

Does Pure Contemplation Belong to Architecture?

The Denied Ramps at the Church of San Salvatore in the Santa Giulia Museum in Brescia

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Abstract. This paper addresses the issue of balancing the two values underlying the accessibility and conservation of cultural heritage: its use and its protection. These values are often, wrongly, regarded as opposites, or as incompatible. The reason for this contrast originates in the way of understanding ancient architecture and in the value of the relationship between architecture and people.

This issue is considered by presenting a recent case concerning the Museum of Santa Giulia in Brescia, a multi-layered complex that preserves evidence ranging from the prehistoric to the contemporary age, housed in a monastic complex of Longobard origin.

The recent failure to build some ramps proposed for increasing accessibility to the church of San Salvatore, an integral part of the museum's itinerary, offers an opportunity to reflect on the need for better integration between different, and only apparently opposed, instances.

The topic is dealt with by referring to the most recent disciplinary reflections in the field of conservation carried out in Italy with respect to the issue of accessibility to the cultural heritage, without neglecting juridical-normative aspects and international documents, such as the Faro Convention.

This multidisciplinary reading aims to highlight the main significance of accessing cultural heritage, with reference also to the objectives of sustainable development and the human development of the individual and the reference community.

Keywords. Accessibility, Conservation, Santa Giulia Museum in Brescia, Faro Convention, Individual and Community Rights

1. Introduction

Among the most recent European documents on accessibility is Bogdan Andrzej Zdrojewski's *Report on structural and financial barriers in the access to culture* [1].

This is the first comprehensive report of the Committee on Culture and Education presented as a motion for a resolution to the European Parliament. The document – recalling the importance of an active and accessible cultural sector for the development

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of an inclusive democratic society – stresses the need for “the promotion and achievement of inclusive and meaningful access to culture as one of the priorities on the political agenda”.

Although a relatively recent topic in Italy [2, 3], accessibility to culture is not primarily a technical issue (*‘how to make culture accessible?’*), but a response to the question *‘why make it accessible?’*. The answers are manifold and can be found on several levels. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states in Article 27 that: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” [4].

Moreover, Italian legislation on the protection of cultural heritage and landscape (2004) also includes in the objectives of ‘enhancement’ those activities aimed at “ensuring the best conditions for public use and enjoyment of the [cultural] heritage, including by people with disabilities, in order to promote the development of culture” (Article 6) [5].

In 2005 the Faro Convention introduced the definition of ‘heritage community’ as a group of “people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations”, and emphasised its collective profile in the right to benefit from and respect the common European cultural heritage (Articles 2b and 4) [6].

A careful reading of the Faro Convention reveals an important legal significance, in that the focus has shifted from the rights of the individual to those of the community in which individuals live. We are, therefore, talking about a collective right whereby the community takes responsibility for all its members so that no one is left out, thus strengthening the right of the individual under the ‘umbrella’ of the community.

Furthermore, considering the issue of tangible and intangible barriers to culture, it should be remembered that:

1. barriers prevent the full participation of communities in cultural processes and cultural ecosystems, thus automatically inhibiting their potential development;
2. any form of barrier introduces inertia into the business ecosystems that could result from cultural and creative industries;
3. any form of (direct or indirect) access limitation introduces resistance to the pursuit of an inclusive society and an inclusive growth process;
4. barriers represent an overall degradation of the cultural ecosystem, excluding the potential value of implementing cultural and creative industries.

Promoting the development of culture is therefore an operation that acquires social, anthropological and identity connotations that no one can or should renounce. This is an assumption that has direct repercussions for the project of the reuse and accessibility of the built heritage, and that has long been accepted in the most advanced circles of debate within the discipline of architectural restoration. In fact, as early as 1998, Amedeo Bellini wrote: “We have [...] insurmountable difficulties imagining a monument that has not been produced for people, that is protected and preserved in itself, as an abstraction, and not to be enjoyed; [...] it appears to us as something that bears witness in a more complex way to qualities that belong to all experiences, and therefore to all” [7].

More recently, the role of culture and cultural heritage is also present in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, the term ‘culture’ appears explicitly in SDG 4, target 4.7; SDG 8, target 8.9; and SDG 12, target 12.b and the term ‘cultural heritage’ appears in SDG 11, target 11.4, and in many other SDGs culture and cultural heritage are underlying themes [8].

This means that culture and cultural heritage impact on several areas such as law, heritage studies, education, urban planning and tourism that are drivers for the development of a society that connects inclusion and sustainability, based on a conception of accessibility to heritage communities as cultural law. There can be no real sustainable development without strengthening the conditions of inclusion and the active participation of the entire local community. In turn, an inclusive community will generate a sustainable growth effect compared with the social impact of the above-mentioned areas.

