courses are divided across various learning levels with over 200 students with a nominal fee of 5 Euros a month to sustain the volunteer group's mission. Moreover, the project extends beyond language. The association regularly conducts free guided visits to Florence's main museums, including the Palazzo Vecchio, the Museo del Novecento, and

the Botanical Gardens, where the students can relate their own experiences to the exhibitions. *“At the Botanical Garden Museum, it’s wonderful, there’s a great exchange because of the plants. Everyone shares their own stories: what they know, what they eat, etc. The visits are pretexts for talking, for sharing, for spending time together,”* Diana says.

The project’s users also reflect the shifting demographics of migration in Italy. Initially, many participants were young African men, but recent years have seen more women from Eastern Europe, often older and seeking cultural connection through museum visits rather than language courses. This shift demonstrates the project’s flexibility in responding to changing migratory patterns and needs. Diana explains how the project also unveils the role of gender in assimilating to Italian culture, such as access to the Italian language for accompanying wives and sisters of migrants, *“You often see this: the brother accompanying his sister who’s just arrived to her first lesson. So, there are these beautiful, meaningful gestures of recognition, because the women see [the Gli Anelli Mancanti classrooms] as a place where they feel welcomed.”*

- **Tackling Inclusivity Barriers:**

The association’s initiatives also include a major annual festival or party that previously occurred within the city’s outdoor public spaces, namely the piazza adjacent to the association’s building, Piazza San Paolino. These festivals included simple yet impactful activities including matching volunteer photos with personal background statements. Such exercises encouraged reflection on stereotypes and personal histories, building a sense of empathy and understanding among participants. Diana recounts how organizing events in public spaces was particularly powerful in reinforcing the visibility of multicultural presence in Florence, *“for us, from a community-building point of view, organizing the festival in a piazza activated so much energy. It was a unifying force.”* The use of public squares, although logistically demanding, allowed for broader community engagement and signaled that inclusivity is a public, civic matter. Unfortunately, urban redevelopment and privatization of space have pushed the project to more private and less central venues, which has impacted the scale and spontaneity of participation.



Figure 19. Public Space Event by Gli Anelli Mancanti (Gli Anelli Mancanti, 2022)

- **Success, Impact And Future Development:**

A key strength of Gli Anelli Mancanti is its reliance on a large, committed volunteer base—nearly a hundred individuals, each with specialized roles. This organizational model reinforces community ownership and sustainability, where volunteers are free to join for 3 months at a time depending on their circumstances. Diana emphasizes that such engagement fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose, with volunteers often learning as much from the participants as vice versa. This has also resulted in the long-standing presence of the project, as it continues today in its 35th year.

### 3. The *Abuab* (Doors) Initiative - Barcelona, Spain

Interviewee: Isber Sabrine

- **About The Project:**

The *Abuab* initiative, founded by heritage practitioner Isber Sabrine in 2018, represents an emergent model of heritage engagement that actively fosters social inclusion, particularly among displaced and marginalized populations. Rooted in a community-based and participatory series of excursions, *Abuab* leverages public heritage spaces as platforms for cultural dialogue, identity affirmation, and civic connection. Drawing from his own experience as a refugee, Sabrine highlights how *Abuab* was created as a response that challenged any exclusion refugees were experiencing in their new environments, from lifelong cultural narratives to everyday life activities.



Figure 20. Abuab Participants at Various Excursions (Abuab, 2025)

- **Applied Tools and Target Audience:**

The project, which is currently in its third iteration in Barcelona, consists of small events of 15-20 people including tours across heritage museums, art exhibitions, and concerts. *Abuab* collaborates with NGOs with direct contact to refugees, such as the UNHCR and local organizations, but also utilizes social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram to announce events. Participants are usually adult individuals, although they often bring along their children and families, underscoring the project's wider social reach. Sabine articulates *Abuab* as a space where cultural heritage is reclaimed as a common thread among people from different places, transcending discourses of states and boundaries. Working mainly with refugees from the MENA region such as Syria, Yemenis, Moroccans, Algerians, but also Ukrainians, Sabine expresses that *"refugees often discover that despite cultural differences, there are many similarities too. This is especially true in Spain, where you can see shared cultural heritage through 800 years of Arabic history. That's part of what we aim to highlight through our work."*

- **Tackling Inclusivity Barriers:**

These engagements are not limited to passive consumption of heritage; rather, they involve active participation, storytelling, and knowledge-sharing that foster mutual understanding. Projects in the past have included visits to Montjuïc Castle and the Joan Miró Foundation, among other cultural heritage institutions. Sabine affirms the importance of these engaging experiences especially for those with a greater cultural barrier, *"Adaptation varies a lot. Some people adapt quickly; others struggle... For instance, people from Ukraine tend to adapt more easily because they come from a European context where going to museums and concerts*

*is more common. On the other hand, people from the Middle East may not be used to visiting museums or attending opera performances.”*

The project also discovered that more participants were drawn to attend concerts such as opera performances that presented cultural heritage through a unique, more palatable platform, possibly due to the participants’ ability to connect more freely to the subject matter. As a response to this, the visits to heritage museums include volunteers who speak the same language, or are even from the same countries as the refugees participating to offer familiar explanations during the tours, but further to connect with each other and form a community in their new environments.

- **Success, Impact and Future Development:**

*“Many refugees feel forgotten or invisible,” shares Sabine. “When someone takes the time to include them, they feel valued. Our events help them learn about their new home; its history, people, and culture. That knowledge builds confidence and a sense of belonging.”* Despite operating on a volunteer basis with minimal funding, *Abuab*’s impact can be scaled to wider territories throughout Italy while maintaining its strategic awareness of heritage’s potential role for securing social infrastructure. Sabine perceives heritage engagement as a direct human right, and one that offers a greater self-esteem and well being for a person assimilating to new contexts, situating it as a basic need rather than a luxury. This positions *Abuab* as an excellent model for inclusion and social cohesion in heritage zones and could be expanded further towards publicly accessible spaces.

#### **4. Dante On The Move - Ravenna, Rome, and Florence, Italy**

Interviewee: Jennifer Allsopp

- **About The Project:**

At the junction of heritage, literature and cultural landscapes, the Dante on the Move initiative provides an innovative approach to cultural integration for young refugee students in Italy. Initiated in Spring 2023 by Jennifer Allsopp, Fellow at the University of Birmingham, the project was launched as a university module on migration through the lens of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* and his other writings at Trinity College’s Rome campus. At its core, the project explores classical literature as a tool that not only offers a universal language for expressing displacement and exile, but also forms a meaningful connection between the reader and the environment it was created in or inspired by. Dissatisfied with dominant policy discourses that framed refugees through a victim mentality, Jennifer’s Dante on the Move sought to create a counter-narrative by observing Dante’s own status as a political exile as a potential cathartic bridge between contemporary refugee experiences and Italy’s cultural heritage landscape.

- **Applied Tools and Target Audience:**

The module brought together a diverse range of 12 refugee students from Iran, Afghanistan, Egypt, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Kurdish Iraq alongside 5 American exchange students who

would meet weekly to discuss Dante's writings, culminating in a final exhibition of the students' inspired works. Rather than limiting literary exploration to a classroom, the course greatly utilized heritage public spaces and walking tours to allow a physical engagement with Dante's texts, whereby Jennifer attests that, "*we couldn't have done the course in just a classroom.*" This included field visits to Dante's grave in Ravenna, the Florence Baptistery, and his statues in public parks and piazzas across Rome, as well as visits to public museums. Beyond a backdrop, these national heritage settings triggered an emotional response from the refugee students, including a moving instance outside the Florence Baptistry where one student recognized Dante's inability to return to Florence as her own experience. Unlike the bureaucracy of socioeconomic integration, Jennifer describes such encounters with cultural heritage as moments of true cultural integration which center on conviviality and exchange for a marginalized community.



Figure 21. Participants from *Dante on the Move* (Jennifer Allsopp, 2023)

- **Tackling Inclusivity Barriers:**

To tackle barriers of inclusivity such as those of language, the students were encouraged to engage with the material in multiple languages including their native tongue—English, Italian, Persian, Arabic, and others—adapting the curriculum towards each individual's needs. The immediate success of the project was evident from her students' engagement with the subject matter. For example, Jennifer recounts how "*in the very first session, Sahara, one of the Afghan students, burst into tears reading Dante's description of exile because she thought, 'how is it that this 700-year-old dead Italian politician, poet can understand my experience, but people today can't?'*"

The students also staged their final creative projects with total freedom of expression at the heritage sites and public spaces that they visited.. One student produced a short film titled

The Paradise of Exiles, tracing her journey through bureaucratic ‘purgatory’ and ending in the Galleria Borghese, which had granted her permission to shoot there. Marti, an Egyptian student, created a comedic dialogue with the statue of Dante in Pincho Park, critiquing the poet’s depiction of Muslims. These artistic outputs not only reflected the students’ interpretations of Dante, but further inscribed their presence into the cultural spaces they were exercised in.

- **Success, Impact, and Future Development:**

The initiative was met with an unexpected openness from public institutions and actors, who not only allowed access to some heritage sites but were also deeply moved by the engagement. For example, Francesca Masi, head of the Ravenna Antica foundation, was brought to tears during a meeting with the students at the Dante Museum. Such reactions underscore the capacity and potential of classical literature and its related heritage spaces in creating a platform for refugees to share their stories, and to disrupt preconceived stereotypes. By engaging with Dante, the students were not simply learning about Italian heritage; they were claiming it, reshaping it, and being received as legitimate cultural interlocutors through what Jennifer describes as ‘cultural capital’. Through this, the students are today able to articulate their thoughts and ideas through a newfound cultural commonality with Italian society. The course also included reflections and follow-up evaluations including an anthology publication.

This success has led today to expanding the project’s model to new contexts, including Shakespeare in the UK, Steinbeck in the US, and Tagore in India. Each of these projects will focus on leveraging canonical literature to enable displaced individuals to access, reshape, and inhabit cultural narratives and public spaces that have historically excluded them.

Together, the presented case studies demonstrate that inclusive engagement with historic public spaces can be effective when heritage is considered as a participatory practice rather than a passive experience, even if simply by providing a helping hand to guide one across a new environment. Across all the initiatives, the ranging age groups from young schoolchildren to adult refugees represent the capability of cultural heritage to not only entice various audiences but enable all of them to connect with the cultural content in their own way. Moreover, the abundance of available public spaces allowed them to be used as playgrounds for assimilating not only with the spaces themselves, but also with one another. As a result, the projects thrived on adaptable, low-cost models that were often volunteer-driven thanks to the potential of historic public spaces. As for integration tools, language appeared as a vital tool, where projects like *Tessuti Sociali* and *Gli Anelli Mancanti* utilized it greatly. Learning the stories of spaces, such as reading Dante in Dante on the Move and listening to opera music in the *Abuab* initiative, also emphasizes the importance of connecting with cultural material and narratives to find human connection. Ultimately, the case studies reveal that such inclusive practices can build a sense of belonging and civic participation by resituating marginalized groups not just as visitors, but as active contributors to culture.



# III ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC SPACES IN HISTORIC CITIES

## 3.1 Who Do We Design For? The Impact of The Built Environment on People's Lives

### 3.1.1 From Standards to Real-World Complexity: The Evolution of the Concept of Disability

The starting point for any design process is the definition of the target audience and an understanding of the needs that the project must address. Throughout history, however, the pursuit of harmony and perfection in architecture has often led to an idealized representation of the human figure. Without having to go back to older models such as Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, this trend has also found expression in the contemporary era in Le Corbusier's Modulor, a paradigm of a standardized and abstract body taken as a universal measurement of the built environment. Although Le Corbusier referred to the Modulor as a scale of harmonious proportions designed to meet the "human dimension", it is clear that this model refers to an ideal and highly simplified audience. Suffice to consider the parameter used as a basic measure, which is the height of an ideal man set at 1.83 m, as well as the sole reference to the male figure, leaving out any female equivalent. What clearly arises is an approach which, in pursuing a model of standardization, ends up ignoring the diversity and real differences among the population, and inevitably results in conditions of exclusion for all those who do not fit that standard.

Although this idealisation has persisted in influencing design to this day, over the last forty years a multidisciplinary debate has brought important contributions that have deeply overhauled both the idea of users and the role that the built environment plays in people's lives. In particular, it was the evolution of the very concept of disability that brought a change in perspective, promoting a broader and more articulated understanding of personal well-being.

This shift in thinking was prompted by the growing claim of rights by people with disabilities. In the United States in the 1960s, amid the civil rights activism, the Disability Rights Movement also gained momentum, bringing the topic of disability to the public's attention, which was made particularly prominent by the consequences of World War II and the Vietnam War on the bodies of thousands of veterans. Through the Movement's efforts, a new interpretation of disability began to gain traction, no longer seen solely as a "lack" of health or an individual impairment, but also as a condition stemming from social, environmental, and cultural contingencies.

This conceptual change reached a turning point in the field of healthcare thanks to the efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO). In 1980, the first International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps (ICIDH) was introduced, proposing a sequential model divided into disease, impairment, disability, and handicap. In this framework, disability was still associated with the idea of a

physiological or cognitive deficit of the person, to be cured through medical procedures aimed at re-establishing a “conventional” health status. However, in the transition from disability to handicap, the direct effect that the latter has on the person in interacting with the built environment, in performing actions and fulfilling social roles is acknowledged for the first time; it is no longer just a question of mental and physical condition, but a phenomenon that manifests itself within a social context.

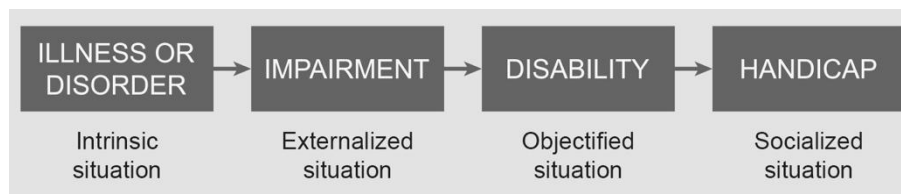


Figure 22. Graphical representation of the concept of disability and handicap as proposed by the 1980 ICIDH model (Authors’ work)

A further defining advance occurred in 2001 with the publication of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), which definitively abandoned - at least in theory - the idea of disability as an intrinsic characteristic of a person (Buono & Zagaria, 2003). Disability was now redefined as the outcome of a complex interaction between physical, environmental, and social factors, but also as the result of inadequate responses that society offers to people with specific needs (Terzi, 2004; Traustadóttir, 2009).

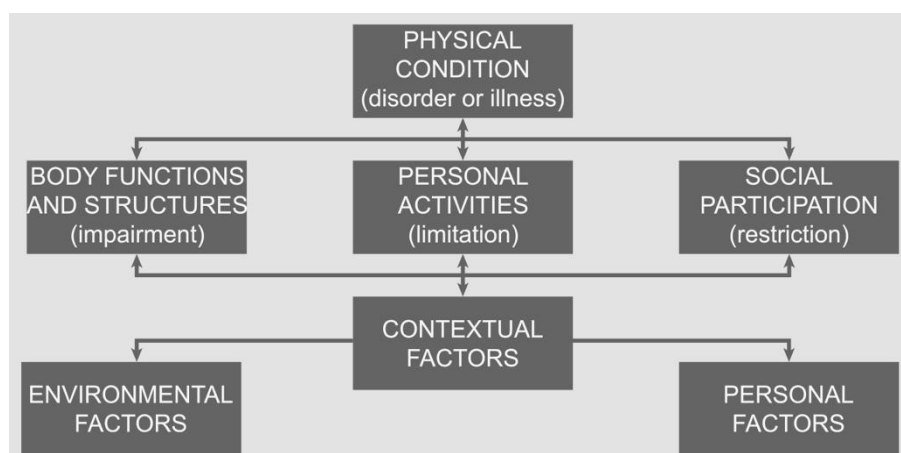


Figure 23. Graphical representation of the concept of disability and handicap as proposed by the 2001 ICF model (Authors’ work)

It is in this transition from the medical model to a bio-psycho-social one that we can recognize the fundamental role of environmental accommodations, integration policies, and collective practices in establishing the degree of participation of individuals in social life (Arengi, 2012).

This trend finds its fullest expression in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), an international document approved by the United Nations in December 2006. The objective of the Convention is to promote and ensure that persons with disabilities fully and equally enjoy their fundamental rights: to life, health, education, work, mobility, independent living, freedom of expression and, more generally, to participate in political, cultural and social activities. The Convention therefore represents a turning point not only for recognizing disability as an “evolving concept” and as the result

of "the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers," but also for clearly defining the domains and resources to which every individual must have access in order to ensure that universal rights are effectively granted.

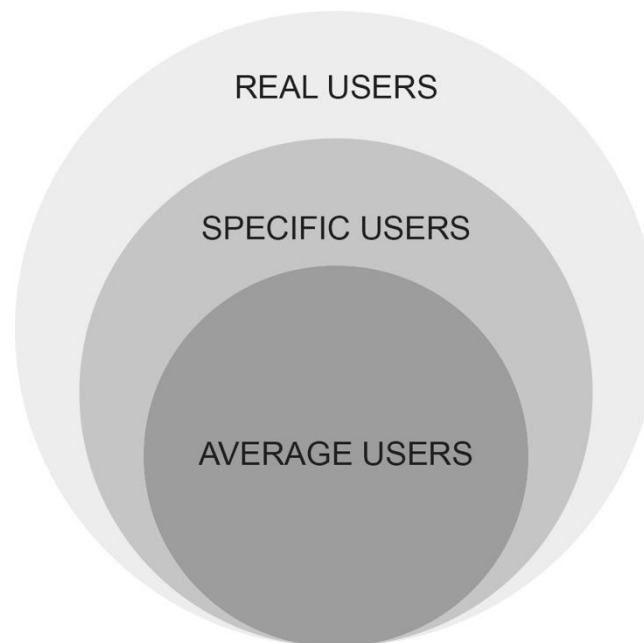
These premises make clear the crucial role that the built environment plays in people's lives, no longer a simple backdrop but a key condition in the realization of citizenship rights and full social inclusion.

### **3.1.2 Real Users: From Disability to a Broader Understanding of Human Needs**

The previously mentioned evolution of the concept of disability and its acknowledgement as an ordinary human condition is a first step towards the objective of accessibility and inclusion, but it does not represent its fulfilment. As we will see later, various national regulations have attempted to address this issue solely by addressing the so-called "architectural barriers". Although this approach extends the portrayal of the built environment users, it proves to be critical in proposing a schematization of disability into a limited number of user categories through oversimplifying and reductive models, such as identifying the person with disability as the one in a wheelchair. The aim of pinpointing standard design scenarios and solutions thus leads to what A. Accolla (2009) defines as "functionally accessible social discrimination." This refers to the implementation of ad hoc arrangements designed to meet the needs of a specific user group alone, not integrated in a synergetic manner within a system designed for average audiences, with the result of reproducing discriminatory situations for the group of people that one planned to include. In this regard, a prominent example is the designation of alternative access points and paths for individuals in wheelchairs to visit a place. Although, on a functional level, this solution allows people who use mobility aids to access the space, it also brings attention to the person's disability, potentially leading to their isolation from other users and a diminished quality of the experience. Consequently, despite promoting a form of integration, this simplification and specialization of design proposals is unable to offer equal opportunities.

Under these assumptions, in order to design a physical accessibility that can truly result in inclusion, it is essential to consider who the actual users of the built environment are. The answer to this question lies in the concept of real users (Del Zanna, 2005). The real users are not identified as a set of people with specific characteristics, nor as a socially defined group, but are conceived as an abstraction useful for understanding and managing the complexity of real people. As such, it represents an open, dynamic, and constantly changing whole, developed in antithesis to the standard. Although it is not possible to outline the precise boundaries of this cluster, it represents a qualitative reference point for project design, aimed at achieving environments, services, and products that can be enjoyed by as many people as possible. In operating terms, this implies a change of perspective, shifting the designer's interest from identifying user profiles based on the psycho-physical characteristics of the person to focusing on outlining needs, defined as demands, attitudes, and expectations in the pursuit of specified purposes. An inclusive design approach, aware of issues relating to the physical accessibility of the built environment, emerges as a dynamic process that acknowledges and values diversity, moving beyond a view of the latter as merely as a disability and recognizing a reality of the human condition that is also defined by the contextual factors mentioned above. In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that, although the boundaries of the real users concept intentionally remain undefined and

oriented towards welcoming as many people as possible, it must be understood more as a design approach, a target. This is because, at the same time, it cannot be translated into a generic design operativity “for everyone” that would risk neutering the specificities of the most marginalized groups, disregarding the forms of discrimination and inequality to which they are exposed on a daily basis (Crippi, 2024). The recognition of differences therefore remains an essential factor in ensuring true inclusion.



*Figure 24. From the average to real users, through the evolving concept of disability - specific users (Authors' work)*

At this stage of the discussion, it is fundamental to explicitly state the needs of the users of a space, as well as the services and products it hosts. Maintaining a level of generality coherent with the concept of real users, but at the same time avoiding an overly generic approach, for the purposes of the project it is possible to identify two main frameworks that reflect the complexity and diversity of human needs: on the one hand, physical needs, and on the other, sensory and cognitive needs (Marconcini & Pracchi, 2019). The purpose of this distinction is not meant to narrow down the variety of experiences into rigid categories, but to offer a useful tool for understanding how to transform these needs into design criteria.

The first cluster of needs concerns the ability to move around within the built environment, at its various scales, and to interact with the objects that comprise it. Although it may seem predictable, the abstraction of the concept of movement allows one to overcome a restrictive view that ascribes the project solely to the technical aid used by the user, placing it as a determining parameter. From this perspective, it becomes possible to figure out integrated solutions, not just dedicated ones, that can handle different needs, even ones that sometimes conflict with each other. The aim is to make sure it's not just an user-friendly experience, but also a pleasant and satisfying one. For design purposes, this entails considering: the size of spaces, to ensure freedom of movement even when using technical aids; the continuity of paths, avoiding interruptions or elements that compromise usability; the choice of materials for horizontal surfaces, thus preventing fatigue or the risk of falling; finally, the shape and

positioning of furniture, in order to ensure that it does not become an obstacle and is accessible to the greatest number of people with different physical abilities (Arengi, 2007; Argentin et al., 2008; Azzolino & Lacirignola, 2011) .



