CPCL Vol.3 no.2 | 2020

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF
CREATIVE PRACTICES
IN CITIES AND LANDSCAPES

PRACTICES

Dreams of the Accessible [Cultural] City

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ABSTRACT
When we speak about access to culture, the first things that come to mind might be wheelchair ramps and braille signage. These things are certainly important, but the question is far broader than that. We might want to ask if the space is accessible for people with other needs, such as those suffering from autism, the young and the elderly, people of different faiths and different financial resources. For many people, a €70 ticket is as much of a barrier as steep stairs would be for someone in a wheelchair. And are we speaking just of the audience? Doesn't true access go beyond that, to the stage? Who has access to production, programming, scriptwriting, artistic and technical roles in cultural production (and whose culture, therefore, is produced)? In this article we will present how some cities in the EU-funded ROCK project have dealt with the question of accessibility to culture—how they have answered it, and how they have asked it.

KEYWORDS
Accessibility to culture; Cultural inclusion; CH-led regeneration; Belfast; Lyon; Warsaw

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2612-0496/12585
ISSN 2612-0496

The need for access: who are we talking about?

Accessibility is far from being a niche concern. In Lyon, for example, 13% of the locals are disabled. When you add to that those who have accessibility issues other than disability—for example socioeconomic or linguistic issues—the number expands again. When you further take into account the families, partners and friends of this diverse group, it is clear that the number of people whose choices in cultural consumption are curtailed by potential issues of access is far from being a small one. That is why Lyon, as we shall see below, takes care to extend the many provisions for the disabled within its healthcare, transport and employment services into the field of culture.

Beyond the physical

Though we will herein treat measures against physical and non-physical barriers to access, it is important to begin by stressing the salience of the latter. As Marleen Hartjes, accessibility manager at the Van Abbe museum in Eindhoven, elucidates, "The museum should be inclusive or accessible to all, and that means you will not only have physical boundaries that you have to overcome but also mental boundaries." What such boundaries consist in? "When you are in a museum you want to be part of a story, or want to understand what we are doing in the museum," that means concern with "accessible information, accessible stories and the way we approach one another."

In other words, culture must be intellectually, culturally and socially accessible. The ideal in this regard is that information is clearly presented and available in multiple languages, and that it is not only posted about within a cultural space, but also disseminated into diverse communities. Further, the content of the cultural offer must be relevant to the culturally diverse groups that coexist within a city.

For Katarzyna Miekus of Warsaw's Ochata Theatre in Warsaw, the concept of accessibility must apply to physical disability, health problems, lack of knowledge of the local language, and those who are less well off financially. This last category, says Katarzyna, are especially important to keep in mind during the COVID-19 pandemic. "For many of us it was very obvious that we can just turn on the computer and do the zoom meeting. But you know for some people it was not so easy." Katarzyna, who is involved in running the Culture Without Borders festival in Warsaw, had to ensure that there were options available to those without access to the internet, or to their own devices.

Such concerns do not to be thought of as in essence different from those that surround physical disability. As Lyon's former Deputy mayor for gender equality and disability, Thérèse Rabatel, puts it, "The difference between the two, which does not only concern disabled people but all

citizens, is rather a complementarity: One cannot go without the other, they are not in opposition."

One exemplary demonstration of how these issues can be treated hand in hand is the 'Gig Buddies' programme, which is run in Belfast, where it is supported by the local council. Gig buddies are volunteers who are paired with people with access issues of all sorts: Whether using a wheelchair to get around, suffering from autism or down syndrome, or socially isolated because of their age or background. Volunteers meet with their new buddies and schedule weekly or monthly cultural activities, from musical and theatrical performances to visits to museums or cultural sites.

"It's made a dramatic increase in the amount of people with disabilities attending gigs, and all sorts of theatre and festivals," says Christine O'Toole, acting manager for tourism culture, heritage and arts in Belfast City Council. As well as a new friend who can offer volunteers new perspectives and experiences, volunteers are also often able to avail of free tickets to events; "Many venues and festivals have special Gig Buddy tickets set aside," Christine explains.

