

**Ethical and Philosophical Dimensions of Accessibility to Cultural
Heritage
or why we need a different perspective**

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FACING the QUESTION

What do you think is the first thing that comes to one's mind when asked what provides accessibility to cultural heritage? Architects, urbanists, engineers, web developers, and graphic designers were asked for their opinion. Here are some of the most common answers: built infrastructure – ramps, pavements, roads, transportation; wheelchair access; visibility; signboards and no fences; access for people with mobility difficulties and with sight impairments. Another usual explanation one finds in the specialised literature is ensuring “*a barrier free environment for all visitors*” [Martin 1999].

So, in general, the understanding of accessibility to cultural heritage is limited to provision of means for a physical contact of disabled people (mostly considering motor impairments) with the environment. This result is understandable, given that covering the physical access needs is the most challenging conservation task as it often requires intervention in the heritage site structure itself. But at the same time it is quite alarming. Focusing only at providing physical accessibility we unwittingly separate the disabled people in a distinct group while claiming that we all strive against treating them as “*inferior to the rest of society*” [Finkelstein 1987]. Remaining within those narrow frames we also risk ignoring other human abilities and needs.

Today cultural heritage is considered to be an inseparable part of our environment and social life – single buildings or entire territories, tangible or intangible sites, movable or

immovable items. These are sites that we, the people, recognize today as important because of specific characteristics we consider valuable. So the cultural heritage is significant as such only because of the people who evaluate it. Hence the importance of accessibility to cultural heritage for all of us.

Certainly, the heritage sites are not equally accessible. Fortresses and fortifications for instance were located and built in a way to be physically difficult to access. They are often on high cliffs, have steep narrow paths and hidden escape exits. Underground facilities (for example walk-through canals of the drainage and sewerage system of the ancient towns) and tombs were designed in a manner that makes them hard to recognise in the environment. The “invisibility” for the unworthy was deliberately sought in the erection of some monasteries and churches. Religious sites and places of worship were erected to fulfil a specific experience only for a limited group of people with certain beliefs. Some of these beliefs and practices from distant past will always stay unknown and shrouded in mystery for us.

The difficult physical and visual access or the limited to certain community emotional access was sought on purpose for utilitarian or cultural reasons. Hence, the accessibility should be considered an important feature of these cultural sites’ identity, meaning, and significance.

So we face a paradox. Sometimes today we condemn analogous features of the cultural heritage as strongly limiting the accessibility. And yet, we define the same features as part of the specific heritage values.

Following this train of thought the next challenging questions when speaking of accessibility to cultural heritage would then be “Is the physical accessibility the only possible approach?” Is it always sufficient and desired? Is it always ethical to the heritage site? Is it ethical also to the people – the ones who created it, the ones who use it today and the ones who will appreciate it tomorrow? Do we omit something?

CHANGING the PERSPECTIVE

In the recent years the accessibility to cultural heritage has been considered in various specialised studies, national documents and standards (UK, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden,

Iceland, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, USA) with target groups including the professionals in the field of heritage, the owners, and the management bodies of the cultural heritage sites. These documents build upon a provision of an acceptable balance between the preservation of specific properties of cultural heritage and accessibility. While the initial efforts were primarily focused on improving the physical accessibility, today there is a growing international concern on the need to improve also the “*social, cultural and intellectual accessibility*” for all [Pouhere Taonga 2011]. Although these specialised documents point out a wide range of problems (horizontal and vertical movement, lighting, signage, information) the emphasis is on solving accessibility primarily for the disabled.

In Bulgaria the attitude towards the accessibility to cultural heritage is still limited more or less only to the provision of easier physical access to the environment and is focused basically for people with disabilities [Law on the Spatial Planning 2013, Ordinance № 4 2011]. Although the Cultural Heritage Act guarantees the right to use heritage sites by providing “*physical and intellectual access to them without damaging or exposing them to any risk*” (Article 3), the broadening international understanding of accessibility to cultural heritage has not yet been adequately assessed [Cultural Heritage Act 2013].

The leading ideas in above mentioned national documents propose an approach towards accessibility to cultural heritage based on the relation “value – accessibility”. The heritage values determine the limits of possible intervention to provide facilitated access and movement. As a result it is supposed that an ethical to the values accessibility is achieved. So to say, no significant substance has been destroyed. But at the same time, other unique heritage features might have been sacrificed and/or left inaccessible.

It is we – humans – who determine the cultural heritage values based on the current cultural philosophy of the society. It is again we – humans – who require accessibility to cultural heritage according to our abilities and needs, but also in correspondence with our constantly increasing expectations towards the surrounding environment. This characterises the accessibility to cultural heritage as a variable dimension depending on the ethical conduct and philosophical understandings of a given society. But using strictly the approach “value – accessibility” we risk forgetting for whom we preserve these values and for whom we provide accessibility. And losing this aspect we

somehow downgrade people to merely cultural heritage consumers rather than highlighting their role as key participants in the process of communication with heritage. So we had better change the perspective and look for the answers to the challenging questions in the relation “value – human – accessibility”.