*Figure 25. Possible partial portrayal of users and circumstances that may be considered when referring to physical needs framework. It highlights situations of disability or ones that are not considered as such, permanent or temporary circumstances, or even visible and invisible conditions. (Authors' work)*

This is complemented by the sensory and cognitive needs framework, which involves all the requirements that arise in the actions of localization and orientation in space, as well as in the ability to communicate and establish meaningful interactions with people and objects within that space. In the built environment, the foregoing translates into the process of Wayfinding, a term by which K. Lynch (1960) defined the range of activities involved in identifying and processing information available in a given space, enabling individuals to move efficiently and successfully from one location to another. The environment must convey meaning and be able to provide all the information needed for the process of wayfinding, in all circumstances and to all users. To do this, it is necessary to provide two complementary systems of communication. The most straightforward approach is to produce clear, easily visible, and readable signage to be distributed along paths and at key junctions in the layout of a space. Accordingly, it is possible to act through implicit environmental markers, either autonomous or integrated into a signage system, designed in accordance with the environmental setting to emphasize its structure. At an operative level, in the first case, the solution consists of ensuring adequate visibility of signage systems, which must be readable and understandable without any physical, sensory or cognitive impairment. In the second situation, on the other hand, it is a matter of organizing the elements of the space to make them environmental markers, hence prompts or clues for orientation (Baracco, 2016). Particularly important are extra-visual perceptual signalling arrangements, which facilitate the use of all people's senses, while taking care to avoid sensory overload, which, ironically, would have negative effects on the wayfinding process.



*Figure 26. Possible partial portrayal of users and circumstances that may be considered when referring to sensory and cognitive needs framework. It highlights situations of disability or ones that are not considered as such, permanent or temporary circumstances, or even visible and invisible conditions. (Authors' work)*

Despite the complexity of the topics and the possibility of further in-depth analysis, it is believed that the cognitive framework established thus far is sufficient to clarify the first premises underlying inclusive design. This brings different considerations into play, which are not aimed at fulfilling a simple legislative

obligation, but rather guide a new way of design that can assure better performance of the space for the greatest possible number of users, particularly groups subject to forms of exclusion.

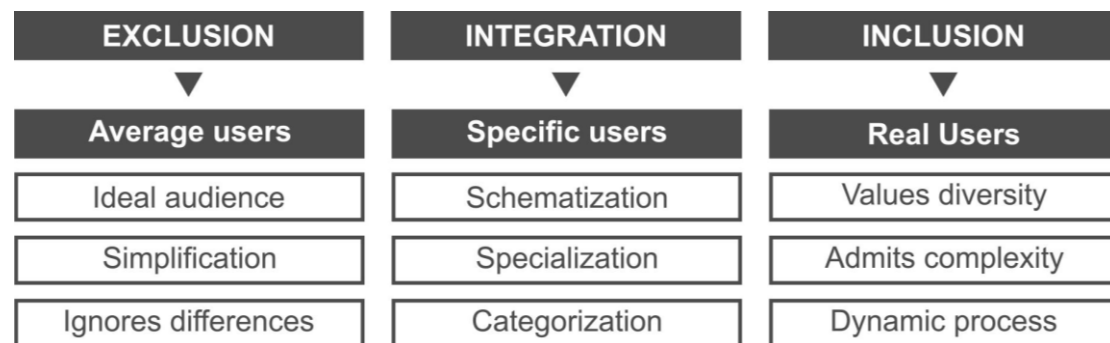


Figure 27. From exclusion to inclusion, through the evolving concept of users (Authors' work)

## 3.2 Everyday Challenges: Barriers Limiting Accessibility of Public Space

### 3.2.1 Tools for accessibility. From the legislative approach to design methodologies “for all”

The response to the demands for the rights of people with disabilities and the growing awareness of the crucial role of the built environment on individual and collective well-being was not long in coming. While the outcomes achieved over time have not fully met expectations, it is important to explore how these matters have been addressed. Here, we will examine on the one hand, the Italian regulatory approach - chosen both because of the authors' origins and because it offers a rich background for further methodological analysis - and, on the other hand, the design methodologies that take inclusion as their founding principle. The intent is not to provide the reader with practical guidance -for which there is already extensive literature to which the reader may refer - but rather to critically investigate the potential and limitations of these tools, with the aim of proposing a transition towards a more effective and conscious practice.

From the outset, regulatory measures have represented the primary tool for addressing these issues. In the Italian context, alongside general dispositions relating to the role of the State in guaranteeing freedom and equality to citizens - already established in Article 3 of the Constitution - the first specific legislative references to accessibility were introduced in the 1980s. Their primary objective was to provide tools and technical guidelines aimed at shaping the built environment so that it could be used by the widest possible range of people.

An overview of the national framework highlights the limited results achieved so far. Italian legislation has frequently been criticized by key stakeholders as insufficient to address the heterogeneous needs of actual users. Nonetheless, it merits closer examination—if not a full re-evaluation—since over time it has attempted to progressively align with the principles set out by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. While the initial approach relied on prescriptive constraints and minimum

dimensional standards, it soon became evident that regulations needed to evolve towards performance-based criteria, specifying the conditions that the built environment and equipment must guarantee to ensure effective usability for all. This shift opened the way to greater flexibility, enabling contributions from inclusive design research and technological innovation. The main limitation, however, lies in the prevailing reductive interpretation, which often treats prescriptive requirements as an end in themselves rather than as a foundation for integrated and innovative design solutions.

A clear example of this limited interpretative capacity is the urban planning instrument introduced by Law No. 41 of February 28, 1986<sup>26</sup>, which contained provisions for the preparation of the annual and multi-year state budget: the Plan for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers (PEBA). To this day, it remains the only legislative tool available to public administrations for identifying critical issues, proposing design solutions for existing public buildings that are inadequate in terms of accessibility, and planning, over a multi-year horizon, the financial resources necessary for their implementation. Law No. 104 of February 5, 1992 (Law for the assistance, social integration, and rights of persons with disabilities)<sup>27</sup> addressed a significant shortcoming of the earlier framework, extending the scope of PEBA beyond public buildings to include connecting spaces and, more broadly, the urban contexts in which they are embedded. Despite this, the ineffectiveness of the instrument is evident: a study conducted by ANCI Lombardia<sup>28</sup> in 2018 revealed that, more than thirty years after the obligation was introduced, fewer than 7% of municipalities in the Lombardy region had adopted or were in the process of adopting a PEBA. In addition to operational difficulties - such as the absence of a structured system for stakeholder governance and coordinated action planning - the main limitation lies in the mechanical application of minimum standards, which are often poorly articulated and rarely interpreted in terms of their performance value. In this sense, the PEBA case illustrates that the effectiveness of legislation depends less on formal compliance with prescriptive requirements than on the capacity of designers and administrators to translate them into a performance- and needs-oriented vision of the project, thereby generating genuinely inclusive interventions.

In light of the limits shown by legislative instruments (both Italian and international) - and not always attributable to intrinsic shortcomings - research began as early as the 1980s to follow a parallel path, aimed at developing design methodologies capable of addressing the objectives set by the topic of inclusion. In those years, disciplinary approaches rapidly evolved, placing the individual and their needs at the centre of the design process. Human-Centered Design, Barrier-Free Design, Universal Design, Transgenerational Design, Design for All, Ergonomic Design, and Inclusive Design are only some of the labels under which these experiments have been identified in different times and contexts. While the variety of names underscores specific emphases and founding principles, the underlying goal remains the same: to guarantee social participation by ensuring that spaces and the artifacts they contain are accessible to the widest possible number of people. The differences lie mainly in

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<sup>26</sup> In original: Legge 28 febbraio 1986, n. 41, *Disposizioni per la formazione del bilancio annuale e pluriennale dello Stato*

<sup>27</sup> In original: Legge 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104, *Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate*

<sup>28</sup> Association representing over 1,400 municipalities in the Lombardy region, supporting local administrators <<https://anci.lombardia.it>>

methodological nuances and in the geographical and historical contexts of their development. To better frame these considerations, the following section will examine two of the most consolidated and widespread approaches today: Universal Design and Design for All.

The definition of Universal Design was first articulated in 1985 by Ronald L. Mace, architect and professor at North Carolina State University, 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” (Mace, 1985). The intention to move beyond a design conceived “for disability only” is evident, advocating solutions able to accommodate diverse needs while also reducing reliance on assistive technologies or specialized services. Within this framework, the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University developed seven guiding principles of Universal Design. Although initially conceived in relation to product design, these principles are equally transferable to architectural and urban scales: (1) Equitable use; (2) Flexibility in use; (3) Simple and intuitive use; (4) Perceptible information; (5) Tolerance for error; (6) Low physical effort; (7) Size and space for approach and use (NC State University, 1997).



Figure 28. The 7 Principles of Universal Design (Authors' work)

Without delving into their practical applications, it is essential to underline that these principles have provided an operational framework able to address physical, sensory, and cognitive needs, shifting the perspective from a focus on (physical) disability to the broader diversity of individuals. The resulting approach takes into account not only the requirements of users with disabilities, but also those of children, older adults, and people from different cultural or educational backgrounds, groups not traditionally included among so-called “vulnerable users”. Over time, these principles have evolved significantly, extending the focus from individual abilities to broader cross-cutting dimensions such as social participation, health, and well-being. In this direction, the research carried out by the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA) at the University at Buffalo has defined the eight goals of Universal Design: (1) Body fit; (2) Comfort; (3) Awareness; (4) Understanding; (5) Wellness; (6) Social integration; (7) Personalization; (8) Cultural appropriateness (Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012).

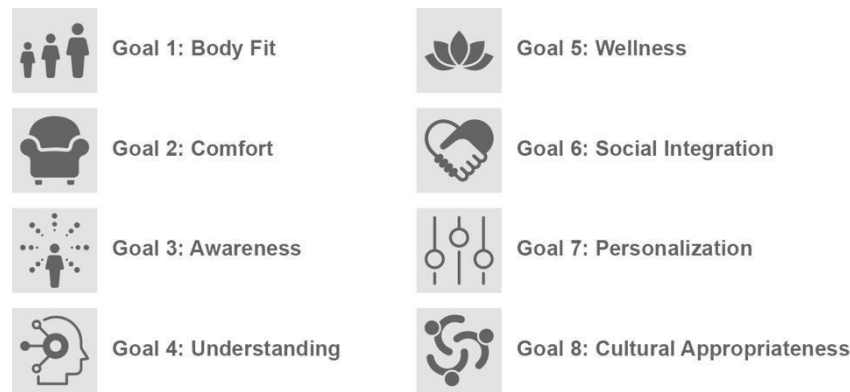


Figure 29. The 8 Goals of Universal Design (Authors' work)

In the European context, the disciplinary response to these themes took form in 1993 with the establishment of the European Institute for Design and Disability, later renamed Design for All Europe in 2006. A decisive turning point came with the Stockholm Declaration, promoted by the Institute in May 2004, which defines Design for All as:

*“Design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality. This holistic and innovative approach constitutes a creative and ethical challenge for all planners, designers, entrepreneurs, administrators and political leaders. Design for All aims to enable all people to have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of society. To achieve this, the built environment, everyday objects, services, culture and information - in short, everything that is designed and made by people to be used by people - must be accessible, convenient for everyone in society to use, and responsive to evolving human diversity”* (European Institute for Design and Disability, 2004).

In defining this objective, significant parallels can be observed with the principles of Universal Design; nevertheless, the distinctive feature of Design for All lies in the methodology it adopts. Its foundation is the concept of participatory design: as emphasized in the Stockholm Declaration, *“The practice of Design for All makes conscious use of the analysis of human needs and aspirations and requires the involvement of end users at every stage in the design process”* (European Institute for Design and Disability, 2004). The increasing diversity that characterizes contemporary society demands a continuous re-examination of human needs, for which no single, universally valid solution can be identified. Consequently, the methodology distinguishes itself through a pronounced multidisciplinary orientation and operational flexibility, aimed at developing integrated solutions across multiple domains of action. On this basis, research has focused on defining a dynamic process, commonly referred to as the “Design for All Process”<sup>29</sup>, articulated in two main phases: the first, of a meta-design nature, consists in identifying users' needs and aspirations and translating them into performance requirements through an ergonomic and holistic approach; the second corresponds to the actual design stage, in which the final definition is achieved only after critical evaluation and iterative refinement of the proposals, carried out with the direct involvement of future users.

<sup>29</sup> Design for All Italia, *Il processo Design for All*. Associazione Design for All Italia. More information can be found at <https://www.dfaitalia.it/servizi/consulenza-design-for-all/>

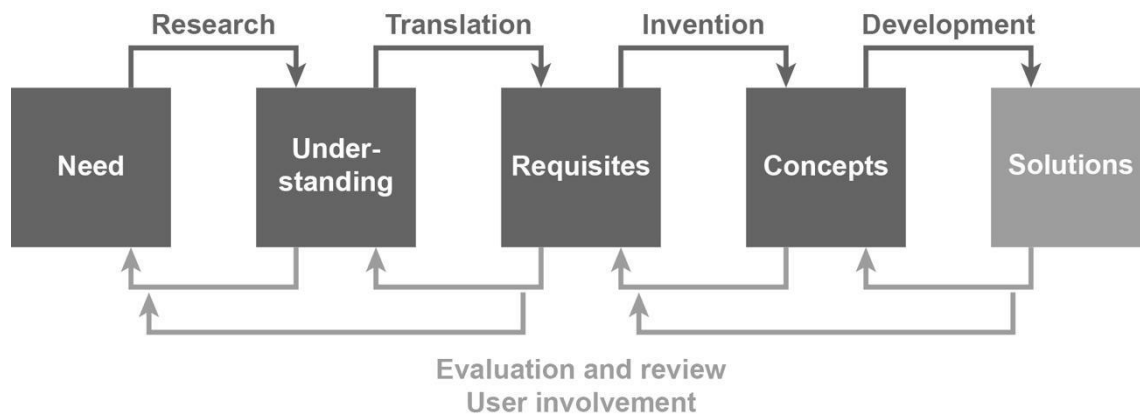


Figure 30. Graphical representation of the Design for All process (Authors' work)

The two methodologies, also considering their evolution over time, cannot be considered as fundamentally distant from one another; for this reason, it does not seem appropriate to privilege one over the other, nor over the additional approaches mentioned above. This becomes even clearer when one observes their limited dissemination, a condition partly due to educational curricula that have not yet fully integrated these matters. The intention here has been to illustrate different ways of pursuing the goal of accessibility and inclusion, thus recovering the original meaning of design as a tool for responding to people's needs, including those of persons with disabilities. In contemporary practice, however, such requirements are too often reduced to a formal verification of regulatory compliance, with the well-known limitations already highlighted. What is instead required is the development, from the earliest stages, of a solid understanding of the needs of all users, alongside the awareness that design cannot be confined to the architectural object alone but must be part of a system of synergistic and coherent actions. This broader perspective should not be perceived as a constraint or as an unattainable ambition. While it is evident that it is impossible to fully address every need, accessibility should be understood as a creative act, capable of generating environments that foster autonomy and safety, while at the same time enhancing the quality of the places in which we all live.

### 3.2.2 Performance over Prescription. Rethinking Designers' Role Through the Misinterpretation of Italian Accessibility Regulations

In light of the various tools currently available - briefly recalled and critically examined here - it becomes evident that designers play a decisive role in determining whether an environment can be genuinely accessible or, on the contrary, whether it excludes specific groups of users. Their responsibility goes beyond the correct application of regulations or guidelines but extends to the ability to integrate and diverse approaches, while acknowledging both their limitations and potential. Considered individually, the different methodological and regulatory tools inevitably reveal critical issues: some risk being reduced to mere formal compliance, others promote an abstract and idealized representation of users, and still others focus on specific categories without capturing the full complexity of reality. When framed within a broader perspective that incorporates contemporary research on accessibility and inclusion, these tools reveal their complementary nature, capable of compensating for one another and producing a more articulated and effective framework. Within this context, the proactive role of the designer

emerges: not merely as an executor of rules, but as a critical and innovative interpreter, able to transform constraints and guidelines into opportunities for design. The designer thus carries the responsibility of translating regulatory, social, and cultural requirements into conscious spatial choices. The true challenge lies in the capacity to reconcile protection and innovation, individual needs and collective visions, technical solutions and quality of experience. From this standpoint, it becomes inevitable to ask which actions, at an operational level, are required of the designer.

An analysis of the Italian context clearly reveals that, in the approach of key professionals to accessibility and inclusion, one of the most critical weaknesses lies in the tendency to interpret regulations in a purely formal sense, limiting design practice to the satisfaction of minimum requirements. A shift in perspective is therefore essential: the multiple needs of individuals must be related to the performances that the built environment is called upon to guarantee. Such an objective cannot be achieved by merely complying with the minimum parameters established by regulations.

Based on the above, the first step required of designers is to move beyond a reductive conception of disability, historically centred almost exclusively on physical impairments. This partial approach, still widespread today, has produced solutions that address only a limited portion of actual needs, neglecting other essential dimensions of human experience. In recent years, however, new forms of awareness have emerged with increasing clarity, underscoring the urgency of adopting a genuinely holistic and multidimensional approach. Within this framework, it becomes crucial to consider sensory and cognitive disabilities, which are often invisible in urban design and planning processes, yet equally decisive for ensuring effective participation in social and cultural life. Acknowledging these conditions broadens the designer's outlook, encouraging the development of tools and solutions that move beyond the mere removal of physical barriers to also confront informational, communicative, and perceptual obstacles, thereby advancing the creation of truly inclusive environments.

A persistent gap also emerges in the definition and adoption of truly effective implementation tools. What is particularly lacking is an integrated and structured system of actions, capable of translating general principles into feasible and coordinated operations. The fragmentation of responsibilities among different institutional actors, the weakness of intersectoral processes, and the insufficient interaction between the various levels of governance continue to hinder the full implementation of inclusive policies. In this context, the need to develop and consolidate methodologies and technical instruments becomes urgent, as well as tools able to support inclusive design across the entire project cycle: from the preliminary assessment of the context to the definition of objectives, from the translation of needs into performance requirements to the evaluation of impacts. Only a systemic approach, grounded in the virtuous interaction between design culture, regulatory frameworks, and technological resources, can bridge the current gap between theoretical ambition and operational practice, fostering the development of accessible, equitable, and culturally meaningful environments for all. While such an approach cannot be managed entirely by designers, they nonetheless bear the responsibility of acting as cultural promoters, capable of stimulating its advancement and orienting its future development.

In line with the above, and consistent with the reflections developed in the previous sections, a priority objective to be pursued - also in relation to the aims of this handbook - is the construction of a robust

knowledge and cultural background that can serve as the foundation of design practice. This entails not only recognizing who the users of public space are, but also developing an in-depth understanding of their needs, desires, and aspirations, taking into account the diversity of physical, sensory, cognitive, social, and cultural conditions that characterize contemporary society. At the same time, it is crucial to acquire appropriate tools to systematically and comparatively assess the level of accessibility of the built environment and the quality of the experiences it enables, critically evaluating both strengths and weaknesses. Only through this dual perspective - focused on people and supported by rigorous analytical tools - coherent design processes can be generated, capable of guiding the transformation of public space towards models that are more equitable, safe, and comfortable for all.

From an operational perspective, it becomes necessary to introduce a system of parameters capable of providing a comprehensive assessment of the level of accessibility of the physical environment. Such a system should not be confined to the detection of architectural barriers alone but must also be directed toward identifying the absence of spatial, perceptual, and functional qualities, which often prove crucial in ensuring a fair, safe, and universally accessible user experience (Lauria 2012). In this perspective, the focus shifts from the mere elimination of evident physical obstacles to the development of overall conditions of usability, capable of restoring centrality to the diverse ways in which individuals engage with space. However, if the usability of public space continues to be evaluated exclusively on the basis of the minimum requirements established by regulations, it becomes evident that truly inclusive solutions cannot emerge at the design stage. As already emphasized, regulatory prescriptions can no longer be invoked as the direct cause of inadequate design; they should instead be regarded as an indispensable framework, one that must be interpreted in a critical and proactive manner to generate innovative strategies and genuinely inclusive outcomes. In the Italian context, a particularly significant case is the one of cultural heritage, where the lack of accessible solutions is often justified by appealing to regulations for the preservation of historic cities<sup>30</sup>. Yet, a careful examination of the regulatory framework leaves no doubt: any intervention on cultural heritage must nevertheless guarantee accessibility, while also encouraging the adoption of innovative, experimental, and non-rigidly predetermined solutions. From this standpoint, Italian legislation provides a certain degree of flexibility which - far from being perceived as a constraint - should be actively recognized and leveraged by designers, transforming it into an opportunity to develop approaches capable of reconciling protection and inclusion (Arengi & Marconcini, 2023; Agostiniano et al., 2009).

In conclusion, the topic of accessibility and inclusion underscores the responsibility entrusted to designers. Compliance with minimum requirements is not sufficient: what is needed is a proactive, critical, and innovative stance, capable of interpreting regulations as opportunities rather than as constraints. Designers are called upon to translate social and cultural needs into informed spatial choices, generating environments that are usable, equitable, and meaningful. In this sense, design

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<sup>30</sup> The main Italian regulatory references are: Decreto Legislativo 22 gennaio 2004, n. 42, Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio, ai sensi dell'articolo 10 della legge 6 luglio 2002, n. 137 [Law of Cultural Heritage and Landscape] and Decreto Ministeriale – Ministero per i Beni e Attività culturali del 28 marzo 2008, Linee guida per il superamento delle barriere architettoniche nei luoghi di interesse culturale [Guidelines for overcoming architectural barriers in places of cultural interest]

becomes an act of collective responsibility, in which professionals foster cultural change by combining protection with innovation, technical rigor with quality of experience, thus contributing to the creation of cities that are more inclusive and sustainable.