Another such practice is Warsaw's 'Culture Without Barriers' festival. This festival aims to give access to everyone, regardless of any disability, or financial or social situation. It involves tonnes of events, such as film screening, theatre, and museum visits. "We organise this for one week every September," says Katarzyna. "It's a moment when we also host workshops and debates to discuss accessibility," so the festival is not only a moment for the city to offer more broad cultural opportunities, but also to invite feedback on its approach to accessibility, and hear what people have to say. For some institutions that find dealing with accessibility issues tricky from a budgetary point of view can take this opportunity to use the city's budget to make a change to their practices. "The festival is a way for these institutions to, you know, change something," Katarzyna says.

Include everyone

It's not always evident to which groups concerns about accessibility should be addressed, nor in what manner. In Belfast, for example, concerns about access have often centred around religious equality, ensuring that the two major religious groups, Catholics and Protestants, have equal access to the cultural offer. This is handled by constant contact between the culture department's good relations team and the equality unit. However, this approach, which has long been essential, given historical and contemporary tensions between these religious groups within the Northern Irish context, may need to play a less central role than it does at present.

According to Christine, "Many people no longer feel inclined to tick a box, because they may not identify as being defined by the religion that they were born into. The ethos of our new cultural strategy is that absolutely everyone has the right to express their identity. The whole city is supposed to be the playground, not broken into Catholic areas, Protestant areas, Chinese areas. People needn't be seen first as asylum seekers or travellers. That's the way to start breaking down preconceptions."

Given this perspective, the city's cultural department is trying a new approach: Rather than trying to name each group to which they are trying to provide access, the department is approaching access holistically. "We wanted to take a radical approach," Christine says, "and we wanted to not name them and pigeonhole them each and put them in the box because the whole ethos of the cultural strategy is that everyone is a human and equal."

This means that people of different genders, sexualities, religions, ethnicities, and physical and mental abilities all need to be kept in mind at once, taking a broad approach that is equipped with measures specific for each group.

Access to what? It's not only about the artwork

"Try to see the world otherwise" Different types of doors for different types of people

Making culture accessible does not just mean adding something on to the existing cultural offer, like braille on the description of an artwork. It also requires that you adjust the offer itself. In the Van Abbe museum, for example, a series of 'Unforgettable Museum' tours were designed for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease. "And these tours really shifted our way of thinking about how we deal with our audience in the broaden sense possible," Marleen explains, "art became a tool in order to retrieve their memories."

However, adjusting the offer does not mean that you need to present experiences that are exclusively geared towards the disabled. It is also an opportunity to enrich the experience for all. In The Van Abbe, Marleen discovered that creating a multi-sensory experience that facilitated blind museum-museum goers was widely popular amongst the general population: "the multisensory perspective is not only valuable for people that are blind but it is valuable to actually understand the artwork from a different perspective. This can open up a whole new multisensory approach in the museum and can really enrich the museum's experience for every visitor."

In the Van Abbe, says Marleen, the idea of becoming more inclusive "changed the identity of who we are as a museum." They realised that as "a place of stories that we are telling though our objects, our artworks,

FIG. 1 Social media communication from Marleen Hartjes, accessibility manager at the Van Abbe museum in Eindhoven

our exhibitions, that we need to understand that if that's the core of what we are as a museum, then that core should be accessible too." Their public funding puts an onus on them to be accessible to the whole of the public, not only in terms of how you enter, but also what you see. "The choices that you make as a museum, the collection that we build and also the meaning that we give to those collections is very important to understanding the world we live in."

One way that the museum has tried to deal with this was a mission to diversify its collection. "We set our mission to collect more women, collect more people of colour, collect more people from other countries, to give more stage and more time and galleries and programme space to people and artists with other voices. If we are not relevant, we will lose our grip on society. We have to evolve as well, because the people are evolving." This approach isn't limited to collecting new work – it's also about how the institutions show current work. "You could add multiple layers of storytelling in your way of working in order to give different perspectives on your already existing collection.