From this perspective, three main themes can be considered as “cross-cutting issues: cultural transformation and adaptation (1), access (2) and participation and governance (3)” [9].

The three cross-cutting issues can be considered the keywords present in the proposed definition of museum by ICOM in 2019 [10]. They recall the Faro Convention that redefined accessibility as a collective right, making the role of social memory fundamental, and finding their practical and modern application in the principles of Universal Design.

2. The case of the Church of San Salvatore in the Santa Giulia Museum in Brescia

The case under examination concerns a recent event of ‘denied accessibility’ involving the monastic complex of San Salvatore and Santa Giulia in Brescia that houses the City Museum and which – with the Roman Archaeological Park – has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in the serial site “The Longobards in Italy. The Places of Power (568–774 CE)” since 2011.

The Santa Giulia Museum not only houses important permanent collections of historical and artistic evidence that tell the story of the city, but is itself the result of centuries of stratification in which there are Roman domus; the Longobard basilica of San Salvatore with its crypt; the Romanesque oratory of Santa Maria in Solario; and the Renaissance Nun’s Choir.

A sufficient accessibility degree is guaranteed for almost all the spaces of the complex of the Santa Giulia Museum – considering its wide extension. Exceptions are the crypt, the side chapels and the sacristy of the Church of San Salvatore, and the lower sacellum of Santa Maria in Solario. Obviously, in such a complex of historical buildings, accessibility does not always meet the standards for independent use of the spaces. In some cases, in fact, users have to cover complex and long stretches leaving the ‘natural’ museum paths. The museum’s accessibility, however, is mainly aimed at people with limited mobility (especially wheelchair users), and only in recent years have pilot projects been initiated that include sensory accessibility.

In addition to the permanent collections of the City Museum, the monastic complex also hosts temporary exhibitions of international standing, which are usually held on the top floor of the museum building in spaces specially equipped for this type of event. However, some temporary exhibitions have been specifically hosted in the most significant and fragile places of the ancient complex, with the intention of establishing a comparison and dialogue between the historical context and the objects on display. For example, Juan Navarro Baldeweg’s recent exhibition (September 2020–April 2021) was set up, at the explicit request of the architect, in the spaces of the Renaissance Nun’s Choir and the Church of San Salvatore, including its side chapels, the sacristy and the

crypt. The latter three are among the few spaces in the entire complex that are not accessible, especially to wheelchair users.

However, the exhibition gave rise to much discussion about the appropriateness of using such a fragile and partially inaccessible site as an exhibition space, preventing a wider public from fully enjoying it. Shortly after the opening of the exhibition, in fact, the question of accessibility was highlighted with some clamour – especially in the local press – while the sensitivity of the location as an exhibition space remained in the background.

The controversy stimulated the museum's management to find solutions to make Baldeweg's exhibition fully accessible, either by making videos of the objects on display and using augmentative reality (in the case of the crypt, which is physically impossible to reach for those with limited mobility, especially wheelchair users), or by building two reversible ramps to make the side chapels and the sacristy of the church of San Salvatore accessible.

These interventions, of course, went beyond the contingency of the show, and were intended as an investment in full accessibility for the future. It is precisely in this context that we are interested in contributing to the debate on improving the future usability of the City Museum.

Considering that making certain parts of the monastic complex physically accessible (the crypt of San Salvatore and the lower sacellum of Santa Maria in Solario) would imply heavy and unacceptable changes from a conservation point of view, we are interested here in discussing the project for the accessibility of the side chapels and the sacristy of San Salvatore.

At present, these richly decorated spaces are already included in the permanent museum itinerary, housing some exhibition showcases. However, in order to reach them, one has to climb a 17-centimetre-high step, which makes them effectively inaccessible to people with impaired mobility.

For the Baldeweg exhibition, where the northern chapels and sacristy housed some works, permanent but removable ramps were proposed to overcome the height difference: two 'mirrored' ramps for the chapels and one 'isolated' ramp for the sacristy.

Both ramps had 8 percent slopes and were made of high-density polystyrene, with the walking surface and sides in phenolic plywood, their colours recalling those used in the design of the museum. In particular, the floor was designed in so-called 'Santa Giulia blue' and the sides in light grey (Sarnico stone colour). The ramps' small dimensions and their integration with existing elements of the permanent installation, guarantee minimum impact in terms of the perception of the church's space. With steel bars inserted into the polystyrene, the ramps would not be fixed to ancient elements, but to existing elements of the exhibition design: to the metal grids of the chapels' floors and to the balustrade in the sacristy.