### **3.2.3 Assessing the accessibility of Public Spaces: Quantitative and Qualitative Parameters**

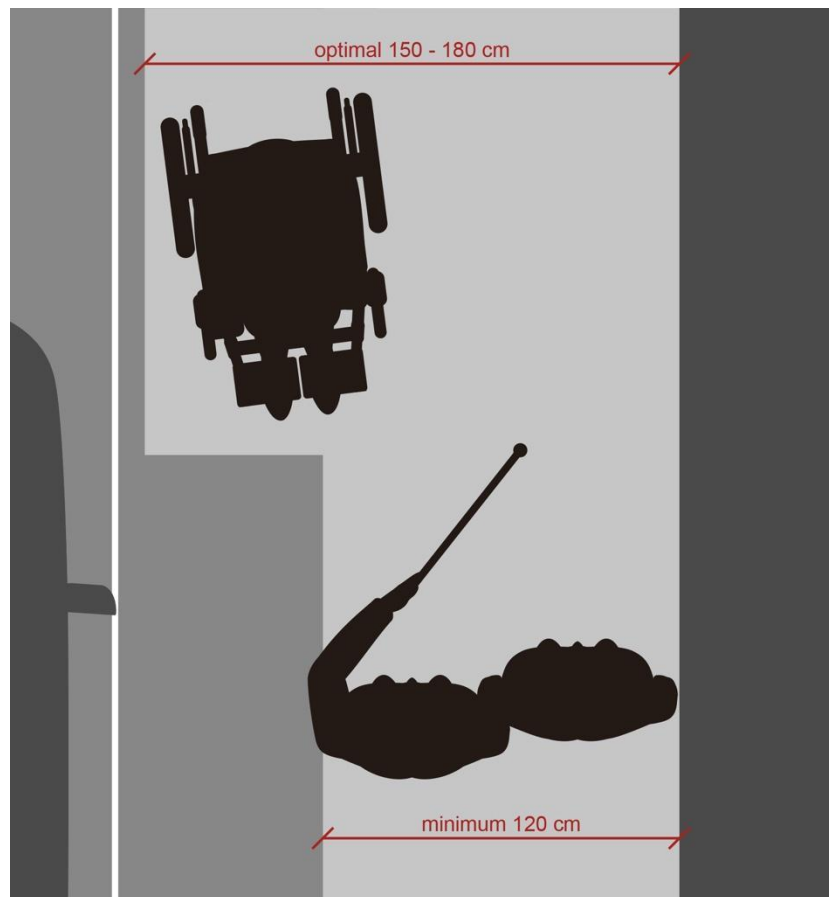
In light of the considerations developed so far, the analysis of public space constitutes an essential starting point for orienting design choices toward criteria of accessibility and inclusion. Only a careful and structured reading of existing conditions makes it possible to identify both criticalities and potentialities, thereby defining the most appropriate areas for intervention. The following section aims to provide readers with a set of operational tools to support this process, enabling the transformation of general principles into practical and verifiable actions. The parameters defined below perform a dual function: on the one hand, they allow for a systematic assessment of the current accessibility conditions of public spaces, highlighting limitations and shortcomings; on the other, they indicate the desirable performance levels that such spaces should ensure, directing the project toward solutions capable of improving usability, safety, and inclusion. In this sense, the parameters should not be conceived as mere verification tools, but as operational references able to guide the entire design process in a coherent and forward-looking manner.

The starting point for this analysis is the examination of the main Italian national and regional regulations that define dimensional parameters and accessibility requirements, with particular attention to *Decreto del Ministro dei lavori pubblici 14 giugno 1989, n. 236* and *Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 24 luglio 1996, n. 503*. As already noted, these regulations are limited to prescribing minimum requirements and do not provide quality indicators consistent with the evolving cultural debate on inclusion. To define a set of parameters that can serve as a shared reference at the international level, it has therefore been necessary to draw not only on legislative frameworks, but also on scientific literature and applied research, on the most up-to-date design practices documented through case studies and field experiences, as well as on evaluation criteria and related tools developed in international contexts. Given the complexity of the performances required by the objective of inclusion, the evaluation tools presented here will have a dual nature: on the one hand, quantitative, specifying precise dimensions; on the other, qualitative, through interpretative criteria that can be adapted to the different contexts in which they are applied.

Assuming the skills needed to analyse public space have been acquired - aimed at identifying points and routes of interest for the development of a pedestrian mobility network capable of effectively connecting the city's significant spaces - the first level of analysis concerns the geometric features of the paths. These parameters represent the fundamental technical basis for evaluating the quality of pedestrian mobility and its capacity to respond to accessibility and inclusion criteria.

The first aspect to be assessed concerns the width of the path, understood as the safe space dedicated to pedestrian mobility, referring both to sidewalks and to streets intended exclusively for this purpose. Traditionally, the primary reference for determining this width has been the person using a wheelchair,

for whom sufficient space must be guaranteed for passage. For this reason, regulations have set a minimum width of 90 cm. While this dimension is sufficient in terms of basic transit, it does not guarantee adequate conditions of comfort and safety. For example, in the case of a sidewalk raised above the roadway, a width of 90 cm does not allow for wheelchair rotation and changes in direction, obliging the user to take longer trips and resulting in greater fatigue. To address this issue, the main regulations require that every 10 m of linear path include a widening of at least 150 × 150 cm, allowing for turning manoeuvres and changes of direction. In addition, these widened spaces also serve as rest areas, while maintaining free and safe pedestrian circulation. Although wheelchair users represent the condition of physical disability associated with the most bulky mobility aid (even accounting for the variety of wheelchair models currently available), the minimum dimensions established by regulations are not sufficient when viewed from a perspective that embraces the full diversity of needs. A clear example is offered by people with hearing impairments, regardless of the use of assistive technologies. Communication involving at least one deaf or partially deaf person may occur through sign language, lip reading, or - when residual hearing is present - require adequate physical proximity to the interlocutor. In all these cases, it is essential for the two individuals to be able to walk side by side. Considering that a standing person occupies on average about 60 cm, it becomes evident that a minimum path width of 120 cm is necessary. This clearly demonstrates that, if comfort and safety in public spaces are to be understood from a truly inclusive perspective, the wheelchair-based reference dimension alone cannot be considered sufficient. For this reason, in assessing urban accessibility, it is advisable to adopt a minimum path width of 120 cm as a reference parameter, supplemented every 10 linear meters by stopping and manoeuvring areas of at least 150 × 150 cm. From a design standpoint, these indications can be further strengthened: wherever possible, a width of 150 cm should be provided, and in situations of heavy pedestrian traffic, at least 180 cm. Such dimensions ensure constant safety and comfort for all pedestrians, while also facilitating the smooth and simultaneous crossing of multiple flows of movement.



*Figure 31. Plan diagram illustrating the recommended minimum pedestrian path width of 120 cm, sufficient to allow two people to walk side by side - in this case, a blind person accompanied by their guide - and the optimal width between 150 and 180 cm, which ensures greater comfort, safety, and the simultaneous passage of multiple pedestrian flows (Authors' work)*

A second fundamental matter concerns the slope of surfaces, both longitudinal and transverse. In the first case, an excessive gradient can cause fatigue or even pose a safety risk, potentially leading to falls. For this reason, regulations establish maximum slope percentages to ensure accessibility for all users, regardless of whether mobility aids are employed. While legislative references differentiate permissible thresholds depending on the longitudinal development of the ramp, a slope of 8% - equivalent to 8 cm of rise per linear meter - has traditionally been considered acceptable. However, in public contexts, numerous studies have demonstrated that a slope truly accessible to everyone should not exceed 5% - equivalent to 5 cm of rise per linear meter -, since manual wheelchair users encounter significant difficulties beyond this limit. In light of such evidence and on-site investigation, it is therefore proposed to adopt 5% as the maximum longitudinal slope. Moreover, given that any ramp - even if compliant - can lead to physical strain, it is recommended that every 10 m of linear development incorporate a flat resting area, with minimum dimensions of 150 × 150 cm, allowing users to pause without impeding pedestrian flow.

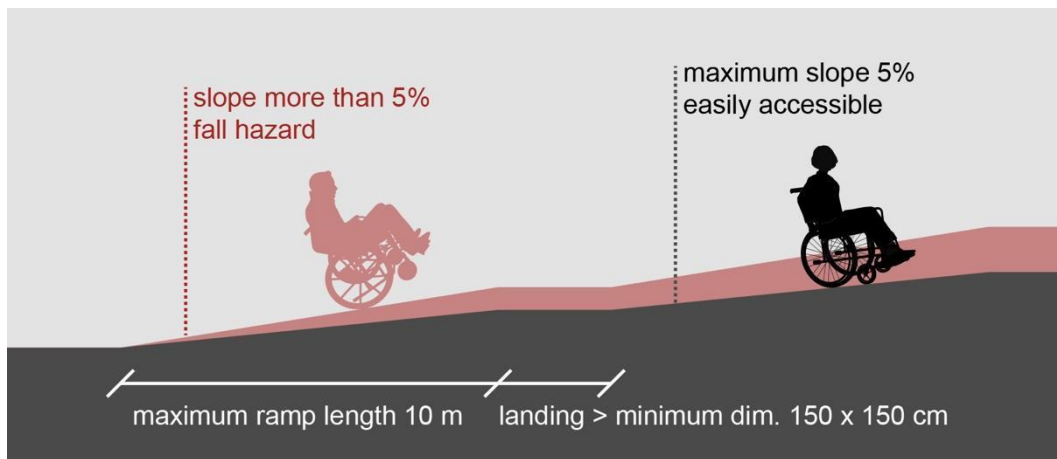


Figure 32. Section diagram illustrating the recommended maximum longitudinal slope of 5%, which does not pose significant hazard risks, and a ramp length of 10 m between two landings with minimum dimensions of 150 × 150 cm. (Authors' work)

Regarding the transverse slope of the path, a distinction can be made between continuous conditions - in which the section of an entire path maintains this feature - and localized situations, such as driveways that interrupt the linearity of the sidewalk. Transverse slopes may also be a source of fatigue, as they require users to continuously rebalance their posture and counteract lateral thrust; for individuals using mobility aids, this condition may become hazardous, increasing the risk of slipping toward the roadway. In line with regulatory references, which emphasize the need to ensure adequate rainwater drainage without compromising pedestrian safety, the maximum transverse slope value should not exceed 1%.

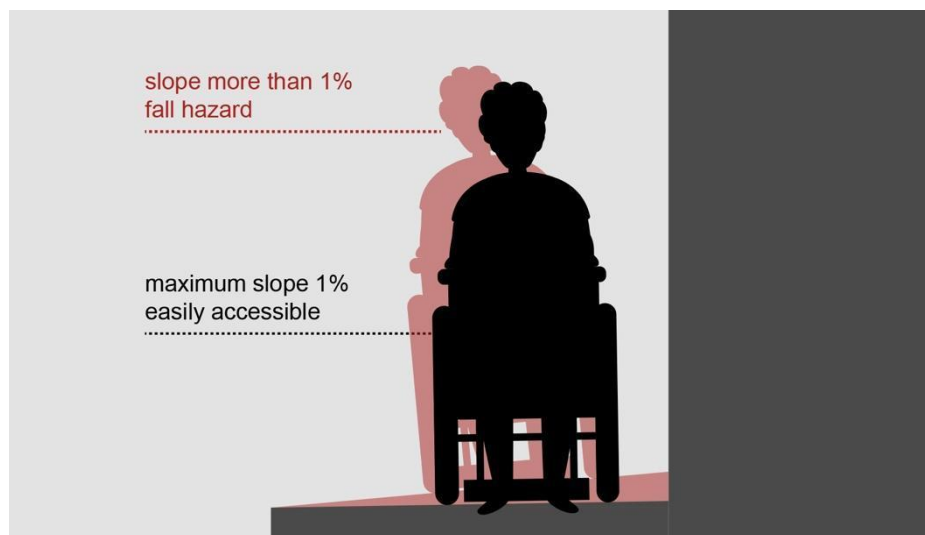


Figure 33. Section diagram illustrating the recommended maximum transverse slope of 1% (Authors' work)

In line with the discussion on slopes and ramps, it is also necessary to address the issue of level differences. Once again, regulations and design practice take as a reference the wheelchair user, who, due to the characteristics of the aid, cannot overcome level differences beyond a certain threshold. In public spaces, small discontinuities are frequently encountered, often caused by the junction of different materials or by specific technical requirements. Although ensuring surface continuity and planarity

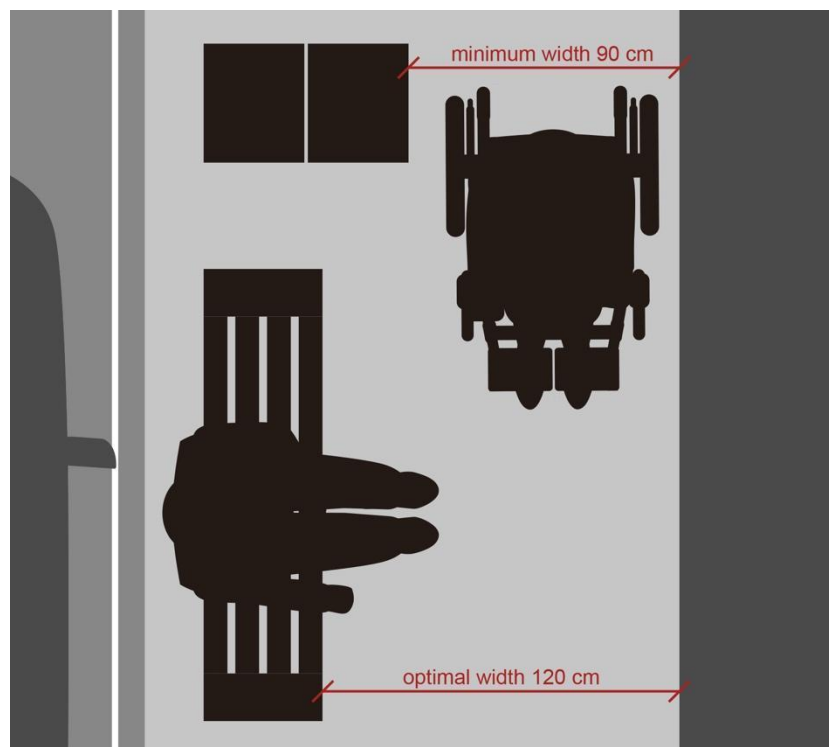
should always be the preferred solution, slight differences in level may be tolerated, provided they can be crossed independently and in complete safety, regardless of the mobility aid used. For this reason, the maximum admissible threshold is set at 1 cm. Finally, an important consideration concerns the use of ramps as a universal accessibility tool. While ramps are essential for wheelchair users, they may prove less reliable for other groups of users. Within the field of physical disabilities, for instance, there are individuals with reduced balance who may find ramps difficult to navigate. Similarly, for people with visual impairments, steps - being more easily perceived through plantar tactile feedback - can provide greater safety in recognizing thresholds that can be crossed. For this reason, it is crucial to provide both alternatives and not to assume ramps as a universally valid solution. This implies the need for adequate support devices to facilitate the use of steps and stairs, primarily through the installation of handrails. To ensure usability for all, it is advisable to provide double handrails: one positioned between 90 and 100 cm in height, suitable for adults, and another at 75 cm, intended for children and people of short stature.



*Figure 34. Section diagram illustrating the recommended heights for handrails. (Authors' work)*

Continuing the analysis of parameters useful for assessing and designing the accessibility of public space, another element of relevance is street furniture. This category includes a wide variety of components, the detailed discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this handbook; however, it is possible to focus on a transversal and fundamental aspect: their spatial placement. Street furniture can, in fact, become an obstruction and interfere with pedestrian flows; its positioning must therefore be carefully evaluated. Far from being dispensable, street furniture is an important - and, as will be shown, necessary - tool for ensuring comfortable and safe use of public space. This does not mean renouncing its installation, but rather ensuring its compatibility with the minimum dimensional requirements previously outlined. A first case concerns floor-level obstructions: in front of such elements, a clear

passage of at least 90 cm must always be guaranteed to ensure the continuity of pedestrian flows, and particularly the passage of a wheelchair user. This measure can be considered sufficient, as these are localized situations that do not affect the entire development of the path. Nevertheless, it is strongly recommended, wherever possible, to ensure a width of 120 cm, since, for example, the use of benches by seated individuals further reduces the available space. In this way, both the functionality of the path and the usability of the furniture are safeguarded, ensuring safety and comfort for all users. A second, more specific case concerns the presence of so-called suspended obstructions, namely elements that protrude from the continuous line of the building frontage or are supported by localized structures. Such elements constitute a particularly significant hazard for people with visual impairments, as they are difficult to detect with the aid of a white cane, which enables the identification of obstacles only up to a height of approximately 80 - 90 cm. For this reason, it is essential to ensure a clearance height from suspended obstacles of no less than 2.10 m. Alternatively, from a design perspective, protection systems positioned below 50 cm can be adopted, making the obstruction detectable and thus perceptible to users.



*Figure 35. Plan diagram illustrating the recommended minimum width of 90 cm in front of street furniture, sufficient to allow the passage of a person on a wheelchair, and then the optimal minimum width of 120 cm to ensure furniture usage and pedestrians transit (Authors' work)*

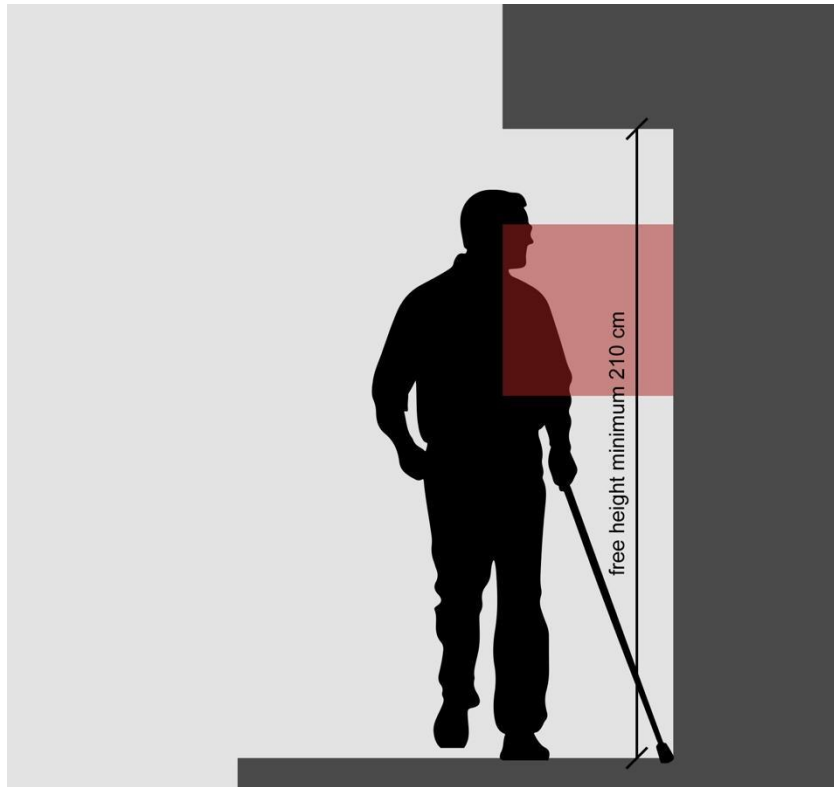


Figure 36. Section diagram illustrating the minimum free heights of 210 cm from suspended obstacles (Authors' work)

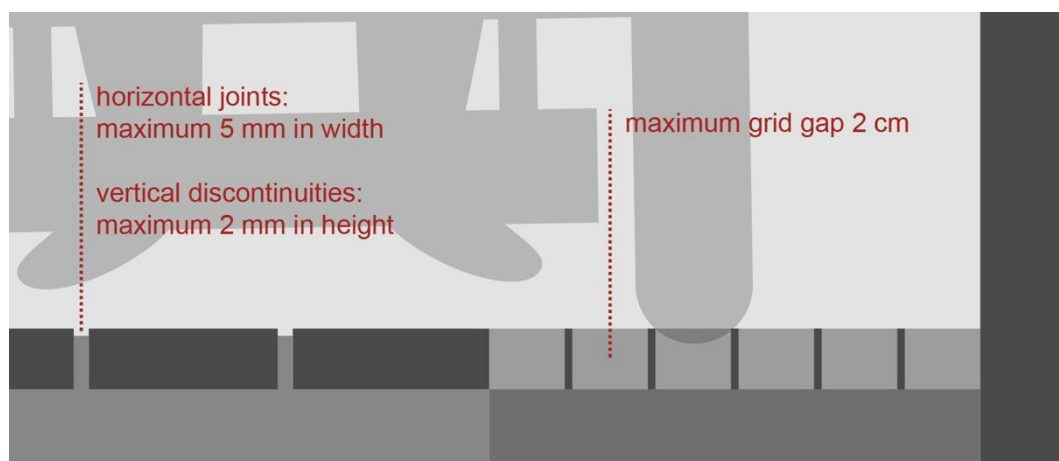


Figure 37. Section diagram illustrating the alternative design proposal of a protection -maximum height 50 cm - detectable by the blind person through the white cane (Authors' work)

In conclusion, it is worth recalling that the principles of design practices such as Universal Design should always be followed in order to create street furniture that is easy to use, safe, and comfortable for all.

Generally, it is also advisable to place furniture elements along the outer edge of sidewalks, as this ensures the continuity of the free section of the pedestrian path and allows people with visual impairments to use the building frontage as a natural reference for orientation. Finally, a specific consideration must be given to benches, understood not only as individual objects but as essential tools for enabling rest along pedestrian routes. This issue is directly connected to the absence of certain spatial qualities, often overlooked in regulatory frameworks. Not all individuals possess the same level of autonomy in movement or the ability to cover long distances; for this reason, it is necessary to provide rest areas equipped with benches, appropriately distributed along pedestrian networks. As a guideline, a maximum distance of 500 m between one rest area and the next is recommended.