The Van Abbe's multi-sensory experiences include a 2014 exhibition with 28 blind or partially sighted artists. "They were also the ones who were giving the guided tours, so that was a bottom up exhibition." The museum

has also found that these tours don't just mean an enhanced experience of the works, but are also an opportunity to create engagement and exchanges between disabled and non-disabled guests [Fig. 1].

Thérèse had a similar experience in Lyon, when the city decided to focus on making itself more accessible for women. "Making the city more accessible for women or people with disabilities means making it more inclusive for other categories of the population." She gives the example of something simple like modifying benches by adding armrests. This makes it easier for all sorts of people to enjoy the public space, "it's good for old people, the disabled, for pregnant women, but it also creates a more enjoyable experience for everyone else. When you work for some, you work for others. That's the principle of universal accessibility."

"It's about normalising and accepting and integrating, not making a difference," is how Christine sums up the approach to accessibility in Belfast, and, according to Katarzyna, the approach in Warsaw is based on a similar lesson: "We find it very important to be with people with disabilities to see that we are all together, and it's not a problem if somebody has any disabilities. It makes you sort of get familiar with differences between us." Thérèse says that, in the experience of Lyon, this approach is more about careful thought than high costs, in fact, "It doesn't even cost much, it's just attention to others, it's human investment."

The digital divide

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically shifted the landscape of accessibility. The huge push that many cultural institutions have made to offer access online means that people suffering, for example, from mobility issues, have a much easier time tuning in to the cultural offer. For Marleen, another advantage is that it allows the Van Abbe to launch "a totally different relationship with our audience," and to give people access to a huge amount of material that could not be physically displayed in the museum due to space constraints. Marleen believes that this trend will help to cure what she deems to have been a misconception among cultural institutions, the 'myth of the golden visitor'. "We somehow think that our only important conversation is with those golden visitors that come through our doors. If we are only relevant to the people that are coming through our doors, we are truly missing out on an important role a museum can have, a part we can play in people's lives."

Warsaw has also exploited COVID-19 as an opportunity to engage more with pupils and students. The city launched a handbook on how to survive during the pandemic which focused on theatre for teenagers. "It was about theatre, about being together. Every day there was one subject that they were talking, about the history of theatre. It was sort of internet classes for quarantines," Katarzyna explains. None of the city cultural departments to which we spoke were concerned that online experiences

would replace culture-in-the-live, and all were convinced that this new way of going about things ought only to further invigorate and add an extra dimension to the local cultural offer and reach new audiences.

Nevertheless, it has also severely exacerbated a gap that has long gone unattended – the digital divide. Around 44% of the European population between the ages of 16 and 74 have been found to be digitally illiterate, meaning they have trouble negotiating basic tasks such as opening and replying to emails.[1] Add to this those who are digitally literate but have trouble accessing the internet due to poor connectivity or limited access to devices such as computers and smartphones, and you have an extraordinary number of people whose access to culture has been curtailed by the widespread move online.

Cultural departments in cities are ill-equipped to tackle this challenge, and it is one that urgently needs to be dealt with.

Role of the actors (cultural institutions, municipalities)

Role of cities

An ethos of the city council

Facilitating accessibility cannot just be a question of what you do. Rather, the willingness to create access must be reflected in the internal structures through which cities and cultural departments operate. Practically speaking, how are cities and cultural departments rearranging themselves to better tackle this issue? In Belfast, Christine explains, "We have a special unit within our council that focuses on accessibility and equality. We have several equality officers, and an equality manager who oversees the venues and public spaces that are used by the public." If venues are found lacking, there is a dedicated fund which will help them make purchases or carry out renovations to improve accessibility.

Christine considers accessibility to be an ethos which must be diffused throughout the council, but she also points out that it is enshrined in legislation; Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act mandates equal access to all services, public and private. The approach to enforcing this legislation is not one of dolling out fines or sentences, "It's about giving enough money and giving that time, in order to enable people to think that they can't just cater for one particular grouping, that they need to think wider than that."