This type of installation would, therefore, have ensured a conservative intervention that respected the material integrity of the ancient architectural elements. Moreover, being a particularly light material, polystyrene ensures that it does not put too much weight on the original stone paving and that it can be easily handled to remove ramps when necessary, restoring the existing situation (Figures 1-2).



Figure 1. The side chapels: the current situation (top) and the project with a photo-insertion of the ramps (bottom).



Figure 2. The sacristy: the current situation (left) and the project with a photo-insertion of the ramp (right).

For the reasons stated above, in our opinion the proposed solution represented a good compromise both formally and functionally between the requirements of protecting the ancient monument, of usability extended to as many people as possible in view of Universal Design, and of managing the operations of setting up and maintaining the museum spaces. Moreover, the elements could have been retained not only for the temporary exhibition, but permanently.

Since the complex is a listed building under Italian law, any intervention must be authorised by the competent Superintendence of Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape, to which the ramps project was submitted in November 2020.

The analysis of the Superintendence's opinion – which arrived a few days before the closure of the temporary exhibition – offers interesting food for thought on the delicate balance between the need for conservation and the need for inclusion in such a fragile context as this UNESCO site.

From the point of view of protection, the Superintendence emphasises its utmost interest in guaranteeing the full enjoyment of the historical, archaeological, architectural and artistic values of the church of San Salvatore, without it being debased by exhibitions that have nothing to do with its thousand-year history. It recalls, moreover, that the entire monastery complex is already equipped with numerous other more suitable spaces for this purpose, which it would be a contradiction not to use. On this basis, the Superintendence authorised the construction of the ramps and their permanence only for the duration of the Baldeweg retrospective (i.e., for a few days), reserving the right to decide whether or not to authorise any future temporary exhibitions in San Salvatore, in order to protect the monument's decorum. Only if permission is granted can ramps be put in, and then only for the duration of the event. The issue was then reduced to the need

for only temporary accessibility, which led to the acceptance of the ramps as long as they were removed as soon as possible.

In our opinion, the main issue has not been addressed, namely that these spaces are already included in the permanent exhibition itinerary of the museum, as evidenced by the presence of the display cases.

While it is true that in some cases it may not be possible to achieve the accessibility of cultural heritage unless unacceptable transformations are made to ancient buildings (as in the case of the crypt of San Salvatore), we believe that this is not the case in the example under consideration. In most cases, in fact, careful and conscious design can achieve the objectives of protection and enhancement, and of accessibility, through acceptable or even qualifying solutions. Of course, balancing different needs is not always easy, but it cannot be *a priori* considered impossible.

In the case of the Church of San Salvatore, it is a matter of overcoming a difference in height of a few centimetres to reach the side spaces. This would make it possible not only for everyone to fully enjoy the permanent museum itinerary but also allow for complete immersion in the spatiality of the church, fully perceiving its historical and architectural values.

In the context of projects for the reuse of ancient buildings, some Italian scholars have proposed adopting a multi-criteria grid as a tool to balance various needs from the very beginning of the design phase [11, 12]. These include the need to maximise the conservation of the building's ancient material; structural consolidation; the usability and accessibility of spaces in relation to the planned routes; thermo-hygrometric and lighting issues and those related to safety management; maintenance during operation; and so on. These needs all have to be combined into an architectural project of great formal quality.

This way of organising the reuse project avoids dealing with issues that were not taken into consideration when the work was completed, and which are often necessarily resolved *a posteriori* using less than optimal solutions.

The case under consideration is a testimony to the fact that the issue full use of the Church of San Salvatore was left out of the initial project. However, the solution now proposed for overcoming the step – integrating into the existing layout with minimal impact on the perception of the ancient spatiality – is presumably the optimal one that could have been chosen from the outset.

Therefore, we believe that, in situations of this kind, an effort should be made to overcome the overly abstract concept of protection, in order to favour greater inclusiveness.

3. Conclusions

The case of 'denied accessibility' in the Church of San Salvatore in the Santa Giulia Museum in Brescia is instructive from several points of view. Firstly, it is evident that if the requirement of accessibility is not solved from the beginning, an *a posteriori* solution can become a real problem from the point of view of design and function, in relationship to managing the paths for visits, and attaining permission from the competent bodies.

Secondly, as is more evident when considering a multi-criteria grid in the reuse project of historical sites, none of the various issues involved can assume such a weight that all the others are not satisfied.

Finally, today's national and international documents confront the topic of accessibility not so much as the fulfilment of the right of the individual person (with

disabilities), but – more correctly – as a way of affirming the value of culture as an expression of the memory and identity of communities to be passed on to future generations. From this perspective, accessibility to culture and cultural heritage is to be understood as synonymous with democracy and sustainability.

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