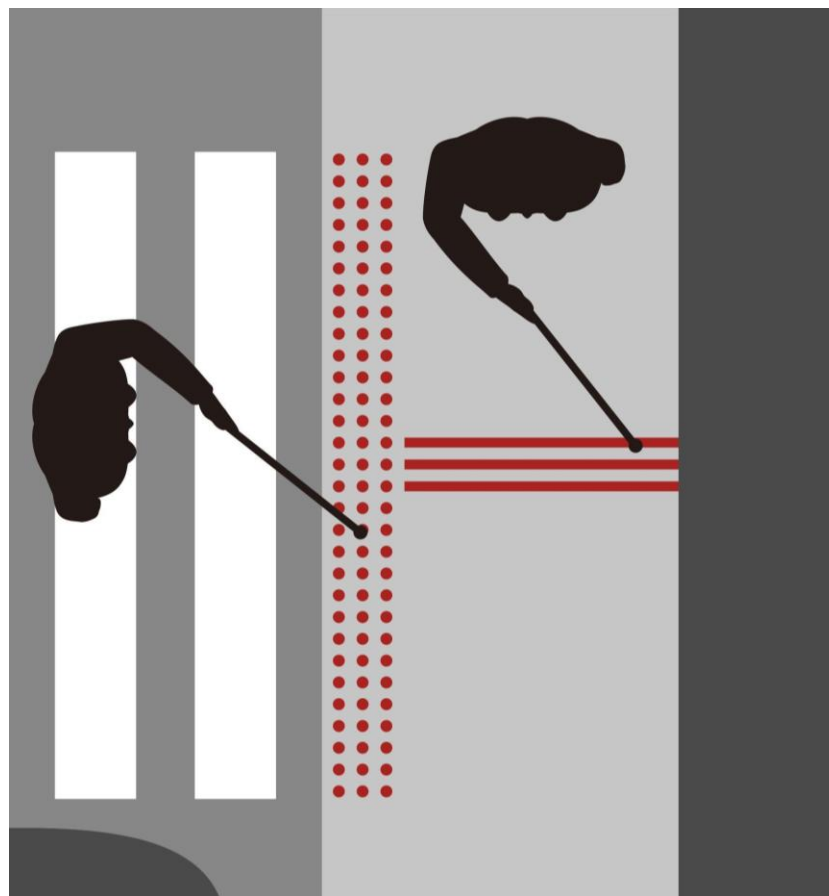
Another key issue concerns the material characteristics of pedestrian path surfaces, which must ensure adequate safety and comfort for all users. Particularly, surfaces must guarantee accessibility for those who rely on mobility aids, a requirement that calls for maximum coplanarity of the paving materials. To this end, specific parameters have been established regarding the joints and connections between individual paving elements. A material can be considered suitable for accessibility only if it is non-slip. Furthermore, horizontal joints must not exceed 5 mm in width, while vertical discontinuities must be limited to a maximum of 2 mm. In the case of splits, grates, or similar structures, the maximum permissible gap is 2 cm, in order to prevent wheelchair wheels or cane tips from becoming trapped. All these parameters should not be considered solely as design references for new pavements, but also as tools for evaluating and monitoring the maintenance conditions of existing surfaces, on which the overall level of accessibility largely depends. Regular inspections of materials, joints, and surface discontinuities are therefore essential to ensure, over time, the safety, comfort, and effective usability of public space.



*Figure 38. Section diagram illustrating the dimensional requirements for pavement joints (maximum horizontal joint width 5 mm, maximum vertical discontinuity 2 mm) and for gaps between grid elements (maximum width 2 cm) (Authors' work)*

In line with the above, another fundamental issue concerns the characteristics of flooring, with reference to the orientation needs of people with sensory and cognitive disabilities. From this perspective, the use of colours and surface finishes takes on a communicative role, contributing to the legibility of functions and spatial configurations in the public space. The chromatic aspect is particularly crucial for people with low vision: contrast between surfaces becomes an indispensable tool for recognizing level changes

and distinguishing areas with different functions. In this sense, colour codes combined with differentiated finishes can enhance the comprehension of space for all users. For instance, along a pedestrian path, the presence of a rest area could be signalled through the use of a material with a different texture - while maintaining the required coplanarity and safety characteristics - associated with a specific colour to emphasize its distinct function. Here, plantar tactile perception provides an additional sensory communication in recognizing the possibility of sitting. While in such cases this represents an added quality of the environment, in other contexts colour contrast is essential for safety: a clear example is the need to highlight stair treads which, without chromatic differentiation, may be difficult to perceive for people with low vision, thereby increasing the risk of falls. In this regard, another useful device is tactile paving which, although not uniformly regulated at the international level, presents consolidated modes of application. Its effectiveness lies in conveying two key messages: first, to signal the presence of a threshold or a potential hazard through a dotted pattern (e.g., a pedestrian crossing); and second, to indicate a direction to follow through lines. In this latter case, however, the goal is not to create continuous guidelines along every route, but rather to orient users at intersections towards the nearest natural guideline - understood as any existing linear reference in the urban environment, such as a building frontage, a curb, a hedge, or similar elements – or to a point of interest. It is equally essential to ensure that these tactile elements contrast adequately in colour with the surrounding surfaces, in order to maximize their perceptibility and effectiveness.



*Figure 39. Plan diagram illustrating the use of tactile paving to signal a pedestrian crossing. Approaching from the sidewalk, the linear elements indicate the presence of the crosswalk, while the dotted surface marks the threshold.*

*Coming from the crosswalk, the linear elements guide the person toward the nearest building frontage, which can be used as a natural guideline for orientation (Authors' work)*

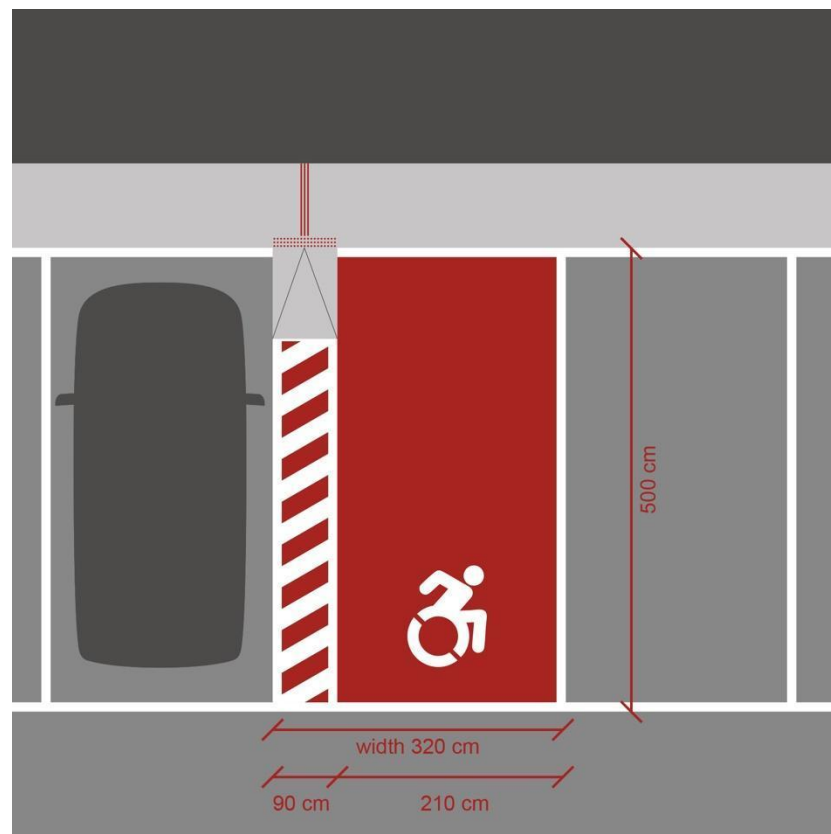
In line with these needs, attention must also be directed to the information and guidance tools provided in public spaces. Communication is generally entrusted exclusively to the visual channel; however, this approach clearly excludes certain groups of users. While the limitation is evident in relation to sensory disabilities, the most widespread critical issue concerns people with cognitive ones. Texts that are too long, the use of complex language, or a lack of clarity in the message can compromise the understanding of information and, consequently, the ability to orient oneself in space. It is therefore necessary to rethink communication systems in accordance with the principles of inclusive design, focusing both on the geometric characteristics of information supports - so that they remain accessible and visible even to individuals with physical impairments - and on the content and modalities of presentation. Considering the wide variety of elements involved, and the impossibility of addressing them exhaustively in this context, the following is a concise list of the main characteristics that should guide the design of such devices:

- **Accessibility of support:** devices must be positioned at a height and distance accessible also to people with physical impairments and wheelchair users.
- **Visual clarity:** use of large fonts, high-contrast colours, and simple graphics to support people with low vision.
- **Simplicity of language:** concise texts, avoiding technical jargon and complex structures, to facilitate understanding for users with cognitive disabilities.
- **Multisensory communication:** integration of tactile, auditory, and digital supports (e.g., braille, QR codes, voice systems) to expand accessibility beyond the visual channel.
- **Consistent layout:** standardized symbols and pictograms, internationally recognizable, to ease orientation across different contexts.
- **Contextual positioning:** signage located along main routes, in correspondence with nodes, intersections, and access points, to support real navigation needs.

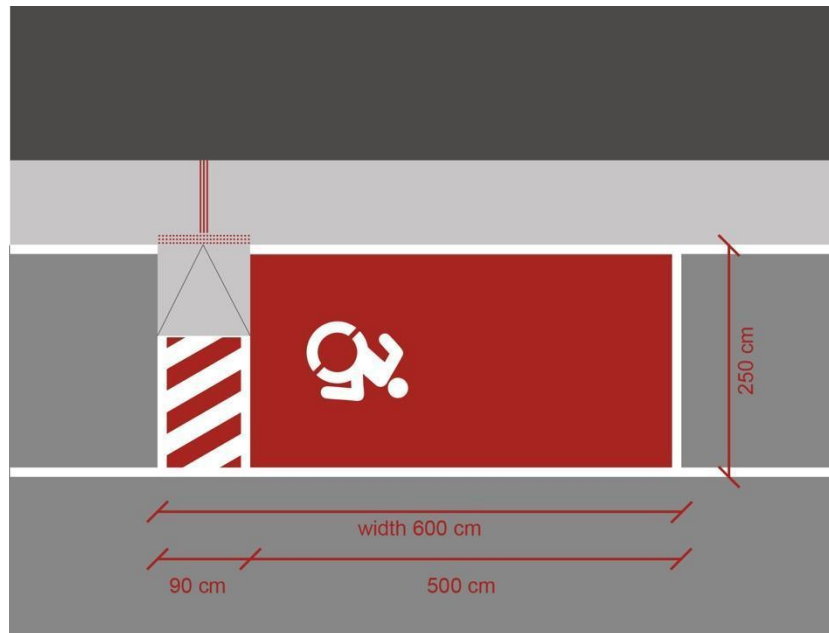
A final reflection concerns the accessibility of public spaces in terms of reachability. Although the necessary efforts toward sustainable development have increasingly promoted slow mobility, it remains true that people with disabilities may encounter significant difficulties in this regard and thus need to rely on vehicular transport. For this reason, it is essential to evaluate the possibility of accessing a given public space either through private vehicles or via the public transport system. The latter, of course, requires specific interventions in the provision of the service itself - beyond the direct competence of designers, although they can play a role in promoting them. In both cases, however, the correct design of the interchange point with the public space is crucial: parking areas in the first instance, and bus stops or similar systems in the second (excluding here extra-urban transport).

The design of an accessible parking space reserved for holders of the European Disability Parking Permit requires careful consideration of its distribution within the urban fabric and, above all, the conditions of safe and autonomous connection to the nearest pedestrian path, in addition to its

geometric and material characteristics. A constant regulatory parameter establishes the ratio of one reserved space for every 50 standard lots; however, in proximity to major public areas - including green spaces and areas with multiple public services - this ratio should be exceeded, based on a case-by-case assessment of the expected flow of users. Beyond numerical distribution, each reserved parking space must comply with specific accessibility requirements, consistent with the geometric and qualitative parameters previously outlined. In particular, the space must allow for safe vehicle exit and re-entry, including for those using mobility aids. For perpendicular (bay) parking, a minimum width of 3.20 m must be guaranteed, while for parallel parking a depth of at least 6.00 m is required. However, the most critical element is the seamless and safe connection between the parking space and the nearest pedestrian path, ensuring maximum autonomy for all users. This requires the elimination of any existing level differences and the use of suitable surface materials, thereby guaranteeing continuous, safe, and comfortable access from parking to public space.



*Figure 40. Plan diagram illustrating the design of an accessible bay parking lot for people with disabilities, showing the minimum required dimensions. It also highlights the need for a safe connection to the sidewalk, through a ramp, and the presence of tactile paving to facilitate the identification of the reserved parking space by all users (Authors' work)*



*Figure 41. Plan diagram illustrating the design of an accessible parallel parking lot for people with disabilities, showing the minimum required dimensions. It also highlights the need for a safe connection to the sidewalk, through a ramp, and the presence of tactile paving to facilitate the identification of the reserved parking space by all users (Authors' work)*

The bus stop must provide not only a place to wait but also protection from the elements for pedestrians. However, the design of an appropriate shelter must carefully consider the dimensions of the sidewalk to ensure that it does not obstruct the continuity of the pedestrian path. Therefore, two alternative solutions are proposed: the first for situations where the sidewalk has sufficient space to accommodate all necessary furnishings; the second for narrower sidewalks, where minimum conditions of comfort and safety must still be ensured. From a design perspective, the first proposal involves a shelter with recommended dimensions of 250 cm in width and 130 cm in depth, allowing for the inclusion of a bench and ensuring sufficient space (at least 100 cm) for a wheelchair to be placed alongside. The shelter should be supported by vertical structures at the rear to keep the pedestrian path clear and to facilitate safe boarding and alighting from the vehicle. The second proposal suggests a shelter with dimensions of 270 cm in width and 90 cm in depth. These dimensions provide space for a seat with ischial support and a minimum of 120 cm in width to allow for a wheelchair to be placed alongside it, parallel to the direction of the pedestrian path. As with the first proposal, the shelter should be supported by vertical posts and suspended above the ground to maintain clear pedestrian access. Additionally, a minimum 150 cm deep area must be provided for safe boarding and alighting from the bus.

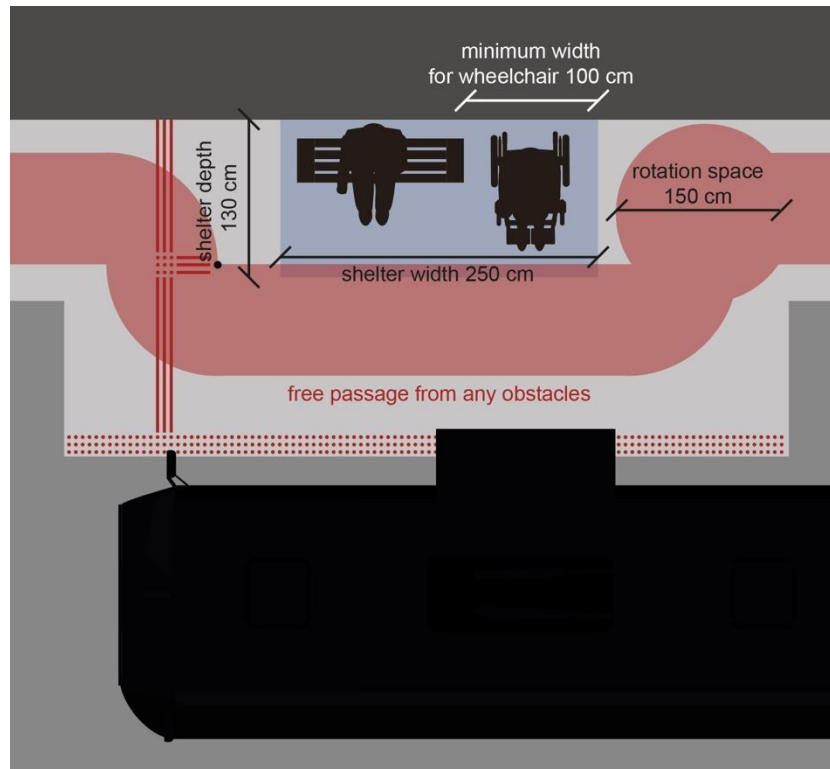


Figure 42. Plan diagram illustrating the proposed design for a bus stop shelter, where the sidewalk provides all the necessary space for the continuity of the pedestrian path and the protected resting area for pedestrians. The diagram includes the suggested minimum dimensions, checks for the continuity of pedestrian flow, and how the tactile paving should be implemented to mark the bus stop boundary and guide pedestrians to the informative signage. (Authors' work)

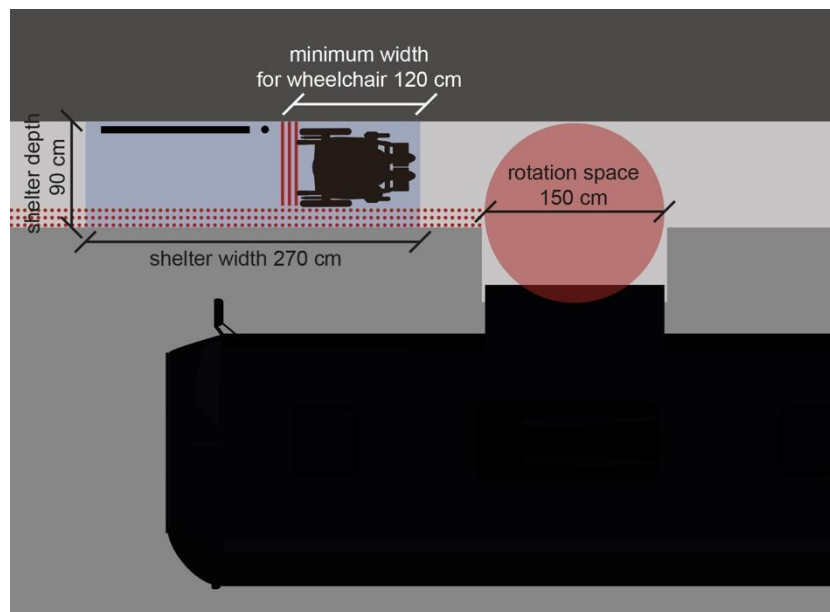


Figure 43. Plan diagram illustrating the proposed design for a bus stop shelter in condition of narrow sidewalk. The diagram includes the suggested minimum dimensions and how the tactile paving should be implemented to mark the bus stop boundary and guide pedestrians to the informative signage. (Authors' work)

In both cases, signage must be appropriately designed, both in terms of graphic characteristics and the integration of non-visual communication channels. Signage should be positioned at a height between 90 and 140 cm from the ground to ensure visibility for all users. Furthermore, tactile signage must be implemented to delineate the edge of the platform, allowing blind or visually impaired pedestrians to orient themselves and locate the bus stop, guiding them to the bench.

In conclusion, ensuring accessibility in public spaces requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that considers the diverse needs of all users. From the appropriate design of pedestrian paths to the careful integration of tactile paving, ramps, and furniture, each element plays a crucial role in fostering safe, comfortable, and equitable environments. By adhering to clear design guidelines and incorporating both sensory and functional considerations, public spaces can be transformed into inclusive environments that support autonomy and participation for everyone, including people with Physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. A proactive, thoughtful design strategy that respects these principles will not only meet regulatory requirements but also improve the quality of life for all users, making public spaces truly accessible and welcoming.

### **3.3 Accessibility in Historic Urban Spaces: Methodologies and Effective Practices for Public Space Design**

#### **3.3.1 Features of Public Space in Historic Cities: Impact on Accessibility and Liveability**

At this point in the discussion, it becomes essential to overlap the required accessibility performance for public spaces with the characteristics of historic cities. However, before proceeding, it is important to clarify what is meant by accessibility when addressing the relationship between people and cultural heritage (Sørmoen, 2016). The interaction between individuals and cultural heritage naturally begins with its physical accessibility. While this is fundamental, it alone cannot translate the knowledge and values that heritage embodies. For this reason, a second level of accessibility must be introduced, one that can be defined as "conceptual", relating to the recognition of the existence of a codified system of transmitting a message from sender to receiver. In this sense, the user must be supported with all the necessary tools to understand the sociocultural context that produced the heritage and to interpret the testimonies it conveys (Baraldi, 2016). It is precisely the combination of tangible and intangible resources that comprise heritage, which immediately highlights that its enjoyment is linked not only to physical needs but also to sensory and cognitive needs (Marconcini, 2020). For heritage to truly become a universal asset, it is essential to understand the characteristics of historic cities that are traditionally perceived as obstacles to the performance requirements previously outlined, which should be considered universal across all contexts. It is equally true, as mentioned earlier, that accessibility in historical contexts is not an unattainable goal. The key lies in understanding the specific features of the historic cities alongside the cultural values they embody and proposing contemporary creative solutions that can balance instances for wider accessibility and heritage preservation. To achieve this, designers

must engage in a careful reading of both the physical and intangible qualities of the historical environment.

Although each historical context presents its own unique features, it is possible to introduce a series of limitations to accessibility as categories that can be applied to analyze any historic city. To illustrate this, the city of Mantua, which, alongside Sabbioneta, is one of the many UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Italy, serves as a significant reference. By examining images of the city, it will be possible to compare accessibility performance with the specific characteristics of the historic urban fabric.

The primary limitation encountered in historic urban contexts is the insufficient size of spaces for movement, which are often inadequate. In particular, numerous situations arise where pedestrian paths, especially sidewalks, do not allow wheelchair users to pass, thereby compromising the mobility of people with physical disabilities. These spatial limitations not only affect the autonomy of specific groups who rely on mobility aids but, as previously demonstrated, they also hinder the comfort and safety of all road users. In this context, it is crucial to reflect on how to improve accessibility, considering alternative solutions to the traditional raised pavement, typically located on both sides of the road. One possible solution would be to prioritize accessibility on just one side of the street, ensuring optimal performance for pedestrian mobility. In this scenario, designing coplanar spaces becomes essential, supporting an innovative approach that considers the interaction between different types of traffic. Furthermore, it is important to implement design solutions that safeguard the safety of individuals with sensory and cognitive disabilities, ensuring that pathways are clearly identifiable, obstacle-free, and easily navigable. Finally, from a geometric perspective, another aspect that impacts the usability of historic cities is the inadequacy of pavement slopes, and in some cases, entire routes connecting different urban levels. These excessive slopes can hinder mobility, particularly for individuals with motor disabilities. Therefore, it is crucial to provide solutions that ensure the continuity of pathways, including adequate spaces for rest along the way.



*Figure 44-45. City of Mantua. Narrow street sidewalks that do not allow wheelchair passage, accommodating only one pedestrian at a time, thus limiting the mobility of people with motor disabilities and compromising the safety and comfort of all users (Sebastiano Marconcini, 2024)*



*Figure 46-47. City of Mantua. The sidewalks, throughout its entire length or in specific areas such as driveways, present excessive cross slopes. This creates a risk for individuals using mobility aids, making it difficult for them to navigate safely and comfortably (Sebastiano Marconcini, 2025)*

A second recurring issue concerns the presence of level changes that are not always designed to be accessible to all users. These can range from small height differences, such as single steps, to full stairways within public spaces. In such cases, it is crucial to acknowledge the different needs of users, for which there is no single, standardized solution - typically seen in ramps or elevators. Instead, it is important to emphasize that design proposals should ensure a choice in overcoming the level change, catering to a range of needs. In this context, the focus should not solely be on overcoming the level difference itself, but also on all the elements that facilitate access for people. In addition to physical interventions, it is vital to consider sensory and cognitive support, such as incorporating colour contrasts and tactile indicators, and where necessary, to develop alternative pathways. In this case, adequate information and spatial orientation tools should also be provided to help users recognize available access opportunities.