In Lyon, accessibility is enforced through a combination of national laws, strong political will and coherent, cross cutting policies. Lyon's policy spans "employment, early childhood, schools, sports, culture, transport and more. I work with all my colleagues to make connections between

1 https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/resource-centre/content/digital-skills-gap-europe, accessed 28 December 2020.

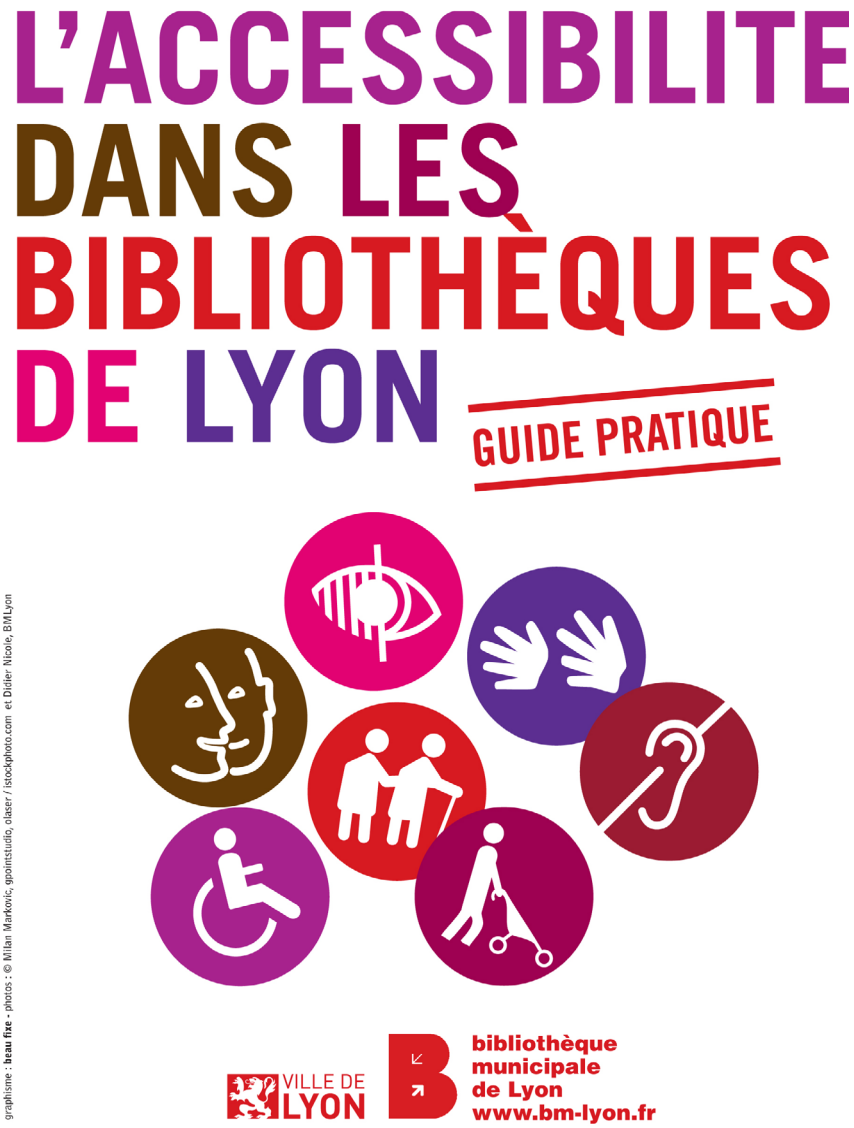

FIG. 2 Guide for the accessibility to Lyon's libraries

accessibility policies. We have strict national laws, but these have to be given force at local level," says Thérèse. This force has been aided by the creation of a network of referents on disability policy. The network has 13 referents, each of whom is posted in a different department, with one person whose job is to manage the group and bring everyone together.

