World Heritage-Universal Heritage. The Commitment of Brescia Museums Foundation and Brescia Council to Enhance Museums and Public Archaeological Areas

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Abstract. Brescia's museums network has adopted and developed in the last years a wide number of ways to make its heritage inclusive and accessible to everyone. Via the creation of different tools and initiatives, Brescia Museums Foundation, that manages the network, is at constant work to ensure the possibility to all members of the public to fully experience the cultural heritage.

Keywords. Heritage, Accessibility, Universal values, Inclusion, Cultural dissemination, ICT

1. Introduction

Brescia's museums comprise a heterogeneous heritage which extends from the third millennium BC to contemporary art, housed in historic buildings that distinguish the city's urban centre and cultural life.

The museum network contains an archaeological area, with monumental buildings of primary importance for northern Italy including the 1st century BC sanctuary, 1st century AD *Capitolium* temple (Figure 1), Roman theatre (1st – 3rd century AD) and additional Roman furnishings and statues. An 8th – 15th century AD monastic complex covering more than 11,000 m^2 (Figure 2) houses the City Museum, which exhibits thousands of objects and artworks in the historic monastery premises; the Tosio Martinengo Gallery features an art collection on display in an aristocratic residence, and Brescia Castle is also home to the Arms Museum and Risorgimento Museum.

One of the main objectives of Brescia Museums Foundation's mission, also on behalf of Brescia Council, is the widest possible public accessibility to this heritage – a large part of which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011. This commitment began in Brescia in the early 18th century and the tradition continues today, sharing projects and achievements with local inhabitants and the wider public.

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Figure 1. Capitoline temple (I century AD)

Figure 2. Santa Giulia Monastery, aerial view

2. The Path to the Culture of Accessibility

The approach to inclusiveness developed over the years in Brescia has undergone progressive evolution, determined by various factors including a nationwide increase in awareness regarding this question, the specialized training of staff involved in museum heritage management and activity planning, and the increasing availability of inclusive tools and strategies applicable to cultural matters.

Projects and activities have been aimed in many different directions, reflecting the diverse characteristics of the heritage, the museums, and the needs of inhabitants and tourists, as well as particular difficulties that might impede a correct and guaranteed availability to everyone.

A considerable driving force for the development of inclusive projects was also provided by the membership of certain Brescian museums of thematic networks which share common objectives and operating methods and have encouraged the spread of good practices and greater sustainability – in particular the network of Lombard sites, listed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2011, which focuses most of its projects on accessibility issues, also stimulating local projects [1].

The projects carried out by Brescia Museums Foundation have thus evolved successively, from the adoption of relatively ordinary paths and tools that guarantee various degrees of access to all members of the public, to the design and implementation

of inclusive strategies, avoiding distinct itineraries and experiences in line with the basic principles of Universal Design.

2.1. Accessibility and Physical Barriers

Although Brescia's heritage consists of outstanding monumental structures, historic buildings and museums, over the years it has proved possible to successfully overcome the architectural barriers posed by these historic constructions that range in date from the 1st century BC to the 18th AD (Figure 3).

Thanks to specialist advice and operations carefully designed with great sensitivity, in collaboration with the government departments responsible for conservation, over time numerous barriers have been overcome. At first, specific devices were installed in pre-existing visitors' itineraries in order to remedy certain shortcomings they presented. Subsequently, starting from at least 2013 in the archaeological area, single routes were designed to be shared by all visitors, with excellent results that have been described in previous publications [2].

Figure 3. Accessibility in the republican sanctuary (I century BC).

Visual impairment was first tackled in isolation, on the occasion of a proposal external to the museum, which resulted in the creation of a concise itinerary (*Ariadne's string*) based on the choice of two themes and featuring high-definition replicas of four works, made of the same material as the originals (marble and bronze) and placed right next to them. Close collaboration with the Brescia section of the Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired and special staff training at the Homer National Tactile Museum in Ancona made it possible to focus on the main possibilities and potential of an inclusive approach, by developing itineraries for heterogeneous groups of visitors – sighted, blind and partially sighted – who today undertake shared tactile paths that have become permanent parts of the museum's educational and cultural facilities.

The archaeological section of the Santa Giulia Museum, established in 1998, is currently being refurbished and it has been decided to allow the tactile exploration of all the original works – mainly in stone – not kept inside display cases, as well as making audioguides available for all visitors.

The museum participated in the creation of a tactile exhibition on the monuments of exceptional universal value registered in the World Heritage Serial Site "The Longobards in Italy. Places of Power (568-774 AD)" (Figure 4). This is called "Getting in touch with the Ancient Lombards" (Brescia, Santa Giulia, March-May 2022) and features models of Lombard buildings and the surrounding areas; an audioguide connected to each one

accompanies visitors on their tactile exploration, providing cultural information – which is also translated into Italian sign language (LIS) and accompanied by videos.

In addition, members of the educational services staff able to interpret LIS can accompany deaf visitors on thematic itineraries which may be adapted according to needs and requests.