*Figure 48 - 49. City of Mantua. The first image shows the connection path between the historic centre and the lake par of the city, where the transition occurs through an irregular ramp, of unsuitable materials and excessive slope. In the image on the right, a connecting ramp between the street and sidewalk is shown, with a slope greater than 10%, making it unsuitable for safe and accessible use (Sebastiano Marconcini, 2025)*

Another key factor compromising the usability of public spaces in historic cities is the inaccessibility of horizontal surfaces, which can be traced to several causes. The first and most obvious cause is the use of unsuitable materials, such as cobblestone paving, which are not proper for ensuring safe passage for all, particularly for those using mobility aids. Another contributing factor is the poor quality of paving execution, leading to uneven surfaces, or the natural deterioration over time, compounded by

inadequate maintenance. In this context, the issue of inclusion calls for a new interpretation, emphasizing the need for continuous attention at all stages of the design process - from construction and material choice to long-term maintenance and monitoring. Every phase in the life cycle of urban spaces must be considered to ensure that accessibility is not merely an initial goal but a dynamic, ongoing process. Finally, another critical issue concerns the use of tactile paving, which is often poorly implemented due to its traditional perception as unappealing. However, it is essential to engage in continuous research on materials and methods of communicating pathways, ensuring that these solutions not only address the accessibility needs of people with sensory disabilities but also guarantee visual integration and consistency with the historical urban fabric.



*Figure 50 - 51. City of Mantua. In the image on the left, a street in the pedestrian area of the historic centre; the pavement is in low maintenance condition, with numerous depressions and discontinuities, posing a risk of falling. On the right, a pedestrian crossing extending diagonally, which lacks tactile pavement for orientation, making it difficult for blind and visually impaired pedestrians to identify it and navigate it safely (Sebastiano Marconcini, 2025)*

Another significant challenge in historic cities is the non-functionality of street furniture, which can be traced to various causes and the performance requirements that should be met. This issue directly intersects with the limitations discussed earlier. Specifically, the narrow dimensions of historic pathways mean that many types of street furniture compromise walkability, significantly reducing the usable width of the paths. On the other hand, street furniture is often not installed at all, as the available space does not allow for its placement without obstructing pedestrian flows. A clear example of this is the lack of benches, except in open spaces like squares and parks, or the absence of adequate public transport bus stops. In other instances, the placement of the furniture itself limits its functionality, such as when elements are placed on surfaces with unsuitable material properties or on uneven ground that hinders their use. Finally, in many historical settings, furniture solutions are implemented that do not comply with accessibility standards for all users, overlooking the principles of Universal Design. Taken together, these issues significantly reduce the liveability and permanence of public spaces in historic cities.

A further limitation identified is the inadequacy of communication forms within the public space. This issue occurs on two distinct levels. First, it refers to the concept of Wayfinding, which encompasses the set of solutions that assist in orientation and mobility within the built environment. In a historical and cultural context, communication goes beyond mere navigation, encompassing the need to understand

the space itself. In other words, it becomes an integral part of the heritage narrative, since the way the space communicates its history and identity directly impacts the visitor's experience and the accessibility of the heritage values. All of this translates into a range of solutions, some of which have already been discussed, such as the use of tactile paving, but also extends to all those supports that convey information to achieve these two goals. Once again, it is essential to consider various factors in a cross-cutting manner, including the geometric design of the supports themselves, which must enable interaction with people of different physical abilities, as well as the graphic characteristics, the type of communication, and the complexity of the information. Moreover, it is necessary to incorporate communication channels beyond the visual ones, ensuring full accessibility for all users.



*Figure 52 - 53. City of Mantua. In the image on the left, a fountain is located at the intersection between the sidewalk and the adjacent square. This element, along with the surrounding trees, obstructs the pedestrian path and represents a potential tripping hazard. In the image on the right, an example of a suspended obstacle - in this case, a mailbox that is not detectable by the white cane, posing a potential danger to visually impaired pedestrians (Francesca Paiola, 2025 e Sebastiano Marconcini, 2023)*



*Figure 54 - 55. City of Mantua. Two examples of information panels in public space. In the image on the left, the excessive amount of text and the presence of non-relevant directional information make the panel inaccessible for people with cognitive disabilities and for blind or visually impaired users, due to the lack of appropriate graphic solutions and tactile information. In the image on the right, additionally, the graphic choices and the positioning of the panel hinder readability for several users, including wheelchair ones and children (Sebastiano Marconcini, 2025)*

The final limitation that may be encountered is the lack of an integrated system of activities and services that promote social participation, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. While physical accessibility is the first step toward inclusion, it is equally essential to ensure a range of complementary services that support personal well-being. Although this aspect does not always directly concern the work of

designers, as previously mentioned, it is crucial that they advocate for these issues and intervene at points of interaction with the built environment. One example is transport links, where designers can act to enhance the integration of different mobility systems and foster the active participation of all citizens.

In conclusion, ensuring accessibility in historic cities is not only a technical challenge but a multidimensional process that requires thoughtful consideration of both physical and intangible factors. As we have explored, it is crucial to address the spatial, sensory, and cognitive needs of all users for developing public spaces that are both accessible and engaging. However, accessibility should not be seen as a one-time goal, but as a continuous process that spans the entire lifecycle of urban spaces, from design and construction to long-term maintenance and adaptation. The preservation of cultural heritage must coexist with inclusive strategies, ensuring that historic cities remain accessible, livable, and vibrant for all. This balanced approach, which respects the rich history and identity of urban spaces while addressing modern-day accessibility needs, is key to transforming heritage sites into universal assets that benefit everyone, regardless of ability. Ultimately, the success of inclusive design in historic cities lies in the ongoing commitment of designers, planners, and stakeholders to advocate for and implement solutions that honour both the past and the future, building spaces that promote social participation and foster a sense of belonging for all citizens.

### **3.3.2 Accessibility in Historic Cities: Lessons from European and Italian Experiences**

Although specifying design solutions is not one of the main objectives of this handbook, it is deemed appropriate at this point in the discussion to offer the reader some general guidelines on how to approach accessibility design in historic cities. Below there are several “categories” of design practices that have emerged from a broader investigation. A key tool used in this analysis was the Access City Award, established in 2011 by the European Commission to recognize EU cities that have excelled in creating accessible built environments<sup>31</sup>. Based on this, a study was conducted on the strategies adopted by the winning cities, finalists, and those receiving special mentions for implementing specific solutions to improve urban usability. While it may seem self-evident, it is important to note that the award is not a certificate of quality. For example, Milan was awarded the first prize in 2016, following several initiatives undertaken for Expo 2015, alongside strategies proposed for the future. However, this does not preclude the opportunity to identify other effective approaches to fostering more inclusive cities, especially in situations where architectural interventions are restricted, and modifying cultural heritage may not be feasible.

The first category of intervention clearly concerns the adoption of inclusive design practices in the development of public spaces and structures. This refers to implementing interventions that take into account the concept of real users and the adoption of approaches like Design for All. However, it is crucial that the proposed interventions are not isolated, but rather part of a long-term strategic programme spread across the entire city. An exemplary case is the city of Viborg in Denmark, which

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<sup>31</sup> European Commission, *Access City Award*. Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion  
<<https://ec.europa.eu/social/accesscityaward>>

successfully overcame the challenges posed by the historical context and topography of the city, including steep alleys, narrow paths, and uneven paving. The project to improve accessibility in the historic city centre involved the local council and four local foundations. This collaborative effort led to projects focused on discreet and inclusive solutions, rather than creating "special" structures designed solely for people with disabilities. The goal was to find innovative solutions for both physical accessibility and improving communication about the city's heritage, ultimately making the city more appealing to everyone. The result has been a new wave of cultural events and the creation of new facilities, with future projects also aligned with these inclusive goals.



*Figure 56. Viborg. Street of the historical centre of the city where one of the two sidewalk was lowered to street level and renovated with a new flooring that is completely plain and accessible to everyone (Source: <https://realdania.dk/projekter/tilgaengelighed-historiske-bykerner>)*



*Figure 57. Viborg. Detail of the paving of a historical road, where it was designed a lane with features that allow a comfortable and safe use of the spaces for everyone (Source: <https://realdania.dk/projekter/tilgaengelighed-historiske-bykerner>)*

Another strategic area for improving the usability of cities is the mobility system. Buildings or public spaces, even if designed with inclusivity in mind, can never be truly accessible if they are not reachable. In this regard, it is essential to ensure that all users can access the public transport system, including through the adoption of specific tools, and that pedestrian areas are fully accessible, providing safety and comfort. Integrating the mobility system, therefore, means working on the various components that make it up and addressing diverse needs. The means of transport are not the only elements that need to be fully accessible; interchange points, such as train stations and bus stops, and the routes to reach them, must also be accessible. Moreover, it is not enough to focus solely on the physical usability of the system; the entire communication system linked to it must also be rethought, adapting to the sensory and cognitive needs of all users. In this regard, one of the most interesting cases is the city of Venice, which, despite never having competed for the Access City Award, offers valuable insights. Its unique

morphology and rich cultural heritage, including numerous bridges, have made it challenging to implement inclusive pedestrian mobility measures. However, the city decided to reorganize the water transport system to overcome the objective limitations imposed by Venice's layout. For situations where it was not possible to adapt bridges or where entire areas of the city remained inaccessible, the vaporetto line system was integrated, making the landing stations fully accessible and thus ensuring greater usability of the city.



Figure 58. Venice. On top, map of the city where are highlighted the areas of the city that are accessible thanks to an integrated system of solution, involving the accessibility of the bridges and the water public transport. Below, brochures promoting the accessible paths within the city (Source: <https://www.comune.venezia.it>)

The next category of accessibility strategies concerns information, which has a dual significance. On one hand, it refers to the need to educate the public about accessibility issues, and on the other, to communicating data about the usability of places and services for users. Starting with awareness, the issues raised here require the training of specialized professionals who can manage the complexity of an inclusive design approach. This training must, of course, be cross-cutting all sectors that may be involved in these processes, not limited to design and construction alone. At the same time, it is essential to educate all those who interact with the public, such as private business owners and employees, to ensure a better experience for everyone using the services they offer. This can be seen as a real awareness raising effort, which should be extended to all community members to encourage supportive behaviours that promotes freedom for everyone. There are many examples of guides produced by various European administrations to promote inclusive projects - such as those in Berlin<sup>32</sup> and Salzburg<sup>33</sup> - or to ensure the accessibility of commercial activities, like those promoted by

<sup>32</sup> Berlin, "Berlin barrierefrei", *Landesbeauftragte für Menschen mit Behinderungen* <<https://www.berlin.de/lb/behi/berlin-barrierefrei/>>

<sup>33</sup> Stadt Salzburg, "Was muss barrierefrei sein?", *Barrierefrei bauen und wohnen* <<https://www.stadt-salzburg.at/mmb/barrierefrei-bauen-und-wohnen/>>

Grenoble<sup>34</sup> and Barcelona<sup>35</sup>. These guides provide design and behavioural recommendations for interacting with people with disabilities. Finally, information is a fundamental tool that end-users rely on to organize their travel according to their needs and the available services, as well as to learn about historical heritage sites. In the first case, the reference is to well-known digital systems, such as websites and apps, which provide information on the accessibility of a place and its services. For learning about a city's cultural heritage, the Royal Route project<sup>36</sup> in Krakow offers an interesting example. This route runs through the historic city centre and includes the main monuments. Between 2008 and 2010, twelve architectural models were created, alongside a maquette of the historic centre street plan, featuring the city's most famous buildings in their actual positions. These models were equipped with raised lettering descriptions in multiple languages and were accompanied by GPS devices with coordinates to reach the models, as well as audio guides relating to the various monuments. This comprehensive tool not only benefited visually impaired visitors but also improved the cognitive experience of the city for other users.

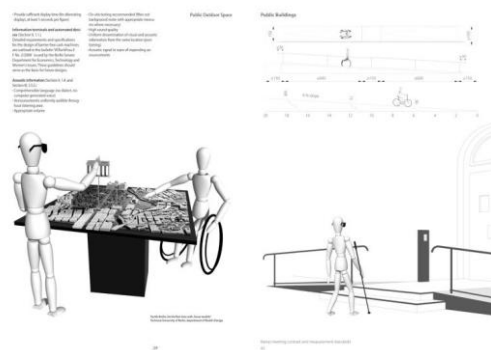


Figure 59. Berlin. A couple of pages of publication by the city of Berlin to design inclusive solutions in public spaces (Source: <https://www.berlin.de/lb/behi/berlin-barrierefrei/>)



Figure 60. Salzburg. A couple of pages of a publication by the city of Salzburg for inclusive residential design (Source: <https://www.stadt-salzburg.at/mmb/barrierefrei-bauen-und-wohnen/>)

<sup>34</sup> Ville de Grenoble, “Handicaps et Accessibilités”, *Ville Solidaire*  
<<https://www.grenoble.fr/50-handicap-et-accessibilite.htm>>

<sup>35</sup> Ajutament de Barcelona, Trepax Txiki (2006), *Som Capaços! Aprenem a conèixer les discapacitats*, Barcelona: Imatge i Producció Editorial

<sup>36</sup> Kraków, “Kraków dla turysty z niepełnosprawnością”, *Kraków bez Barier*  
<[http://www.krakow.pl/bezbarier/turystyka\\_sport\\_kultura/3250,glowna.html](http://www.krakow.pl/bezbarier/turystyka_sport_kultura/3250,glowna.html)>



Figure 61. Barcelona. A couple of pages of the publications *Som Capaços! Aprenem a conèixer les discapacitats* (Ajutament de Barcelona and Trepax Txiki, 2006)

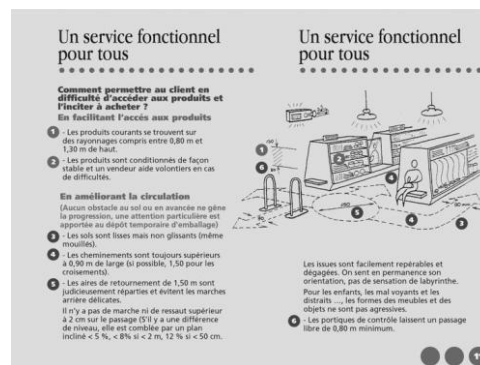


Figure 62. Grenoble. A page from the guidelines published by the city of Grenoble with suggestions for more inclusive commerce structures (Source: <https://www.grenoble.fr/50-handicap-et-accessibilite.htm>)

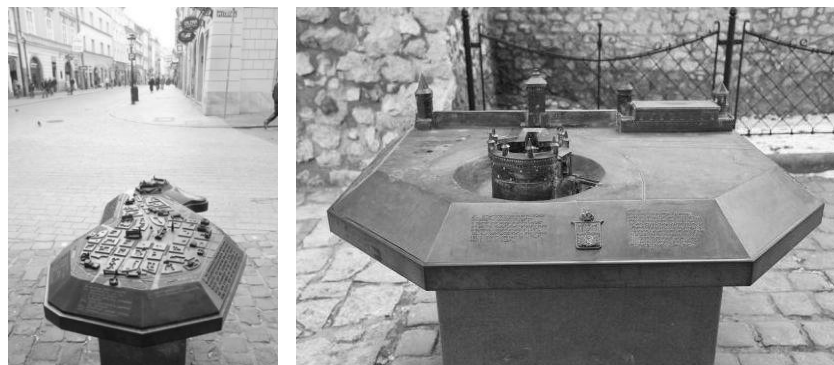


Figure 63 - 64. Krakow. Two examples of the three-dimensional models used within the street as both wayfinding solution and tools for learning about the main sights of the city by blind and partially sighted people. (Source: [https://www.krakow.pl/english/visit\\_krakow/18303,artykul,the\\_royal\\_route\\_for\\_the\\_disabled\\_tourist.html](https://www.krakow.pl/english/visit_krakow/18303,artykul,the_royal_route_for_the_disabled_tourist.html))

Further actions undertaken across Europe to promote inclusion involve activating processes of active participation by citizens, including those with disabilities. This particularly refers to the development of economic, cultural, and recreational activities that enable individuals to exercise their self-determination. A significant example is the Inovaccess project, which ran between 2010 and 2014 in the city of Grenoble. The goal of this initiative was to promote social inclusion by recruiting people with disabilities into local businesses. Particularly, direct collaboration was established between the Municipality of Grenoble and local businesses to adapt three key districts of the city - each with its own specific focus: the business district, the industrial area, and the science hub. The project not only made

workplaces accessible but also addressed all the elements of the route connecting private homes to professional destinations. This comprehensive approach has allowed over 57 companies to provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities, who have subsequently become actively involved in the city's economic and social life.

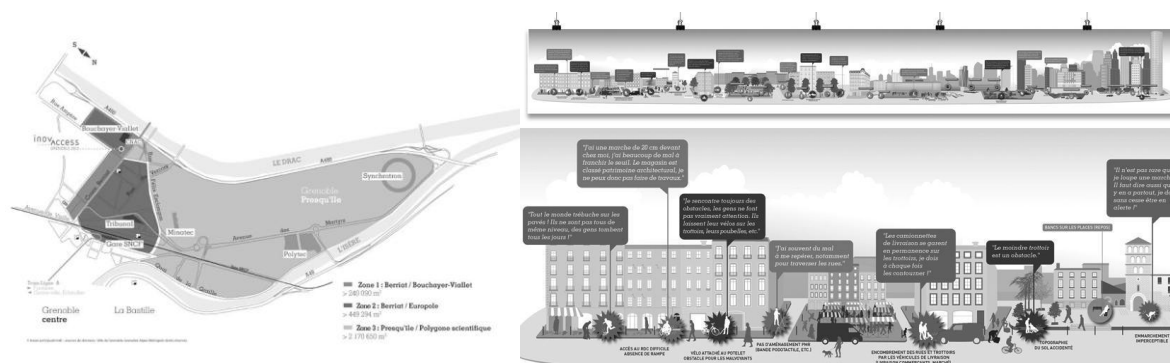


Figure 65. Grenoble. Graphic representation of the objectives of the Inovaccess project and plan of the three districts where the experimentation was carried out (Source: <https://www.jeudidmide.com/project/inovaccess/>)

Lastly, the final approach involves adopting new models of inclusive governance, specifically developing policies for inclusion within local government processes, with the direct involvement of stakeholders. A prime example of this practice is the city of Nantes, France, which first established the Nantes Council for People with Disabilities (CNHP) and, in 2015, the Nantes Council for Universal Accessibility (CNAU)<sup>37</sup>. This body is responsible for co-designing actions undertaken by the administration to improve urban accessibility. The work is carried out by administrative staff, external experts, and citizens with disabilities, who participate through associations. Additionally, the council is tasked with continuously monitoring the results of these initiatives. Furthermore, the council organizes thematic workshops, training sessions, and awareness-raising events to support the project's goals. Another exemplary practice comes from Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, which has also set up an organisation to address these issues: the Municipal Council for the Removal of Architectural and Communication Barriers (SOAKO)<sup>38</sup>. This council is composed of municipal officials from various sectors, appointed professionals, and representatives from disability associations. This structure fosters continuous knowledge exchange and cooperation in planning initiatives and defining strategic priorities. As a result, there is better coordination between the proposed actions, leading to greater effectiveness and a positive impact on raising awareness and promoting the acceptance of diversity within the city. One notable feature of Ljubljana's approach is the adoption of a two-year action plan instead of focusing on isolated projects. This results in an ongoing process that prioritizes the quality of interventions and responds directly to the needs expressed by citizens.

In conclusion, this brief overview has highlighted how inclusion can be achieved through a variety of practices that, when combined, can significantly improve the conditions for everyone to enjoy a city.

<sup>37</sup> Ville de Nantes, "Les missions du Conseil nantais pour l'accessibilité universelle (CNAU)", *Conseil nantais pour l'accessibilité universelle* <<https://dialoguecitoyen.metropole.nantes.fr/pages/conseil-nantais-pour-laccessibilite-universelle>>

<sup>38</sup> Mestna Občina Ljubljana, "Mesto, dostopno vsem", *Odprto in dostopno mesto* <<https://www.ljubljana.si/si/moja-ljubljana/odprto-in-dostopno-mesto/mesto-dostopno-vsem/>>

Specifically, we aimed to demonstrate how actions can be taken that do not always have a direct, tangible impact on the physical design of spaces. While these actions may not fall within the traditional scope of design, it is essential for us, as designers, to adopt a broader perspective. This vision ensures the development of more effective solutions that integrate into a coordinated system of initiatives, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and accessible urban environment for all.

# IV STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN OF PUBLIC SPACES IN HISTORIC CITIES

## 4.1 Actors and Strategies for the Design of Inclusive Spaces

The uniqueness of inclusivity stems from the awareness that it can never be completely achieved, and yet this very perception underscores its necessity as a guiding principle for design and social action. It is unlikely to meet everyone's needs, desires and comfort levels in a shared space simultaneously, and this intensifies with the backdrop of an existing space concerned with expressing its own heritage identity and infrastructure. However, when observed as a continuous practice engaging with the site rather than a static goal, the process of inclusive design can gradually address competing and conflicting needs.

The previous chapters have depicted how historic cities, carrying facets of cultural heritage but also contemporary life, require a synergy between commemorating their past and activating new life for their present users. In this context, approaching the problem of exclusivity in historic cities' public spaces requires a design strategy that can mutually benefit these dualities alongside the space's evolving timeline. As cities continue to grow, shrink, or alter from infrastructural, environmental, social, or economic shifts, their inhabitants may also change or face new needs that public spaces must be able to adapt to. Public spaces are alive and in constant transformation; designing these spaces is therefore not a one-time intervention. Instead, observing the strategy as a *process* that can adapt and respond to both its users and surroundings is what ultimately generates a lasting inclusive public space.

Approaching this in different historic cities will naturally influence the design process, even different sites within the same city can and normally will require personalized interventions rooted in the specificity of their users, the cultural or historical content on site, and environmental surroundings. The goal here is not to apply a singular series of steps that achieve one architectural typology repeating in every public space, but to achieve a level of quality of space that invites all users of inclusivity. It is also imperative to conserve and celebrate the unique quality of each historic space in order to preserve their identities, but moreover to grant users diverse experiences. Furthermore, an inclusive contemporary urban design requires a focus on the community in the wider sense, through participatory development processes that move away from the problem-solution dynamic. It is fundamental for the design success that the strategy and planning process must be extended to local communities in order to make the inclusion process inclusive and dynamic. This requires a planning methodology that cross-values the actors involved, timeframes and resources. The process, through the active participation of all stakeholders, allows for a more widespread awareness of heritage opportunities, enabling its valorisation and promotion. Therefore, a design strategy provides an overarching framework of how to observe and listen to each site's needs in each phase of development through 5 pillars:

1. **Observation and Context Analysis:** Surveying the site, its users and usage patterns and identifying prevalent inclusivity barriers across multiple timeframes,
2. **Communication and Stakeholder Engagement:** Facilitating not only dialogue and negotiation but active participation and representation of stakeholders and diverse/vulnerable user perspectives,

3. **Co-design:** Translating community input into shared design proposals with universal design principles,
4. **Implementation:** Executing experimental incremental interventions based on the priorities collectively communicated,
5. **Assessment:** Evaluating and recording the successes and shortcomings of these interventions, including interviewing users of the site and running post-occupancy studies.