A number of working groups, from 'Institutions open to the public' to 'urban spaces and accessibility' also further this goal. Another important factor is being in dialogue with representatives of the disabled community. "It is important that people can see the will of the institutions, as well as understand the difficulties that we as institutions face in realising our ambitions. Still, you have to do as much as you can, even if you can't do everything. Our objective is that cultural institutions in Lyon will become 100% accessible by 2024, except for rare exceptions, linked to the constraints of buildings classified as historic heritage" [Fig. 2].

These efforts are further bolstered by regular phone calls and on-site visits to cultural institutions, always with the aim of building trust on both sides. Regular discussions between the city and its cultural institutions, and between those institutions and the disabled communities which they serve has become a daily practice which strengthens all of those bodies involved in myriad ways.

The cultural sector is in an ideal place to lead the way in this regard, thinks Christine. "We as municipalities, as boring people who work in offices... we really rely on the cultural sector to make these changes. That it's not just us telling them what to do, it's also the cultural sector coming together and collaborating." Christine believes that local policies and investments must "go into maintaining inspiration in organisations and making sure they can go out and see good practice from elsewhere, that they have time for learning."

In Belfast, this means involving "as broad a spectrum of people as possible through practical interventions to ensure that all views are taken into consideration. It would just be so wrong for us to just talk to people who are already speaking our language."

In Warsaw, the practical approach has been to nominate an 'accessibility leader' in each institution who, besides their normal function, is tasked with keeping an eye on accessibility to all the different aspects of their institution, and coming up with regular suggestions for improvement.

Practical tools

So what are some practical tools that cultural institutions are using to ensure wider access to culture. One angle is access to language, for example in Warsaw, where they have begun subtitling works with Ukrainian and Russian. They also provide audio descriptions, closed captioning and sign language interpretations. But language issues don't always relate to foreign populations. In Lyon libraries stock 'Easy Read' versions of books on designated shelves, books that have been rewritten in a simplified manner for people with literacy issues of all sorts.

Tours can also be geared specifically to people with a given disability. Another angle, as in the Van Abbe, is to provide permanent tools, like 3D prints of sculptures, or high relief versions of paintings, that partially sighted guests can engage with through touch. Tour guides can become models themselves, assuming certain postures represented within the paintings and allowing visitors to touch the guides to get a sense of how the person within the paining is holding themselves.

Marleen remembers how one blind museum-goer's experience touching a sculpture opened up its interpretation not just for that individual, but for the institution's staff as well. "We gave her gloves and she started touching the artwork. She started saying 'it seems there are some sort of bars