Figure 4. Temporary exhibition "Getting in touch with the Ancient Lombards"

2.2. Information and Communications Technology Devices

In 2013 Brescia Museums Foundation began experimenting with new technologies to carefully evaluate their effectiveness for communicating and making accessible items permanently on show and temporary exhibitions, involving both experts and stakeholders in these evaluations. These tools undoubtedly have an important role, but their effectiveness is often undermined by indiscriminate use that is not calibrated to actual situations and concrete requirements.

The application of these technologies has focused in particular on the objectives of information availability and physical access to places.

Wearable devices that offer augmented reality (*ArtGlasses*) were first introduced in the archaeological area, then in the Santa Giulia Museum complex; shortly they will also be available for the Arms Museum in the Castle. These are GPS-positioned glasses with transparent lenses connected to a multilingual audioguide and may be worn during the visit; visitors are guided to and through the most significant places and items with audio cultural information, and augmented reality images are available at numerous points on the itinerary. This added facility can illustrate changes over time (for example showing what something was like before restoration or reconstruction work), artist's reconstructions, especially useful for archaeological heritage (e.g. 3D reconstructions that portray how an area or monument is thought to have looked in antiquity), or videos and interviews with specialists. The devices are user-friendly; on request, subtitles can also be activated for those with hearing difficulties [3] [4].

A further use of technological tools has enabled virtual, immersive visits to the only two places in the Santa Giulia monastic complex which – despite numerous joint assessments by experts and protection bodies – cannot be entered by visitors with limited walking capacity or confined to a wheelchair. These are the crypt of the Lombard church of San Salvatore, an area of great architectural importance where holy relics were kept and worshipped within the monastery, and the lower chamber of the Romanesque church of Santa Maria in Solario, where the monastery treasure was conserved. These two places are important monumental contexts where it would be inappropriate to perform

architectural alterations or install special devices to overcome the architectural barriers they present due to their very nature and conformation.

It was therefore decided to create 360° immersive videos to permit anyone who wants to experience a virtual visit to these two highly significant locations in the monastery, guided by an expert archaeologist who illustrates them and their special features.

The videos are available from the Brescia Museums Foundation website, and may be employed for remote use (and visits). For visitors in wheelchairs, special holders have been prepared in which personal smartphones can be inserted, guaranteeing direct vision of the videos at the entrances to each of the two inaccessible zones; these are freely available at the museum entrance.

As has become particularly evident during the recent pandemic period, the use of technologies can greatly facilitate art and culture's role as shared heritage, allowing items of special interest to be truly accessible to all. Their proximity to users means that visits can be accompanied by relevant information and active interactions can be established with all visitors – in this case via the museum curator who becomes an exclusive guide, with a particular attention to providing accurate information and interesting details.

2.3. Cultural Information Access and Audience Awareness

As part of the work aimed at eliminating all types of barriers to the museum and within the museum itself, we devised and implemented initiatives designed to create inclusive hospitality, also targeting potential audiences who might feel distant from museums for reasons of presumed inadequacy. Brescia's museums are trying to develop an environment based on active participation, to foster social exchange and propose museums as places based on differences – beyond any educational, cultural or socioeconomic barriers – where comparison between different viewpoints and cultures and otherness are constantly stimulated, not in order to defend or justify any in particular but rather to encourage open-mindedness.

Brescia Museums Foundation has adopted *Easyguide*, a simple multimedia guide that can be used directly from a smartphone. Access to content is immediate and is implemented by scanning a QR code which is given to visitors when they purchase their tickets. The texts, images, videos and other multimedia contents available in Italian and English remain usable throughout visits to the individual museums. The web app can also be used by the deaf thanks to the presence of written text as well as audio.

Easyguide, developed by MuseumMate, is a genuine visitors' mentor, which everyone can take with them and use when they wish.

Each guide includes various different itineraries, including a "guided tour" to the most important exhibits. The presentation of certain items is further enriched by multimedia features such as short videos with explanations by the curators of the collections and other specialists.

An "At your own pace" trip is also available, designed for those who prefer to build their own itineraries by selecting the items they wish to explore each time, using the numbers indicated on the museum labels. In all the museums there is always a "Children's visit" designed for children (6 years plus) who – like little detectives starting from the details – have to search the rooms for certain objects and listen to their fascinating stories.

Lastly, the "Activities" section is dedicated to initiatives that are available permanently or for a long period in the individual museums. This tool's flexibility permits its progressive expansion with constantly updated contents and facilities.

For the youngest visitors and their families, from 2022 *Geronimo Stilton. Brescia Musei Adventures* is active. This is a museum app-game for children; guided by the well-loved journalist mouse, they can take part in three exciting adventures in Brescia's museums. Between amulets, amphorae, paintings and armour, Geronimo guides his young adventure companions to discover the museums' history and their heritage with the help of augmented reality that transforms some museum pieces into 3D images which can be examined, manipulated and enlarged – so that even the smallest details may be appreciated and familiarity with heritage is enabled via different channels for maximum accessibility (Figure 5).