The strategy above should not be understood as a linear and consecutive process, but rather as a cyclical one, embodying the idea of continuity and allowing for a back and forth practice. In this sense, the public space is conceived as a work-in-progress, constantly open to revision, adaptation, and improvement. For public spaces, time acts as a powerful component rather than a constraint because it works alongside the progressive nature of public spaces. It allows one to stop and assess, gaining an evolutionary study of the place's needs. Beginning with observation, taking the time to study the site across varying moments throughout the day, cross-referenced across different days of the week, months, or even seasons can generate a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the site. Incidental or recurring barriers can be recorded and therefore addressed, including whether they target a large group of people or marginalized users. Observing can also include comparing what is offered in one public space versus another to understand any weakness areas. Similarly, the surroundings of that space should be studied such as its connectivity and the demographics of its wider urban context. Most importantly, the history or cultural heritage involved within that site should be observed in great detail not only from an architectural point of view but also socioeconomic and cultural, and the transformation of the perception and use of this heritage over time. Is the space still being used as it was intended to when the cultural artefact or building was created? How was the site originally perceived? How is it perceived now? Such observations are similar to the indicators listed in Chapter 2.2.3 which can be useful when approaching a historic public space. Other urbanistic site analysis tools including historic and accessibility maps and literature can be utilized, however it is also beneficial to gain the perspectives of users on site.

Moreover, communication and stakeholder engagement, particularly in the case of public space, is a fundamental aspect to an inclusive design process. Since inclusivity entails enabling people to feel included and represented, it is crucial to involve them. In theory, this forms the basis of a participatory design process whereby residents, visitors and other users of a space partake in its creation, everyday use, and governance, cementing their role as placemakers. In the case of existing historic spaces, communicating with local residents is essential for understanding their interaction with not only the space but the history and heritage it represents, as well as each other. This can take place in the form of surveys, private or group interviews, open laboratories, public talks and debates that gather their insights and challenge their perceptions of the space, allowing personal difficulties and preferences to appear alongside general consensus. It can also consist of interactive walks and workshops on-site with intercultural and intergenerational users to observe their interactions and promote dialogue between them. All the unique collected data can then be translated into a co-designed brief or proposal that directly tackles the stakeholders' needs, in which urban planners and architects take these perspectives into account during the conceptual or schematic design phase of a project to ensure their integration, such as providing more green spaces, clearer signage, activities for the elderly or for children etc. Simultaneously, the design of a project should consult the varying inclusivity and accessibility principles discussed in the previous chapters such as the Universal Design guidelines,

Streets for Life and the UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Assessment kit to ensure that a standard of space is being produced.

This is then followed by the implementation of the project, which can consist of a physical component, the integration of a new policy, or a programmatic schedule that enhances the use of the site. At times, a participatory approach can also be inserted here by involving local residents in the construction or landscaping of the site, or for planning public events. The progress of the implementation can also be communicated visually or verbally to generate interest in the site. Due to the varying nature of each site, the scale and duration of implementation will differ for each project. Some projects may choose to subdivide it into a pilot project that acts as an experimental intervention followed by an assessment of its use before continuing with the entire implementation. Others may carry out a larger intervention if its components require each other to function. Nevertheless, after intervening with the site, a period of assessment is crucial for determining the successes or failures of the project and thereby its capacity for improvement. This can include post-occupancy assessments conducted by the designer of the interaction with the new intervention, increased or decreased footfall to the historic site, but also through interviews with the users of the site to prevent biases and gain diverse opinions. The ability to then remediate an intervention based on this assessment represents the flexibility of the project. As presented previously, public spaces act as living organisms susceptible to change, and therefore reiterations and transformations are equally important as the initial implemented design.

For all the stages described above, it is essential to establish a timeline — understood not as a rigid framework but as a flexible guideline — that allocates defined periods to each phase of the design process, proportionate to the scale and impact of the specific project and site. Observation and context analysis can occur across an extended initial period ranging from several weeks to several months in order to capture daily, weekly, and seasonal variations. It is also beneficial to repeat this periodically to detect long-term changes depending on the scale of the project. Communication and stakeholder engagement can be formed by scheduled milestones such as monthly or quarterly workshops that can maintain dialogue and update participants on progress in real time. The co-design phase should follow the communication period or even work alongside it in its final stages, with clearly defined deadlines for developing proposals, as well as time for iterative revisions based on feedback. As for the implementation phase, its duration is impacted by the scale and complexity of the design, but should maintain moments for observation of user adaptation. If the project is split into subphases, additional time should be allocated for any iterations or adjustments. Finally, assessments should be scheduled at fixed intervals such as six months to one year post-occupancy with long-term plans for maintenance and follow-up that circle back to observing the site once again.

Furthermore, central to the practices stated above is the involvement of actors. In public spaces, the relevant actors constitute both as the producers and consumers of this process whereby it is their perspectives and representations of a space and of one another that can either promote or hinder the feeling of inclusivity, while they are simultaneously the ones affected by the result of this. When designing, it is therefore imperative to gain a holistic view of the visible and invisible stakeholders involved in this process, including:

- **Institutional:**

This group represents the formal governing and administrative body with the authority to create policies and regulation that can enhance the design and management of public spaces in

historic cities. They are able to set the framework for a public space's development as well as which other actors are involved. This group includes:

- Municipal governments:
  - Provide details for land use and public infrastructure,
  - Oversee strategies, budgeting, and compliance with local regulations,
  - Coordinate with other departments related to preservation and accessibility.
- Cultural heritage authorities:
  - Safeguard the historical asset in each site,
  - Set and oversee the limits and parameters of acceptable interventions.
- Tourism authorities
  - Narrate and communicate the historic site to visitors as well as locals,
  - Determine the programme, experience, and branding on site of the heritage.
- Mobility departments
  - Manage connectivity to the site through public transport and access routes without compromising or conflicting with the historical site,
  - Determine availability of pedestrian and cycling lanes and barrier-free routes.
- Social Services
  - Address vulnerable groups such as low-income, homeless, and isolated users.
- **Placemaking:**

These stakeholders represent the primary consumers of the space who actively create a sense of place through their presence and interactions on site. This includes both permanent and transient inhabitants of the area:

  - Local communities (generational residents, elderly etc.):
    - Maintain generational knowledge of the site's history and culture,
    - Invite other communities into their shared heritage.
  - Foreign communities (migrants, expatriates etc.):
    - Introduce intercultural exchange through diverse practices and perspectives,
    - Provide feedback on contemporary representation of European heritage.
  - Students:
    - Organize, volunteer and engage in educational cultural events in the site,
    - Provide innovative responses for the improvement of public space.
  - Business owners and shopkeepers:
    - Influence character and economy of the public space's surrounding area,
    - Attract tourists and residents alike to the surrounding area.

- **Technical:**

The managers of the historic site need to be leading part of the process and need to be sided by specialization and expertise in the fields of urban planning, architecture, historical preservation, as well as inclusivity to achieve feasible and functional design solutions interpreted from the needs communicated institutionally and locally. This includes:

- Design professionals (architects, urban planners, and landscape architects etc.):
  - Design public spaces according to desired user needs, environmental conditions, and local regulations while balancing heritage conservation.
- Conservators and restoration experts,
- Inclusivity specialists:
  - Ensure that accessibility and equality design principles are being met,

Provide specialized knowledge and best practices that can be applied.

- **Facilitators:**

Facilitating stakeholders act often behind the scenes as a bridge between institutional actors and communal placemakers, enabling dialogue and collaboration. This includes:

- Cultural mediators:  
Provide expertise in heritage interpretation and cultural practice,  
Avoid misunderstanding cultural differences in multi-ethnic contexts.
- Participatory experts:  
Guide and direct stakeholder engagement sessions to ensure all voices are heard.
- Educators:  
Foster awareness and appreciation for history and cultural heritage and the shared responsibility in caring for public spaces.
- Civic organizations (disability organizations, women's or elderly associations etc.):  
Amplify marginalized voices and bring specific barriers to the attention of policymakers and designers,
- NGOs (ex. Migrant support groups):  
Advocate for underrepresented and unheard communities,  
Provide practical assistance and insight during the communication and implementation phase.
- Private stakeholders (investors etc.):  
Support by funding public projects through donations or sponsorship but requires careful review to prevent exclusivity.

Due to the multiplicity of actors and stakeholders involved in this process, significant challenges and tensions may arise during their interactions. Particularly for heritage sites which are governed closely and are protected institutionally, power imbalances often emerge in an effort to safeguard the cultural asset. For placemaking stakeholders and public participants, a representational bias can occur whereby those who have the time, confidence, or leisure to participate may not accurately represent the users of the space. Accountability can also become unclear if the role of these stakeholders is not stated explicitly at the beginning of setting the strategy. This is where the strategy of a process becomes useful, as it allows a cyclical sequence of observing, communicating, designing, implementing, and assessing, during which there are repeated opportunities to note any imbalances of stakeholders and to correct them. Rather than trying to resolve all these tensions simultaneously, a continuous strategy ensures that inclusivity is constantly reinforced and redesigned with time, embedding it into every aspect of the urban fabric.

Ultimately, what emerges from this manual is not a set of prescriptive rules, but a framework of guidelines and principles that invites the reader to rethink the design and management of historic cities as an inclusive process. Each context requires specific solutions, but the suggestions outlined here can serve as a solid reference point to guide decision-making. Inclusion should be understood not as a defined goal, but as a continuous process capable of transforming heritage into a living and shared resource. Only through open governance models, dynamic design tools, and participatory managing

practices will it be possible to ensure that historic spaces, despite their distinctiveness, become truly equitable, welcoming, and meaningful for all people.

## 4.2 Preservation and Inclusion: An Exchange for Mutual Enhancement

Although for many designers the association between conservation and inclusion still appears as a paradox, this manual closes by reaffirming the belief that has guided its development: heritage and inclusion are not opposing forces, but complementary dimensions that, when interpreted in synergy, can mutually reinforce one another, generating new meanings and shared values. Acknowledging the complexity of proposing solutions that both safeguard cultural heritage and expand its accessibility, we must nevertheless recognize a simple truth: in Europe, and far beyond, historic cities are not distant relics of the past, but the living stage of our everyday activities.

In light of the various factors presented in this volume that contribute to defining human well-being, it becomes evident that cultural heritage is an essential resource for public space, capable of enhancing its quality and amplifying its positive effects on the community. The contribution it can provide has been demonstrated by numerous studies – to which further reference should be made – including the previously discussed survey carried out between 2013 and 2015 within Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe. The report of this study highlights multiple social impacts: *"fighting unemployment, raising awareness of both regional and personal identity, involving residents in community life, encouraging volunteering, fostering a sense of place, increasing social capital, supporting intergenerational integration, understanding and acceptance of social diversity, enhancing face to face interaction, a sense of belonging, and the formation of local communities"* (CHCfE Consortium, 2015). Cultural heritage is therefore not only a repository of values, traditions, and knowledge through which fundamental needs such as belonging are fulfilled, but also a catalyst for new opportunities of self-realization and identity formation, in which diversity is acknowledged and embraced as an added value.

In strengthening what has been argued so far, it is useful to recall the definition of World Heritage given by the UNESCO. *"Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. [...] What makes the concept of World Heritage exceptional is its universal application. World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located,"* (UNESCO, 2025B). While the first part of this statement emphasizes the intrinsic significance of heritage, the second clarifies not only why we must protect it, but also for whom such protection is necessary. The same principle is echoed in the Faro Convention (2005), which frames cultural heritage as a public good that should be accessible to the widest possible spectrum of community members. Access to culture is, indeed, recognized as a fundamental right, affirmed across different legal systems and first codified in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948).

Having clarified the reasons why cultural heritage must be accessible to the widest possible audience, it is now necessary to examine how this requirement relates to the principle of preservation. The apparent conflict between the historical value and the practical use of a building can be resolved if both are regarded as instruments of mutual enhancement. On the one hand, access to heritage enables individuals to benefit from social, economic, environmental, and ethical resources that foster collective well-being; on the other, the opportunities for active participation that are promoted, in turn, trigger feelings of identification and commitment in its protection.

Physical accessibility cannot be conceived as a secondary objective, but as an essential dimension of architecture itself, which exists as a space for people and their experiences. Ensuring access does not necessarily mean altering the cultural asset in its materiality; on the contrary, it means enhancing its public function and its ability to generate knowledge, identity, and belonging. Accessibility can be pursued through different tools and strategies, even when direct intervention on the built heritage would conflict with conservation imperatives. In such cases, the project must be conceived across multiple scales, within a comprehensive and long-term vision that integrates physical interventions with compensatory and intangible measures, ensuring access to cultural content and reinforcing collective awareness. At the same time, it must be emphasized that intangible strategies cannot replace material interventions, but only complement them, enriching the overall experience and fostering broader inclusion. Ultimately, the aim of an inclusive design approach is not merely to satisfy accessibility as a technical requirement, but to achieve a higher quality of the project: one that respects the built heritage while enhancing its use, as past urban transformations have done by reinterpreting places without erasing their identity. To reach this goal, a complex and multidimensional methodology is required—one that integrates regulatory, social, cultural, technological, and spatial dimensions. Only in this way will historic cities, with all their uniqueness and stratification, become truly inclusive, recognizing diversity as a resource and offering shared opportunities and meanings for all.

In conclusion, the historic city, with its squares, alleys, and monuments, is not only a repository of memory but also the tangible framework of our everyday lives. To preserve and to include does not mean to choose between two opposing demands, but to recognize their reciprocal capacity to strengthen one another, generating new meanings and shared values. Every stone, every layer, every trace of the past can endure only if it remains accessible and meaningful to the contemporary community. Inclusivity is not a fixed goal but an ongoing journey - a design and civic responsibility that binds together rights, identity, and the future. For this reason, the project must become a complex and multidimensional method, able to safeguard historical testimony while transforming it into a living, open, and welcoming resource. Only in this way can the historic city remain faithful to its most authentic nature: a home for all, a mirror of a plural society, and the foundation for new forms of belonging and citizenship.

## GLOSSARY

**Public Space:** All spaces that are publicly-owned and/or of public use that are free to access without a profit motive by all people regardless of their role, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. In this

manual, public spaces are limited to outdoor spaces including but not limited to: parks or green areas, plazas or squares, streets, sidewalks, markets, colonnades, and galleries/arcades.

**Historic City:** A city that carries significant cultural heritage recognized by its tangible (architectural and urban features) and/or its intangible ones (local traditions, practices and identity), and often enjoys a protected status.

**Historic Public Space:** A public space that carries historical significance whether through its physical, natural, or intangible features and is often but not necessarily located in a Historic City, and often enjoys a protected status.

**Cultural Heritage:** Refers to the legacy of physical artifacts (such as buildings, monuments, books, works of art, and artifacts) and intangible attributes (such as traditions, languages, knowledge, rituals, and performing arts) that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. It includes monuments, groups of buildings and sites.

**Natural Heritage:** Exceptional natural sites and features that are important for their beauty, biodiversity, geology, or role in the conservation of endangered species. It includes natural features, geological and physiographical formations, natural sites.

**Intangible Cultural Heritage:** Including oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and knowledge concerning nature and the universe.

**Tangible Cultural Heritage:** Including movable (paintings, sculptures), immovable (monuments, archaeological sites), and underwater heritage.

**Inclusivity:** The practice or policy of providing and actively encouraging equal access to public spaces for people who are otherwise excluded or marginalized by tailoring an urban setting's components and generating inclusive programs.

**Accessibility:** The condition whereby environments, products, services, and digital content are designed and implemented to guarantee equal access, usability, and safety for all individuals, regardless of physical, cognitive, sensory, or technological limitations. Accessibility entails the systematic removal of barriers that hinder full participation in society, particularly with regard to information, communication technologies, transportation systems, and public spaces.

**Disability:** A dynamic and evolving concept that refers not only to an individual's physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments, but to the result of the interaction between such conditions and the social, cultural, and environmental barriers that hinder full participation in community life.

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# ANNEX

## Interview Transcription 1

**Interview Date:** 29 April 2025

**Interview Participants:** Corinna Del Bianco, Noora Alhashimi, Diana Giudici

**Interview Setting:** Microsoft Teams

**Noora**

So, as an introduction I would like to ask, how would you describe the project to someone who doesn't know it, how long has it been going on, and how long have you been involved in it?

**Diana**

So, *Gli Anelli Mancanti* was founded in 1991 so it's an association that's been around for over twenty years now. It initially started as an Italian school for foreigners and a theater school. But since then, it's evolved with the times and particularly evolved according to the volunteers, because the entire organization is run by volunteers. Depending on the people involved in the association, it changes shape practically every year — actually, even every three months — because volunteers can stay for a minimum of three months, or longer, depending on how much time they want to dedicate. As for the association, its core is the school. Then there are other services that support our students; legal support, doctors, a job-seeking help desk. Beyond that, we have after-school support, although that doesn't operate inside the association building, which is located on Via del Palazzuolo. It's important to mention where it's located, because Via del Palazzuolo in Florence has always been considered a central hub for intercultural exchange, though it can also sometimes be associated with social issues.

**Corinna**

Sorry to interrupt, but by after-school do you mean tutoring?

**Diana**

Yes, that's right, homework help.

**Corinna**

OK, so it's open to everyone?

**Diana**

Yes, actually. They hold the sessions at Gian Burrasca, the play center also located on Via del Palazzuolo.

**Corinna**

Right across? Yes, yes, I know it.

**Diana**

Then there's also a recreational component; for example, they're currently reviving the soccer school. Within the association, the volunteers are from all sorts of backgrounds. There used to be many young university students when I joined. Now, we have a large group of what we call our *seniors* — retirees who have the time to volunteer. There used to be more foreigners as well, for example more American students volunteering. Right now we don't have as many, but there was a time when we had quite a number of American student volunteers. We also offer computer classes and English courses. But the core is still the Italian language school.

The part I take care of is what we call the "intercultural area", though in reality the whole association is about intercultural exchange.

We focus on museum visits — essentially connecting our students with the city.

So, the intercultural area started about 8 years ago, more or less. It began in collaboration with the Muse, Florence's museum network, when they were working on the **AMIR** project, which came about as an experiment. From that collaboration, they gave us free access for our students to visit museums. From there, many other free-entry projects were born, not solely with Florence's museums. I remember the Galileo Museum and the Anthropology Museum also joined in. Thanks to these partnerships, we've been able to guarantee at least one museum outing per month for students and volunteers. The idea is that we believe anyone living in Florence, even foreigners, after solving

housing, school, medical needs, etc., still needs to *connect* with the city. And Florence *is* culture; it's a city of museums.

Many didn't feel comfortable or had never even thought about visiting a museum. That's where we came in. With help from the teachers (who acted as intermediaries) we convinced students to join us on museum visits. Thanks to that, we've taken many students who had never entered Palazzo Vecchio, or the Duomo museum, or even the botanical gardens, and from that we've created a collection of group trips.

Usually, we organize these visits for both students and volunteers, to build a *social network*.

It helps reduce the distance between them — because being part of a community also means having a support network.

**Noora**

So would you say that the target users of the space are mostly students, or are there other types of people you work with?

**Diana**

So, we call them "students," but the people enrolled in the Italian classes at *Gli Anelli Mancanti* are often workers. Most of them have jobs. When we organize events, they often bring their families. So our museum visits usually turn into full-on Sunday family outings.

**Corinna**

Do you have any data on how many people participate, how long they stay in the program, where they come from? Any stats or at least general info?

**Diana**

I'd have to check later and see if I can find them. I think there's some paper documentation, and maybe something digital too, but we've never really quantified it. We take notes, but it's never been formalized.

**Corinna**

Because I think it would be a really important indicator of the impact you have on the foreign community in Florence.

**Diana**

Yes, I know. You're right.

**Corinna**

If you do find anything, it'd be great to include it.

**Diana**

Yes, yes, of course.

And yes, things have changed a *lot* over the years — we're talking from the 90s until now.

**Corinna**

Yes, it would be interesting to see that evolution.

**Diana**

So our numbers have shifted a lot too. There's been a major change, also because we've had a change in leadership, which is another factor. In the beginning, it was more spontaneous. Now we're a bit more formal, not fully official, but more involved in public calls for funding.

So the spontaneity has been somewhat replaced by the need to apply for grants to keep the projects going. And we are still all volunteers, we don't have paid staff.

**Corinna**

Of course. That brings me to another question about funding. How are you funded? And how do you get your space on Via del Palazzuolo?

**Diana**

So, the space came from an agreement. I don't remember exactly when they settled into Via del

Palazzuolo, but it was with the municipality. It's a kind of subsidized rent; we pay rent, but it's reduced for the kind of space it is. We cover it with the 5x1000 tax donation system.

**Corinna**

Right.

**Diana**

So we pay for the space with that. And our students who make up a large group pay 5 euros per month.

**Corinna**

For the course?

**Diana**

Yes. And we normally have around 200 people.

**Corinna**

So that helps too. And how is the course structured? How many hours per week? Are there levels?

**Diana**

There are two morning classes, I think Tuesday and Thursday. Then there are evening classes from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. There are multiple levels, we have students who come from completely different alphabets so we start with basic literacy (they call it ABC), where they learn how to write, then it moves to advanced levels. Based on the European Framework, I think it's around a B1 level. Those are the ones we usually involve in our museum visits.

**Noora**

Why did you start with language? Why is language important for foreigners?

**Diana**

Well, it's really about communication. It's the foundation.

It's not entirely true that Italians don't speak English, but still... If you arrive and start speaking Italian, your life gets easier. The interesting thing is that our students come from all over the world and Italian becomes the shared language between them, so they speak Italian with each other because you can have people from Bangladesh, Peru, all parts of Africa... And it's not a given that they speak English either.

**Noora**

So language is the biggest obstacle for foreigners in Italy?

**Diana**

Yes, exactly. It makes things harder, you always need someone with you to accompany you if you don't know the language. I remember, when I worked in the library in Prato, I remember a scene: a girl brought her mom to the library in Prato to take an Italian course with DVDs because the daughter had reached almost a university level, but the mother didn't speak it at all. And so she brought her there to basically start learning Italian from scratch again. Maybe they were going to leave, I don't know, but there was clearly this need.