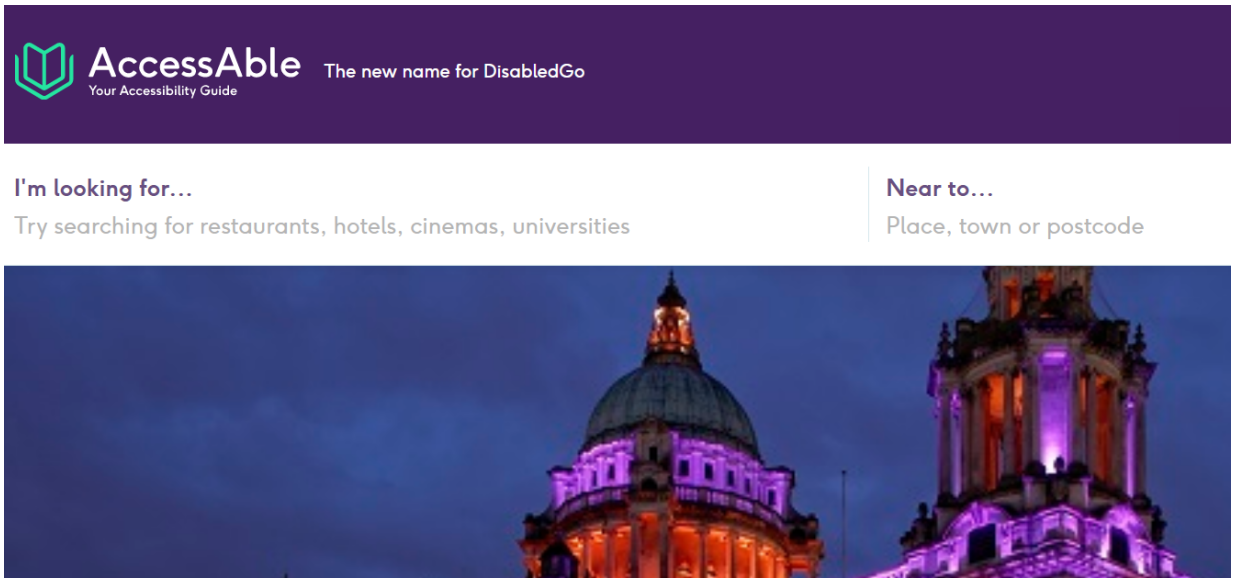

FIG. 3 Homepage of the "Access-able" website

in the eyes of the sculpture, he cannot see anything and also we cannot touch anything because the hands are on his back and he cannot move because he's just like this tumbling figure so it seems that this person is actually trapped inside of his body. One hand is turned a bit… he is doing something secretively.' We were listening open mouthed, because we understood that so many things that we had never thought of beforehand."

In Lyon, the Théâtre des Célestins opens up appointments for blind ticket-holders to come to the theatre before the show starts and move around the stage, get a sense of the space, touch the props, furniture, costumes, and even touch and speak with the actors so that they can have a fuller sense of the performance once the play begins.

Disabled people often carefully plan their trips based on where they expect to be facilitated, so spreading information about measures to make your cultural offer accessible are also really important. In Belfast, a website called "Access-able" allows venues and institutions to upload their accessibility details, from wheelchair ramps to special autism-friendly events, so that people can go to a single site to find out what's open to them across the city. Belfast also works hard to make sure that cost reductions are available to those whom socio-economic reasons might otherwise keep out of cultural spaces [Fig. 3].

Lyon has a similar approach with its "Guide de l'offre culturelle accessible de la Ville." This guide is made up of technical data sheets classified according to the fields of activity of the structures: Libraries, museums and heritage sites, performing arts, artistic and cultural education, events and associations. Pictograms by disability announce the level of accessibility of the tour route of each of the establishments.

These are just some exciting examples of the myriad of accessibility measures that some of the cities involved in the EU-funded ROCK project and in the Eurocities network have put in place.

Conclusion

In this essay we explored different approaches and strategies to increase accessibility in the culture sector in four European cities. If the approaches can differ slightly, the questions remain similar in all cases: How do we grant access to the highest number of people, despite their disability, background or status? What are the tools that cities and cultural institutions have at their disposal to ensure accessibility? Who needs to be involved in the consultation process? With the process unfolding, cities have learned that creating broader access is actually enriching the experience of the whole society. Many cities have understood that accessibility needs to be mainstreamed in different sectors to make it universal and truly inclusive. From a municipality's angle, power lies in its decision making structures, and as Christine from Belfast puts it: "We [as public officers] all have the opportunity to make conscious inclusive decisions every day in our work life." From the point of view of cultural institutions, the need to stay relevant and to represent society in its actual diversity should be the highest goal.

Culture and the arts have the power to challenge perceptions and people's ideas about others, and to do so in a creative way. Increased accessibility to culture for all brings about change and can increase social cohesion and improve cities' inclusiveness, one more step on the path to true urban resilience.

This article is based on a set of interviews realised with four cities:

Marleen Hartjes (2020), "Accessibility Practices in the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven", interview with Cécile Houpert, 29 May

Thérèse Rabatel (2020), "Politique d'accessibilité et secteur culturel dans la ville de Lyon", interview with Cécile Houpert, 3 June 2020

Katarzyna Miekus (2020), "Warsaw's Ochata Theatre and the Festival Culture Without Borders", interview with Cécile Houpert and Anthony Colclough, 4 June

Christine O'Toole (2020), "Accessibility Policies in Belfast City Council, Culture Unit", interview with Cécile Houpert and Anthony Colclough, 5 June

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