2.4. Well-being and Culture

It has been amply demonstrated by contemporary neuroscience [5] that art and beauty nurture and caress the brain. This places museums on the front line in the promotion of psychological well-being, and the prevention and cure of numerous pathologies.

Brescia's museums are proposed as places where – through specific activities and with proper guidance – it is possible to develop awareness of how important it is for our mental health and psycho-physical balance to be in contact with beauty and to be able to enjoy it. And at the same time the museum thus sheds its mysterious historical aura and ventures into unusual domains, meeting special visitors.

For a number of years Brescia Museums Foundation has been engaged in significant activities together with social and health organizations and institutions operating in the town.

Twentieth-century Protagonists is the title given to activities dedicated to aged persons who live in nursing homes. Encounters with history, art and culture have proved to bring about profound and regenerative well-being; meetings are thus organized in which works of art and film projections awaken personal memories and stories that, intertwining together, give life to moving memories.

In recent years we have collaborated with the Residenza Vittoria di Korian Italia e RSA Casa Industria; since 2018 annual meetings have been held for residents, operators and assistants and which are also open to other interested parties. Museum visits have been planned as well, to see the works discussed in real life – and visit Brescia's most significant artistic and historical localities.

Again for the elderly, two parallel projects have been launched in collaboration with Brescia Council's Social Services and Family Policies Department, as well as a number of parishes and daycare centres in the city.

After the positive experience of the pilot project inaugurated in 2018, an agreement has been made between Brescia Museums Foundation, the Children's Hospital and the schools operating within it (Benedetto Castelli Institute of Higher Education and Istituto Comprensivo Centro 3 of Brescia). The project includes a series of interactive educational activities (especially workshops) aimed at introducing and developing knowledge of the artistic heritage contained in Brescia's museums and on the temporary exhibitions organized in the museums.

In recent years, the educational services have collaborated with therapeutic communities and day centres for psychiatric rehabilitation on specific projects intended to familiarize patients with the museums' historical and artistic heritage, with the aim of involving participants in stimulating visits and activities that increase their knowledge of Brescia's history and encourage them to feel part of it

During the health emergency period, the focal points of emergency activities were chosen in order to communicate serenity, trust and hope by means of heritage values, through two projects in particular.

The photography exhibition *Mirabili radici* **-** Il sito UNESCO di Brescia nelle fotografie di Alessandra Chemollo **(**Brescia, Fondazione Poliambulanza, 8 May – 26 September 2021) gave Brescia Museums Foundation the opportunity – thanks to a fruitful collaboration with the Poliambulanza – to enliven the hospital's central wing with texts and images made available those who were there for treatment, to assist relatives or in order to exercise their profession. The photographs, of Brescia's UNESCO heritage and accompanied by short texts, were intended to solicit reflections on the meaning of time in its various manifestations, in search of marks it has left on the monuments – but also, in a different sense, on mankind.

The Azienda Speciale Pro Brixia, with Brescia's Chamber of Commerce, the ASST degli Spedali Civili and Brescia Museums Foundation, in collaboration with Brescia Council, inaugurated a new project to enhance Brescian culture at one of the largest vaccination centres in Europe, located in the Fiera di Brescia. The project involves the decoration of some public areas in the vaccination centre and the creation of a narrative that can be accessed by users through their mobile communication devices (smartphones or tablets), with the aim of accompanying and entertaining those undergoing the vaccination experience with the positive values of culture.

Brescia's Winged Victory became a protagonist, a symbolic link between the concepts of "curing" and "culture". In addition to the large graphic applications designed by Paolo Tassinari, special QR codes on the floor connected those awaiting vaccination to the Winged Victory's website, featuring moving videos and accounts of the statue's artistic qualities and its new setting.

In the post-vaccine period it became possible to schedule a visit to Brixia. Roman Brescia's Archaeological Area and obtain a cut-price ticket by registering for the Brescia Museums Foundation newsletter.

Lastly, safe guided tours of *Brixia. Roman Brescia's Archaeological Area* are being tried out in which visitors include patients with stable cardiological and neurological conditions, cancers and long COVID. These were designed by museum curators and educational services staff together with medical specialists and guarantee both physical and psychological safety.

3. Conclusions

The current working method used in Brescia Museums Foundation's planning and operational processes has led over time to the development a number of different standards, which allow us to measure the achievement of several diverse objectives. Numerous interdisciplinary collaborations have increased our ability to work in large, heterogeneous groups, with the consequent growth of specific skills and the staff's general professional abilities at various levels.

Over the years there has been a progressive increase in the number of visitors, which is certainly due to a combination of factors. Firstly, the activities described above have also contributed to expanding the services provided for everyone, intercepting a greater range of interests and interested parties. The museum areas have also acquired a stable reputation for hospitality and familiarity, which has encouraged members of the public to make return visits. Lastly, highly inclusive proposals have satisfied the needs of those

who do not find hospitality and provisions for their requirements – including those concerning disability – in all museums.

Figure 5. Young visitors enjoying AR with the Vittoria Alata

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