**Corinna**

Yes, it's fundamental. Language is the first element, even to find a job, to be able to integrate into a context.

**Diana**

Yes, exactly. And also, often the man speaks the language, and maybe the wife, or the sister who comes later, doesn't. You often see this: the brother accompanying his sister who's just arrived to her first lesson. So these are also beautiful, meaningful gestures, gestures of recognition, because they see it as a place where they felt welcomed.

**Noora**

Have you seen any other obstacles for foreigners who approach your school?

**Corinna**

And also, what kind of relationship do you build with the culture of the city and with public spaces, heritage, etc.?

**Diana**

Let's say the biggest problems are those of language. Then there's job searching. But I've been told that lately the biggest issue, one that affects everyone, is finding housing. Because, for people of foreign origin (and it's unpleasant to say, but it's the truth) it's extremely difficult to rent an apartment, even if they have a permanent contract.

**Corinna**

Yes, especially now in Florence, with the whole Airbnb situation it's a disaster. Finding an apartment is already hard enough. If you're foreign, unfortunately there's even more skepticism, and so they hold back even more. I was just talking about this yesterday with other moms at the daycare. If you're a foreigner, you face many more barriers. Already in this disastrous rental market, being foreign makes things even harder, culturally speaking.

**Diana**

Yes, and it's also a cultural network issue. Because if you know someone who's inheriting a house or knows your situation and has known you for a long time, then they don't care where you're from. But if that kind of personal connection is missing, it's a problem. I remember when we rented our own apartment, we had to have guarantors (our parents) because our salaries alone didn't inspire enough confidence.

**Corinna**

Yes, of course. So you also help with finding apartments?

**Diana**

No, not really... that's the most difficult part right now.

**Noora**

Instead, looking at areas where *Gli Anelli Mancanti* is able to provide support, how do you measure the success of your initiatives?

**Diana**

It's a difficult question because we're just a volunteer group. We don't have to report to anyone. If you're part of a foundation or project, you usually have to quantify, give numbers, show results etc.

**Corinna**

Sure.

**Diana**

I don't know, maybe the people at the job help desk give themselves a score when they succeed? I'll have to ask. I'm not sure how much gets quantified. Not that it's not important, but I'm not sure it's being done.

**Corinna**

If you can check, that would be helpful to include. But mainly, how do you run those museum visits with students? Who do you manage to involve? Where do you take them? What kind of activities do you do?

**Diana**

OK, so we organize a visit once a month. We choose the location based a bit on our own interests. One that we never skip is a visit to *Palazzo Vecchio*, because it's symbolic of the city, it's close to where we are, and they pass by it often, even for bureaucratic reasons. So it's a fixed stop and very useful because many of them have never been. We also go nearby to the *Museo del Novecento* (20th Century Museum), right behind our school. The educators there are amazing. At *Palazzo Vecchio*, we sometimes get guided by AMIR, but not always. We follow the route that talks about the discovery of America—when the tomato arrived, exotic animals, that kind of thing. So we talk about intercultural exchange during the Renaissance—how products from the colonies or faraway places arrived and

were integrated, already then being depicted on the walls of buildings like *Palazzo Vecchio*. It's great for discussing that. At the *Novecento* Museum, we do a more standard visit, we look at whatever is currently on display. At the Botanical Garden Museum, it's wonderful, there's a lot of exchange, because of the plants. Everyone shares their own stories: what they know, what they eat, etc. We've also been to *Bargello*, where there's Islamic art, we've done tours there too. But really, the visits are pretexts for talking, for sharing, for spending time together.

**Corinna**

So heritage becomes a way to create connections.

**Diana**

Yes, to unite, to share, even just shared moments. It's just that, we're all citizens, but we don't meet, we don't share common spaces. And in those moments at the museum, we're all together, we talk, we even sometimes even grab a coffee after the visit.

**Corinna**

And public space, not just museums, but the public space around them, do you use that too? I remember the little festivals you used to do in the square in front of the center. Or I remember—I'm good friends with Matilde, I don't know if you know her—she has a little boy. I used to play volleyball with your students at the Cascine park. So I remember lots of activities in public space, beyond the walls, outside.

**Diana**

Yes, because that's always been one of our "missions", so to speak; to go outside, to be visible. To promote inter-culture as a model in our city, where it's still not very well represented.

**Corinna**

So, using public space was also a way to promote a positive model, a good practice.

**Diana**

Yes, exactly. The festival you mentioned was for that reason. I was just talking about it with Graziana—you might know her, she's a good friend of Matilde. With her, we used to do things at the festival, like intercultural games. There was a simple one with mixed photos of volunteers, including mine, and some statements and you had to match them up. In my case, my family is Italian, from Emilia, but I was born in Switzerland and I'm Swiss by nationality. So there was a statement like "She's Swiss," and people had to match it to the portrait. There were some funny ones too, like "champion swimmer" or whatever. So you had to figure it all out — we would also do that kind of activity out in the street during the festival, just to make people reflect a bit more.

**Corinna**

There's this theorist from the Young generation, a theorist of urban planning from the '60s, '70s, so a bit old-school, but he said something that always stuck with me: *activity calls for activity*. So, if you put two people playing chess in a public space, others will stop and gather around, and that creates public space, right? So this idea that if you use public space, it will be used more and more. If you give it functions, it will be used more. It's something I've always noticed when, I don't know, you bring a net to play soccer, something like that. You use Piazza San Paolino — that's what it's called, right?

**Diana**

Yes, yes.

**Corinna**

But now, with all those café tables they've put out there, you'll probably use it less, right?

**Diana**

Yes, we actually haven't held the festival there for several years now. In fact, we had to move it elsewhere. That was a big loss because it used to be right in front of our headquarters, but they did construction for the big hotel.

**Corinna**

And where do you go now?

**Diana**

Now it depends, it changes year by year. We've done it in the Careggi area once, another time along the riverbanks. But usually it's in clubs, mostly community clubs.

**Corinna**

So using spaces that are closed and private.

**Diana**

Exactly.

**Corinna**

Not in the piazza anymore.

**Diana**

No, not anymore. It was exhausting, but it was beautiful.

**Corinna**

That's a shame. I can't even imagine the amount of work.

**Diana**

Yes, but it was really nice. And for us, from a community-building point of view, organizing the festival in a piazza activated so much energy. It was really... a unifying force.

Compared to doing it in a venue that holds far fewer people. You can hold an event in a venue with 15 people, but in a piazza? You need at least 40 people to run everything! We even had security shifts and so on. It was a big organizational effort.

**Corinna**

Are your volunteers mainly Italian?

**Diana**

Mostly Italian, yes. Some students later became volunteers, but they're not necessarily tied down, so they stay even less sometimes.

**Corinna**

What kinds of nationalities participate in the courses and the museum visits?

**Diana**

Well, it really depends on the waves of migration. It changes from year to year. So this year, for instance, there's a huge presence, I don't know why, I still have to figure it out, but there's a lot from Eastern Europe. Women in their 40s, very elegant, who come for the museum visits.

**Corinna**

Maybe they are Ukrainian? Could it be linked to the current conflicts?

**Diana**

Maybe, yes. Probably. But yes, there are quite a few. Before, there were many young African men. But now, it's more family-oriented. There are also people from Peru. So the whole setup is different. I remember when it was mainly young African guys, it was fun, but they were always late for appointments! With these ladies, *you* risk being the one who's late. It's a completely different approach to appointments and activities.

**Corinna**

So now it's more European, and before it was more African, now there are fewer Africans?

**Diana**

Fewer, yes. Fewer attend our museum visits.

**Corinna**

But not in the courses?

**Diana**

In the courses, the numbers are more or less the same. There are always some. Now I attend them less often. Even with the visits, I organize them, but I hardly ever go anymore because it's getting harder for me. So I'd have to ask Graziano — he's the school coordinator. Actually, there are almost a hundred of us volunteers.

**Corinna**

Wow.

**Diana**

So each of us is specialized in something.

**Corinna**

OK, so listen, I'd say we could write down everything we've talked about, trying to piece together the questions and answers in a cleaned-up form. Then we'll send it to you, and you can add to it however you see fit.

**Diana**

Yes, perfect, absolutely. Regarding the numbers, those things are a bit more detailed. I mean, I'm not even sure we know them, if we do, we'll include them.

**Corinna**

OK, then Diana, thanks a million.

**Diana**

No worries! And sorry again for my English, as always.

**Noora**

No, no, no — Sorry for my Italian!

**Corinna**

Don't mention it. See? I was useful!

**Diana (50:24):**

Exactly. Lucky we have Corinna.

**Corinna**

So, we'll send you everything as soon as we've put it together. Within about a week or ten days, we'll send it to you. Thanks so much, have a great day!

## Interview Transcription 2

**Interview Date:** 2 May 2025

**Interview Participants:** Corinna Del Bianco, Noora Alhashimi, Isber Sabrine

**Interview Setting:** Microsoft Teams

**Noora**

Maybe I can start with a simple question: How would you explain the ABUAB initiative? Could you briefly introduce it and tell us how it came to be, what the motivation was, and what your role is in it?

**Isber Sabrine**

Yes, of course. First, I'm the founder of ABUAB. I started the initiative in 2018. But the idea really began earlier, in 2015, when I launched a similar project in Berlin. As a Syrian, witnessing so many refugees from Syria and Iraq arriving in Germany, we decided to create an initiative to support them. That first project was based in Berlin and focused on museums. When I returned to Spain, I wanted to start something similar, but with a broader scope. ABUAB includes not only museums but also concert halls and theatres. You may have seen our project website?

**Noora**

Yes, I've had a look at it.

**Isber Sabrine**

Great. The website gives a good overview of the project and its goals. I'll also share some publications that explain the idea behind ABUAB in more detail. My motivation came from being Syrian and wanting to support refugees who face challenges integrating and adapting to a new country. I wanted to share my own experience and use my knowledge of culture and heritage to help others navigate this transition.

Many people arrive in a completely different society, with a new language and culture. ABUAB aims to build a bridge between newcomers and the host society. We use cultural objects—especially in museums—as tools for intercultural dialogue. Refugees often discover that despite cultural differences, there are many similarities too. This is especially true in Spain, where you can see shared cultural heritage due to 800 years of Arabic history. That's part of what we aim to highlight through our work.

**Noora**

I see. You mentioned wanting to help people adapt to their new environment. What barriers have you found refugees face in accessing or relating to cultural heritage? And how do you help them overcome those barriers?

**Isber Sabrine**

Adaptation varies a lot. Some people adapt quickly; others struggle. It depends on factors like their education level and cultural background. For instance, people from Ukraine tend to adapt more easily because they come from a European context where going to museums and concerts is more common. On the other hand, people from the Middle East may not be used to visiting museums or attending opera performances.

**Noora**

So, it's a cultural difference.

**Isber Sabrine**

Exactly. Ukrainian participants generally adapt faster than people from the Middle East or Africa. Education plays a role too, those with higher education often find it easier to engage. Language is another barrier. Some refugees struggle to learn the language, and many arrive with trauma, fleeing conflict zones. For them, culture may not be an immediate priority, they may be more focused on legal status or the safety of their families back home.

**Noora**

That makes sense. You mentioned working with Ukrainians. Are they your target participants? Are they mostly from Syria and Ukraine, or do you also include others?

**Isber Sabrine**

Our main focus is on people from conflict zones—Syrians, Ukrainians, Yemenis—and also on immigrants from Arab countries like Morocco and Algeria. These groups are our primary participants.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

How do you reach them?

**Isber Sabrine**

That's a crucial part of our work. We collaborate with NGOs that have direct contact with refugees, such as UNHCR and local organizations. We've also mapped out immigration and refugee NGOs to build relationships with them. Additionally, we use social media—Facebook and Instagram—to announce events. Many participants find us that way.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

How many people usually participate in your events?

**Isber Sabrine**

Our groups are relatively small—usually between 15 and 20 people per event.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Do participants return for more events?

**Isber Sabrine**

Yes, some people attend multiple events. Others are new. We try to reach as many different people as possible. However, attendance varies. For example, concerts tend to attract more people than museum visits.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

I see.

**Isber Sabrine**

Last week we had a concert that was fully booked, but museum visits sometimes only attract 10 people or fewer. Music seems to be more appealing.

**Noora**

How do you gather feedback from participants?

**Isber Sabrine**

We use surveys to collect feedback after the events. We include specific questions in the surveys to gauge their understanding and engagement with the heritage content.

**Noora**

Do you also organize events in public spaces, like walking tours or visits to piazzas, or is it solely concerts and museums?

**Isber Sabrine**

Our main activities are in museums, concert halls, and auditoriums. We sometimes visit modern art exhibitions, but we don't currently organize walking tours or events in open public spaces.

**Noora**

And why do you think fewer people come to museum visits compared to concerts?

**Isber Sabrine**

Music is more accessible and enjoyable for many people. Museums require more focus and engagement. Concerts feel easier and more entertaining, which might explain the higher attendance.

**Noora**

I see. Do language and education levels also pose challenges when connecting participants with cultural heritage?

**Isber Sabrine**

Absolutely. Not everyone speaks the local language, so we often try to provide tours in their native language.

**Noora**

Do you work with volunteers from those regions?

**Isber Sabrine**

Yes, we have volunteers who speak the participants' languages and can explain museum objects in a way that's accessible.

**Noora**

Going back to the heart of the initiative, how does it promote inclusivity and help participants feel more integrated?

**Isber Sabrine**

Many refugees feel forgotten or invisible. When someone takes the time to include them, they feel valued. Our events help them learn about their new home; its history, people, and culture. That

knowledge builds confidence and a sense of belonging. Also, many of our activities help them meet others from their own country, which creates a network and a sense of community.

**Noora**

That kind of networking is very important. Do you have long-term plans to grow the project's network? Or even to expand into public spaces?

**Isber Sabrine**

Absolutely. We want to expand, but we're still small and operate mostly with volunteers. We need more funding and staff to grow. If we had more resources, especially to pay staff, that would help us grow significantly. We are currently applying for more funding and waiting for responses. With proper funding, we could expand the team, increase our activities, and hopefully extend the project to other countries.

**Noora**

I also wanted to circle back to the users of the project — the participants. Are they mostly families, young children, or do you mainly work with individuals?

**Isber Sabrine**

Mostly individuals, but they can come with family or friends. We generally work with adults, though sometimes children join as well. You can see some examples of our children's activities on our Facebook and other social media pages.

**Noora**

Do you think it's different for children to learn and build a connection with public heritage spaces from a young age?

**Isber Sabrine**

Yes, certainly.

**Noora**

My last question is, do you see any areas where the project could improve? Or any other ways you hope to connect people more deeply with the heritage around them?

**Isber Sabrine**

Yes, this is something we are always working on — making the project more accessible and attracting more attention from local communities, immigrants, and refugees in their host countries. I can also send you some articles that might help you explore these topics further.

**Noora**

That would be great.

**Isber Sabrine**

These articles are based on surveys we conducted with participants. They'll help explain how culture and heritage aren't just something for the elite — they're basic human needs. Heritage is connected to human rights, self-esteem, and well-being, those are the key connections.

**Noora**

Absolutely, I completely agree, and we really appreciate the work you're doing — it's incredibly valuable. We'd be very interested in looking at the articles you mentioned, particularly those that explore how people perceive and connect with these spaces, and what inclusion means to them.

## **Interview Transcription 3**

**Interview Date:** 8 May 2025

**Interview Participants:** Corinna Del Bianco, Andrea Villarini

**Interview Setting:** Microsoft Teams

**Andrea Villarini**

Hello? Good morning, how are you?

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Good morning!

I'm well, thank you. And you?

**Andrea Villarini**

Good, good.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Well, first of all, thank you—thank you for your availability.

I imagine it was a bit unexpected, since the project concluded some time ago.

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes, in fact—I was just trying to refresh my memory from the computer, let's say.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Yes, I can imagine.

Also, Filippo Guarini from the Textile Museum told me: "Look, if you'd like our input too, we're clearly very happy to participate."

So if you like, I can give you a quick overview.

**Andrea Villarini**

Sure, that would be very helpful to help me get oriented.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Certainly. Just so you know, I've started the recording.

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes, I saw that.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

We're using Teams. I hope that's not a problem—it's simply easier for us, essentially like using a recording instead of old-fashioned notes.

**Andrea Villarini**

Absolutely fine.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

So, first, I'm Corinna Del Bianco. I'm an architect, specifically an urban planner, and I teach at the Politecnico di Milano. I'm also a founding member of the Romualdo Del Bianco Foundation, based in Florence. The Foundation focuses on intercultural dialogue. Beyond today's topic, I think there could be other shared interests worth exploring. The Foundation has worked in over 111 countries for more than 30 years. Initially, it collaborated primarily with universities from former Soviet Bloc countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall, using cultural heritage as a tool for integration. Over time, our activities have evolved into more scientific events and institutional engagement. We're part of ICOMOS and ICRROM and have been invited several times by UNESCO to speak on best practices.

Every year, we organize an annual event (which we might invite you to in November), centered around themes of travel and intercultural dialogue. We also participate in Erasmus+ projects. This is the third or fourth project we've won through the Foundation, working with various European universities. This particular project—which started this year—is focused on inclusivity and accessibility, specifically physical accessibility and social inclusion in public spaces within heritage contexts (both UNESCO World Heritage Sites and beyond).

Professionally, I also work independently through artistic photography, installations, and video. That's my core interest. Previously, I worked with the City of Prato on the urban masterplan, and it was during that period I came across your project, *Tessuti Sociali* (Social Fabrics). I remember it well, as it

was quite unique and meaningful, especially in a city like Prato where integration among diverse communities is a major issue.

My core belief—which I'd love to hear your thoughts on—is that heritage should be preserved not just for its own sake, but as a tool for social engagement and rootedness. Too often, heritage is exclusive. In Florence, for instance, museum websites are only in Italian and English. The content is highly specialized, targeted at professionals. Even with a PhD in architecture, I sometimes struggle to enjoy a light-hearted visit! There's a serious misconception that heritage is only for an educated elite—those with money, time, and interest. But it can be a powerful tool for overcoming social divisions and connecting communities to their environment.

That's our guiding assumption for this project. We're conducting a series of interviews alongside a questionnaire. You're one of four key participants we've selected for in-depth conversations about initiatives that place heritage in service of marginalized communities. We're also looking at the broader idea of public space—not just in the classic architectural sense (streets, squares, etc.), but also more socially inclusive interpretations. The interviews will be compiled into a report that serves as a teaching manual for students participating in the Erasmus+ program.

Would you like me to send you the questionnaire later, in case you'd like to fill it in or share it with students?

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes, now the project's goals are much clearer, thank you.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Great! If you don't have any questions, we can start.

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes, let's go ahead. Questions might come up as we go.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Perfect. I tried looking for the project website through the Textile Museum, but the link doesn't seem to work anymore.

**Andrea Villarini**

That's possible—it may be down this year.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

The info I have is mainly from memory—from the project presentation at the Textile Museum in 2022, which was very detailed and left a big impression. So, I wanted to ask: how did *Tessuti Sociali* come about? What was its structure, duration, and main goals?

**Andrea Villarini**

The project was created in response to a funding call from the European Social Fund (ESF) via the Tuscany Region. As you know from experience, in these kinds of calls, the framework often shapes the content. One requirement was that a regional public body had to be involved—so our partner was a Tuscan institution. From a scientific standpoint, our research center—at the time, part of the University for Foreigners of Siena, which I directed—had a guiding concept: the use of technology not only for display purposes, but as a tool for interaction between museum visitors and museum content. On a more theoretical level, we didn't view the museum as a neutral exhibition space, but as a potential social environment where communicative and linguistic skills could be developed. Similar to how, in language learning, you might simulate scenarios—like going to the post office—we saw the museum as a context for real-life communication. This led us naturally to the Textile Museum in Prato. Prato is a unique city in Tuscany, with a large foreign population that tends to be self-segregated. At the same time, the Textile Museum is a national center of excellence. Yet in practice, it remained largely inaccessible to non-Italian speakers. So, the project brought these elements together: an important local museum, an excluded public, and an opportunity for language acquisition through cultural heritage.

The museum's director was immediately enthusiastic. He understood the innovation behind the project and committed fully—not just nominally, but as a true co-partner. That's rare in these kinds of projects, where institutions often sign on but remain on the sidelines. This was back in 2019, before the pandemic. Then, of course, COVID hit, and it heavily impacted the project. Our plan had been for spontaneous learning moments—visitors entering freely, discovering that they could also learn Italian while exploring. Like in some international museums, where children receive learning kits—at MoMA, for example—they can collect points by finding elements in the artworks. That was our model. But with lockdowns, that entire aspect became impossible. Still, as the saying goes, in Chinese the word for "crisis" includes the concept of "opportunity." And in our case, that held true: we reimagined the project. Instead of spontaneous learning, we created structured educational pathways, targeting schools in Prato.

Originally, the goal was to engage foreign communities directly—Chinese, Albanian, Arab, and Urdu-speaking (primarily Pakistani)—but face-to-face interaction was limited. Eventually, we adapted, hosting small group activities in the museum with masks and health certificates, once restrictions eased. We also developed digital tools—notably, QR codes linked to each artwork. But instead of simply giving technical information, the QR codes led to language exercises. For example, a garment might be used to teach Italian vocabulary or sentence structures. The museum's content became a living Italian textbook—not something to read, but something to experience.

Despite the constraints, participation exceeded our expectations. Because access wasn't random but structured, it actually worked in our favor. We went into Prato's schools, explained the project, and turned it into a kind of afterschool activity. Students were brought to the museum, where they learned about its history and engaged in creative and linguistic activities—like drawing, coloring, and basic Italian.

The project ended with a final celebration, where immigrant communities were invited. They brought food, and it truly felt like a community festival—very emotional. The project was later selected by the Region as an ESF best practice, and clearly, your team also recognized its value. So yes, it was like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the pandemic. We really feared we'd have to return the funding. The whole thing was meant to be about physical interaction, and suddenly, no one could enter any museum. But with adaptation, it ended up exceeding our initial expectations.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Of course. And how long did the project last overall?

**Andrea Villarini**

It lasted two years, covering 2021–2022. There were minor extensions for final presentations, but that was the core period—unfortunately, right in the heart of the pandemic. As you know, a funded two-year project always ends up taking longer in practice.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Right. So the target group ended up being school students from the participating communities?