An ethical perspective: ABILITIES vs DISABILITIES

Proceeding with idea that we – the people – stand in the core of today’s understanding of cultural heritage we might consider the accessibility mostly in terms of our needs and potentials. So let’s focus on all various human abilities rather than on certain disabilities. *Our physical abilities* are primarily associated with the human senses. They give us various ways for individual perception of the cultural heritage. The traditional classification includes five senses each of them depending on a specific organ responsible for our capabilities to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Having a reduced functioning of a sense doesn’t mean we are not able to use all the other senses. In addition the coordinated use of multiple sensory organs provides other abilities of ours such as motion and feeling temperature.

Hence, we could define the *physical* accessibility to cultural heritage as a major accessibility aspect associated with all human senses. It is not limited only to the means providing the physical approach to cultural heritage but also includes the ability to touch, see and contemplate, hear the sounds, smell, or taste. So perhaps it is more proper to call it *sensory accessibility* in order to cover all the aspects of the so called physical accessibility.

People also possess *intellectual abilities* associated with their mental skills to think and understand ideas. These depend on certain knowledge about cultural heritage as a basis for personal comprehension and formation of our own appraisal of the valuable characteristics. We need to be aware that the best way to acquire knowledge is individual for each of us. What is quite sure, though, is that we all possess *an inborn curiosity* whose potential could be used to motivate an intrinsic desire for new knowledge thus enhancing the understanding of cultural heritage [Pluck-Johnson 2011]. Moreover, mystery and uncertain curious facts are encoded in most cultural heritage sites. Here is the place to mention also the so called sixth sense – our intuition – usually

defined as the human ability to acquire knowledge without inference or the use of reason [Allen et al. 1995].

Consequently, we could define as the next major aspect of accessibility to cultural heritage *intellectual accessibility*, which concerns the mental abilities of a person. It is associated with provision of cognitive information about cultural heritage that facilitates our appreciation of heritage significance, enables our individual understanding, and reveals an opportunity for own interpretation and insight.

In the context of the competitive market economy of our time the *economic ability* emerges as an important issue also in the sphere of cultural heritage. The increase of the productive role of cultural heritage and its conservation in the society is not unexpected. But this enlarged economic significance is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enables the sustained vitality of cultural heritage sites through their adequate contemporary use thus stimulating the generation not only of cultural but also of financial benefits. On the other hand, though, surveys show a strong trend that the economic considerations take precedence over cultural ones when making decisions how and what to conserve [Tidwell et al. 1999]. An additional debatable topic is related to the personal financial ability to afford access to certain cultural heritage sites especially in a time we claim that heritage belongs to everyone.

But regardless of the above issues, the *economic accessibility* cannot be ignored and should be considered as the third major aspect of the accessibility to cultural heritage. Broadly speaking, it refers to the contemporary understanding for the wise use of cultural heritage as a driver for economic development [ICOMOS 2011]. Many inherited sites or traditional practices still play a key role in today's life of local communities. For other sites, though, we seek an adequate integration of constant or cyclic function that could meet the needs of our society and mainly in such cases we face the challenges of economic accessibility.

Ensuring the different aspects of accessibility implies certain professional activities related not only to the safeguarding of cultural heritage but also to its understanding by people. And if we paraphrase the French educational reformer Célestin Freinet – to understand something one needs first to experience it – then it might be a good idea to first look for the whole range of abilities a given cultural heritage value could stimulate.

And further – to consider these diverse human abilities (including those specific ones of the people with physical or mental disabilities) as a basis for seeking alternative and even challenging solutions that could provide unique personal experience of the cultural site.

But only a balanced interaction of all accessibility aspects in subordination with the significant valuable characteristics could guarantee the experience of the cultural heritage – with environment, information, and services accessible to all (Figure 1.). Choosing the most appropriate solution is undoubtedly unique and is induced by the cultural site itself.

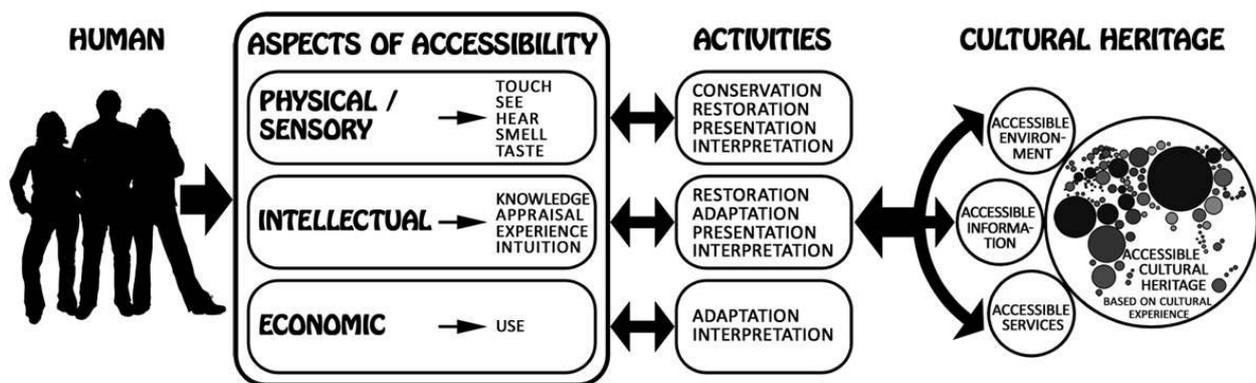


Figure 1. Aspects of accessibility to cultural heritage
Scheme © arch. Donika Georgieva