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes. We started with a sociological study of Prato's immigrant communities. Once we realized the museum couldn't function as a spontaneous learning hub, we shifted focus to schools—reaching about 200 students. And I must say, we had strong support from the school district.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Which grade levels? Elementary, middle, high school?

**Andrea Villarini**

Elementary school.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Great. If you have a PowerPoint presentation or any images, they'd be really helpful for us.

**Andrea Villarini**

Yes, I do—though the photos are a bit gloomy with everyone in masks.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

That's part of the story, though—it reflects the emergency that became an opportunity. So, you first conducted a sociological study, then carried out the activities. What came next?

**Andrea Villarini**

After that, we focused on the e-learning component. The technological element was the creation of QR codes linked to the displayed artworks. These didn't just provide information like the artist or technique. Instead, they led to interactive language-learning activities focused on Italian. The idea was that you could walk through the museum, scan a QR code, and learn Italian vocabulary and grammar related to the exhibit. For example: a traditional garment from a specific region would become the basis for practicing the word "dress" in Italian and its various synonyms. At the end, you'd get a score, like a game.

This idea came to me during museum visits with my kids. They would be asked to find a sword, a cape, etc., in different artworks—and would receive a postcard as a prize. My son was so proud to win one! So the idea here was similar: you bring in kids, have them play with the QR codes, and if they complete enough activities, they receive a small reward from the museum. That aspect was partially implemented. Due to the lack of general visitors, we leaned more toward the structured, in-group activities rather than the open, individual experience. Students would gather in circles, carry out group tasks, and engage with the museum environment in a didactic, interactive way.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Did you have indicators to measure the success of these activities? Especially considering the challenges of the pandemic?

**Andrea Villarini**

Do you mean indicators for whether the activities were effective?

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Yes—ways of assessing success.

**Andrea Villarini**

Not in terms of satisfaction surveys. We evaluated success based on participation levels—from both the students and the communities. The final event was very telling—it served as a real measure of impact.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

And from an architectural point of view, did you focus only on the museum interior, or did you also use the plaza and public spaces around it? During the pandemic, outdoor areas could've been particularly helpful.

**Andrea Villarini**

Not for educational purposes. We focused specifically on the museum's interior exhibits. So for us, "museum space" meant the rooms and artworks inside.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Got it. What do you think are the most difficult barriers to overcome for immigrant communities in accessing museums?

**Andrea Villarini**

The first is language—clearly. The most frequent comment was: "I don't understand." The second is perception—in Italy, museums are still seen as spaces of high culture, reserved for those with education, time, and money. People say, "I'm a worker, I don't go to museums." Unfortunately, this is a very Italian attitude.

I actually have some data on this. The main reasons people don't visit museums include: Low education level, Lack of interest in the content, Lack of time (due to work), Language barriers, Financial reasons, Cultural distance. So yes, the key obstacles are linguistic, cultural, and economic.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

That's clear.

Our questionnaire focuses on those themes—how people use public space, why they don't, and how they perceive heritage. In Florence, for example, Piazza Santa Maria Novella is used by many foreign communities for gathering, but they don't enter the church or the nearby Museum of the 20th Century, even though those are part of the same urban space. So, the square functions as a social and even identity space, while the heritage institution next to it remains unapproachable.

**Andrea Villarini**

Exactly. Even when the museum is just a few steps away, it remains distant.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

One last question: are you or your institution working on new projects in this field, or planning any follow-ups?

**Andrea Villarini**

From my research group's side, no—we're not currently developing anything in this specific area. I can't speak for the University for Foreigners of Siena, but we haven't initiated a new phase ourselves. That said, this conversation might be a starting point for future collaboration.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

So the project didn't lead to follow-ups or publications?

**Andrea Villarini**

No formal publications. However, the Semiotics course at the university later offered monographic classes on museum space as a semiotic environment. So there were academic developments, just not published research.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

That's still valuable. I've finished all the questions I noted down. We'll now prepare a summary text of this conversation in English—question and answer format. If you could send me that PowerPoint presentation—and maybe a few selected images—that would help us enrich the report.

**Andrea Villarini**

Of course. I have a PowerPoint we made when the Region presented the best ESF projects of the biennium. It's very schematic, but combined with what we've discussed today, it could be useful.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Perfect. Thank you.

**Andrea Villarini**

It includes photos of the activities too.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

That would be great for illustrating the final text. We plan to finish everything by mid to late July, and we'd like to wrap up these interviews by early June.

**Andrea Villarini**

Of course. If I can help with anything else, you have my contact info.

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Thanks—I'll also connect you with Simone Giometti, the Foundation's Secretary General. He manages our external contacts and oversees project coordination. Maybe we'll find opportunities to collaborate in future European projects.

**Andrea Villarini**

Good luck with your work! Take care!

**Corinna Del Bianco**

Thank you—same to you. Goodbye!

## Interview Transcription 4

**Interview Date:** 8 May 2025

**Interview Participants:** Noora Alhashimi, Jennifer Allsopp

**Interview Setting:** Microsoft Teams

**Noora:**

So just to start, can you share a bit of background information about the initiative of *Dante on the Move* and how it came to be? What was the motivation for it?

**Jennifer:**

Yes, sure. So basically, my first degree was in modern languages, and I've always been really obsessed with Dante. I first read the Divine Comedy when I was 15, and having spent the last 20 years working with refugees and the last 15 years in social policy and international development, I was really struck by how we were repeating the same old discourses, the same refrains about refugees, especially with this real 'victim' mentality. I was very interested in my work in storytelling and not just what refugees say about their stories, but how they tell them. So thinking about the narrative genre; whether they use comedy, whether they tell it as an epic, whether it's a love story, basically moving away from this very simplistic narrative of a refugee victim.

And I was a little bit kind of burnt out or fed up with all of the policy discourse after 2015, et cetera, you know, things had been really difficult; the rhetoric and policy discourse was really, really hostile. And I came to a point where every time I was writing words like *asylum seeker*, referring to the UK's Illegal Immigration Act etc., I felt like I was kind of reifying this kind of hegemonic discourse. So I reread Dante and I had the idea: Well, Dante was a refugee. What would it be like to read Dante with refugees today and see if we could tap into some kind of experience and humanity that transcends the current political crisis and speaks to a much deeper sense of the quest for meaning? And because I've done a lot of work in Italy, I was working as a visiting professor in Florence University and I already had the idea of using Dante as a way of understanding refugees' experiences.

But then I was invited by Trinity College Rome campus to teach a module on migration. And I said, oh, this could be an opportunity. So I said, yes, I'll do it on two conditions. Firstly, I can theme it around Dante and identity migration and belonging. And secondly, I can fill the classroom with refugee students who kind of enter into dialogue with the US exchange students. And the director said, yeah, that sounds great. They're a liberal arts college.

**Noora:**

When was that? When did it start?

**Jennifer:**

So that was in the spring of 2023, so two years ago, yes. And it was just amazing. I designed this whole course so that every week we would tackle an issue to do with identity, belonging, migration, refugeehood, but linking it to some of Dante's work. So we looked at the Divine Comedy, but we also looked at some of his poems and sonnets and his political treatises, *Convivio* and *Monachia*, also his linguistic treatises, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. And so every week we had a different theme and we would use Dante's work as a stepping off platform to launch into the discussion of people's lived experiences, either of being refugees or of being refugee-receiving citizens from refugee-receiving countries. So that was the US students. There were 12 refugee students and 5 US students. The refugee students came from Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdish Iraq, Egypt, Venezuela, Ukraine. And they were mostly students who were studying at other universities in Rome, so they were able to take the module for credit. And basically, it was just incredible. Like in the first, very first session, Sahara, who was one of the Afghan students, burst into tears reading Dante's description of exile because she thought, *how is it that this 700-year-old dead Italian politician, poet can understand my experience, but people today can't?* So when he's talking about the burden of being hosted and the *panino insalato*, you know, the food isn't good, you feel burdened to your host, you have to walk up and down other people's stairs, you know, you leave everything you love behind, all of these kinds of things... So it really opened up this space for the students to talk about their experiences in a way that was beyond the current policy discourse and spoke to a greater kind of humanity, a more universalist kind of sense of life and life experience.

And so we did some field trips. As part of the course, we went to places in Rome where Dante was present. We went to the Keats Shelley House to talk about the kind of legacy of Dante on Mary

Shelley and the romantic poets. We went to Ravenna to see Dante's grave and then we went to Faya, where he'd been in exile, and then we went to Florence. It was just incredibly moving. And again, I have this image of one of the students outside the Baptistry in Florence where Dante wrote that he wanted to return to be crowned a poet. And she was in tears and she was saying, *you know, it's so unfair that Dante never got the chance to return. You know, I hope I get the chance to return.* It was just an incredibly powerful experience, that combination of reading, but also visiting the actual places where Dante was in exile, and even though Dante couldn't return, we almost as a group symbolically made that return to Florence for him.

We were also really helped by all the cultural actors who we came into contact with in those spaces, they were really receptive to the idea.

**Noora:**

Yes, that's something I wanted to ask you as well, of how you took advantage of public spaces for sharing this history with the students. So, I know that you went to the house of Shelley and similar indoor museums, but what was the role of more outdoor spaces like the baptistry, for example, and other public spaces?

**Jennifer:**

So, just kind of walking around Florence, walking around Ravenna, we did a walking tour and it was important for just feeling that sense of history and seeing places that were important to Dante, as well as seeing the statues and the kind of cultural legacy that's come from him. And this kind of debate about, well, where should Dante's remains be? Should they be in Ravenna or should they be in Florence? (The students had very different perspectives on this), but also in Rome, walking around places like Pincho Park, where there's a statue of Dante.

At the end of the project, all of the students created a final project, which was an artistic output that was inspired by their reading of the Divine Comedy, and they really made use of these public spaces in what they presented. One of the students made a comedy sketch; he's from Egypt and he kind of took issue with Dante's treatment of Muslims in hell, so he made this really funny comic video where he imagined conversing with the statue of Dante in Pincho Park in Rome. Another student created this film called *The Paradise of Exiles*, where she started off in a dark wood like Dante does, and then went through the purgatory of the asylum system. She shot some of the film in the administrative centers for the immigration authorities, and then she finished it in the Galleria Borghese, who made the space available for her to film. That was her kind of idea of a paradise, to be with all of the art. And other students, one of them is an opera singer, and she created a song that she sang.

**Noora:**

I think I remember you showed a video of that, maybe. There was a scene in the presentation at the WIF Festival.

**Jennifer:**

Yes! And then another student, Melina, wrote poetry. Some of the students did paintings. So it was a really kind of mixed bag. But especially Alina, who filmed her film in the Galleria Borghese, it was amazing that they made that space available to us.

**Noora:**

Was there any difficulty in trying to approach them to use these spaces?

**Jennifer:**

They were so receptive to the project. Everybody was just like, this is such a new idea. Like, we take Dante for granted all the time as Italians, and it's taken this crazy English woman to come in and say, hey, have you ever thought; you guys are in the middle of a national refugee crisis. Have you ever thought about joining the dots and thinking about Dante in terms of being a refugee? So, people were really receptive to it. It was really overwhelming.

I think people were also surprised because the refugee students were so eloquent and brilliant. I think people had an idea of maybe what refugees would be like, and then when they actually got to know these very educated, erudite refugees, it kind of was a shock to them. But for example, Francesca Masi, who's the head of Ravenna Antica, when we went to visit the Dante Museum in Ravenna, we had an audience with her and we had a discussion, and she was moved to tears by the students, you know. And she's the top official of all tourism in Ravenna, everything to do with Dante, yet she made space for us and was really moved.

**Noora:**  
That's wonderful.

**Jennifer:**  
So I think it really hit a nerve. I think the timing with Meloni's government, with a lot of the hostile rhetoric against refugees, I think as well me being a foreigner, I was able to get away with saying things that might not have been so well received by an Italian. It was this naive outsider's perspective. But in terms of the public spaces, we couldn't have done the course just in a classroom. The fact of actually being in these public spaces and experiencing that connection... I've actually just come back - you saw in my email from the Camino?

**Noora:**  
Ah yes! I wanted to ask you actually, how was your Camino?

**Jennifer:**  
Amazing! So I walked 440 kilometers from Florence to Ravenna and back again because I was so struck by the value of being in these spaces and feeling that experience. And also, [Dante's] combination of thinking and walking and writing and creating, I wanted to have that experience for myself. I was actually joined by Alina, who was one of the refugee students from the course. She walked with me from Florence to Ravenna, she did the first part with me, but then she had to go back to Rome because otherwise if she left her refugee accommodation for more than four days, she would have lost it. But it was incredibly powerful, this thing of like walking away from Florence with her. And we had some really fascinating discussions and we recorded a podcast as well. So we're going to have a Dante on the Move podcast where we're going to include some of the dialogue that we shared when we were walking. We had microphones and we recorded it.

**Noora:**  
Please share it with us whenever it's out.

**Jennifer:**  
Yes, we will. It should be out in two months' time. We've got some interns who are helping us with it. But we're going to touch base with the students again and look back and see what was the impact of Dante on their life, see how they are doing now, and get them to read out or perform a little bit of their artistic product.

**Noora:**  
That's wonderful. I wanted to ask, we already touched on this, but to zoom in a bit further, why exactly do you think that they resonated this much with Dante? Is it the fact that it's a historical figure and it sort of aids to the heritage of the place that gave them a sense of belonging? Or is it the role of literature? How do you see it?

**Jennifer:**  
Do you mean the refugee students?

**Noora:**  
Yes, the refugee students.

**Jennifer:**  
Well, we talk about integration and it's always the socioeconomic kind, like housing. But there's an element of cultural integration that we don't really talk about. I mean, some countries have these crazy citizenship tests. If you want to be a citizen of the UK, you have to list all of Henry VIII's wives! But sincere cultural integration, actually not integration, that's not even really the right word, but exchange and conviviality, that's what was really attractive as an idea. I think the power of literature to speak to people's hearts as well as the fact that it was in the past meant that there was a bit of a gap whereby they could engage with the storytelling without thinking about the contemporary situation. And the fact that Dante is such a respected figure, he is the father of Italy in the Italian language. So to connect with him, it gave them a source of cultural capital that they were able to use to articulate their experience in a way that was received more powerfully by the Italian public. So Sanaz, for example, like she did an interview on Radio Radicale and they asked her about her experience at the reception centre and she said something like, *but sometimes I ask myself, which circle of Dante's hell am I living*

*in today?* And the interviewer was like, oh, there's this Afghan refugee citing Dante. So it gave them a new language to talk about their experience. Yeah.

**Noora:**

And when you were reading the books, were there any barriers, such as linguistic barriers? Were you reading it in English?

**Jennifer:**

Yes, so we read it in a mix of English and Italian. I provided copies to all the students in English and Italian. Some of the students, for example Sara from Iran, she really struggled with the English, and she ended up getting a copy in her native Persian, so she was reading it in Persian. Marti from Egypt, he was reading it in Arabic. The *lingua franca* that we used in the class was the English version, but each student did what they needed to do to connect with Dante in their own language as well.

**Noora:**

That's great because I imagine that they each get their own interpretation of the story through the influence of their language, and it's sort of mixing the two cultures.

**Jennifer:**

Yes, and what was really interesting is, in England, Dante isn't very well known. But in the Middle East and Arab world, Dante is really famous because he was influenced by Sufism and the Book of the Stairs.

**Noora:**

I grew up hearing about him a lot back home in Bahrain, so I see what you mean. I never linked it to Sufism, but I can see what you mean.

**Jennifer:**

Yes, there's a whole school of thought that Dante was very influenced by translations of Sufi texts that were in the Mediterranean at the time of his life, and that this might have shaped some of his thinking. It's quite contentious. It's a really interesting area to look at. It's an interesting theory.

**Noora:**

I also wanted to ask you about the success of the project. Obviously, it was very successful. But how did you kind of gauge the students' connection with the project? Did you get feedback from them?

**Jennifer:**

So we had the final event, which was completely packed out, and then we also published the students' work in an anthology. So there's a book, *Dante on the Move*. You can order it on Amazon. But we self-published it because we wanted to get it out as soon as possible. Like I'm sure we could have published it with an academic publisher. But it was important to us to get it out there as soon as possible, and to also be able to publish exactly what we wanted. So, every single one of the students contributed to the anthology after the course finished. I was still in touch with them and they were really motivated to follow up and do this, and when we had the book launch, a lot of them came. We have a WhatsApp group now where we stay in touch. And literally every other day, somebody's sending a message like, *oh, I saw this thing about Dante and it made me think of this*. Or, you know, *how are you doing? Happy nowruz*. Like, *how are you doing? I hear your families, you know, might have been affected by X or Y*. It created a community of fellow travelers. I also did an evaluation on the very last day of class where I got a massive sheet of paper with pens and sticky notes, and posed a series of questions and got the students to share their experience of the course directly.

**Noora:**

That's great. Do you think you would repeat the course again? Is there a future for it?

**Jennifer:**

I'm actually working on a funding application that takes the methodology of Dante, of reading Dante with refugees, but in the form of reading Shakespeare with refugees in England, or reading Steinbeck with refugees in the United States, and reading Tagore with refugees in India. So I'm trying to adapt the methodology and apply it to different contexts because I really think it showed how this kind of canonical literature can be a kind of boundary spanner to shake up the debate and support this kind of cultural integration.

**Noora:**

So you see a direct link between literature and cultural and heritage integration.

**Jennifer:**

Yes, especially in Italy. Dante is just everywhere. You know, every town has a Piazza Dante Alighieri, so for the students to have that familiarity with Dante, it kind of makes them feel at home in Italy...

**Noora:**

Yes, I see what you mean.

Okay, I don't want to keep you for too long, but I wanted to ask if you would be okay with sharing some photos with us of the program that we can include, like when you were out in the public spaces and things like that?

**Jennifer:**

Yes, certainly. I'll just send them to your email?

**Noora:**

Yes, that would be great. What we will do now is, since I've been recording the conversation, I will send you a transcript and if you feel that there are some corrections to be made or some things you would like to add, please feel free. We are also doing a questionnaire about how people feel in public spaces, so if you would like to share it with your WhatsApp group, with the students, we would love to get their input.

**Jennifer:**

That sounds great! Yes, I'm sure at least some of them will do it. They're very engaged.

**Noora:**

Okay, great. So I will share all of that with you in a few days. It was really wonderful to speak to you. I'm really inspired by your work, and I'm going to read the other two books!

**Jennifer:**

Oh, that's great. And read Dante on the Move!

**Noora:**

Yes, I'd be very happy to. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, I'm sorry Corinna couldn't be here today, she was really hoping to join.

**Jennifer:**

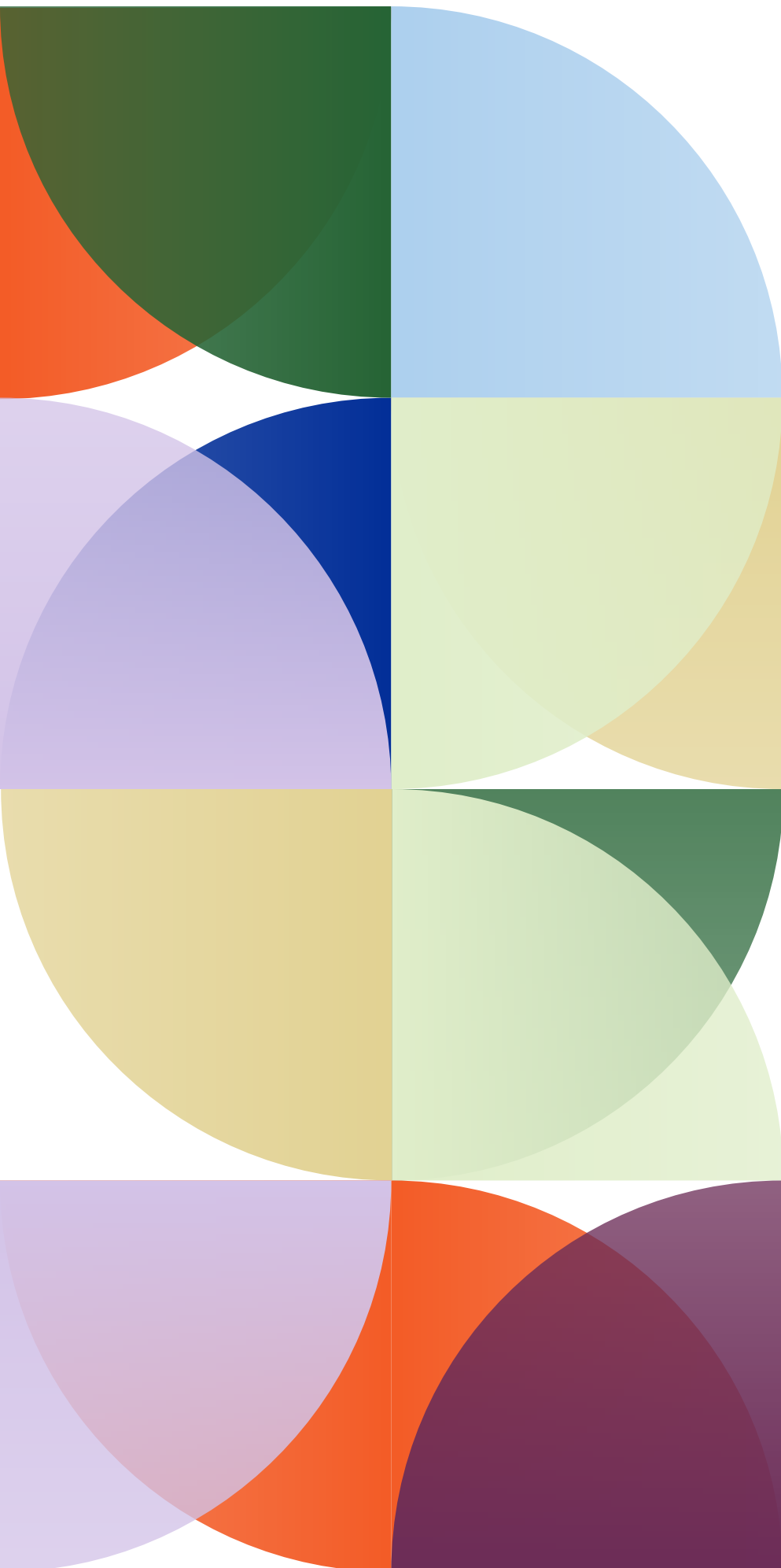
No, that's fine. No worries. Send her my best regards when you see her.

**Noora:**

Will do, have a nice day, ciao!

**Jennifer:**

Take care, Noora. Bye.



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