An example for integration of the accessibility aspects is the recently completed rehabilitation of the Ancient Stadium of Philippopolis in Plovdiv, Bulgaria [Ancient Stadium of Philippopolis 2012]. Situated under the main pedestrian street of the town with a single fragment presented at Dzhumaya square this great facility of ancient times was left inaccessible and unknown. Almost two years after the inauguration of the reconstructed site the place is again a vital part of the city life where different cultural activities take place. The new green piazza to the north is just one illustration for integrated accessibility (Figure 2.). The inclined urban space allows physical access to the ruins of the fortification wall. It gives the possibility literally to face the solid stone structure and feel its impregnability. The landscaping provides for intellectual accessibility by stimulating the intuitive search. It indicates that this place was beyond the walls of the ancient town. And finally, the same place creates a unique venue for cultural events assuring economic accessibility.



Figure 2. The Ancient Stadium of Philippopolis, Plovdiv, Bulgaria – the fortification wall before (2008) and after the rehabilitation with the green piazza to the north (2012)

Photographs © arch. Donika Georgieva

A philosophical perspective: LOGIC vs LIE

Being focused primarily on the numerous specific requirements of the methods for physical conservation of cultural heritage we seem also to forget the effective communication of the significance of cultural heritage sites [Silberman 2006]. The first international document to address the need for effective representation of the importance of cultural heritage sites is the *ICOMOS-Ename* Charter [ICOMOS 2008]. The interpretation and presentation are recognised as an integral part of the process of conservation, highlighting their importance in providing the *"physical and intellectual access"* to cultural heritage.

The right interpretation of cultural heritage is crucial for the accessibility – more specifically concerning its understanding and further personal experience. It is so because we tend to ignore things we do not comprehend; and if cultural heritage “does not touch us” then it is not part of our lives. But we also possess another feature – to feel personal satisfaction when we have accomplished something for ourselves, when we have reached our own conclusions, and when we have gained our knowledge alone. Why not use these human peculiarities when providing accessibility to cultural heritage in all its aspects?

The leading role here would be played by the cultural heritage site itself: its valuable characteristics, its ability to present a unique story. It is true, though, that in a great

number of cases we do not know the “true” story, there are various hypotheses, and new ones emerge over time. More or less, the approach we are somehow used to is taking the path of least resistance; and simply following that habit we try to cover the requirements for quick and easy physical access for the disabled. In terms of philosophy, even the “safest” hypothesis is not sure. What would be the understanding of future generations we also cannot know. But would it be fair to them not to explain our visions, why not even our doubts? So let’s be honest and follow the logic of a cultural heritage site when choosing the manner to provide an integrated accessibility.

Because ignoring this and urging the provision of easy physical access we might omit the logic of the heritage site. Thus we might lose significant characteristics and knowledge about it, and unconsciously attribute a false and misleading idea to the cultural heritage site. A provocative and well-known example illustrating this is Stonehenge. Probably the first association is the massive sarsen circle, but it is just one part of a vast prehistoric landscape with hundreds of burial mounds clustered on the surrounding hilltops, smaller temples, and other ceremonial sites.

There are numerous interpretations of Stonehenge itself: a temple, a place to commemorate battles, a place for celebrations, an observatory, even an ancient computer. And it is not surprising that it attracts thousands of visitors each year. Only in the last decades the new Management Plan of the site drew attention to the inappropriate accessibility and interpretation [Young et al. 2009]. For example, the existing facilities – a huge car park and a visitor centre – are situated right next to the sarsens themselves. In addition, the striking structure is cut off from its surrounding landscape by two main roads. So we do have an easy and very quick physical access to the site but we remain misled about the heritage site logic. Whatever its exact history and origin are, one is for sure – Stonehenge is and will remain a mystery at the very heart of a complex archaeological landscape, a place that needs to be approached slowly walking along the so called Avenue. But the current accessibility organisation unintentionally supports an actual lie leaving us almost without a chance of personal insight and unique experience of the site’s logic.

Following its primary purpose to ensure the effective protection, conservation, and presentation of the World Heritage Site, the Stonehenge Management Plan proposes an overall future vision for integrated understanding of the logic of whole area.

Measures have already been taken for traffic reorganisation, closing of roads, landscape regeneration, and relocation of the visitor facilities about three kilometres to the east (Figure 3.). Thus, the unique cultural setting will encourage its integrated discovery providing a provoking spiritual experience for all.



Figure 3. Strategy for landscape regeneration around the sarsen circle – Stonehenge

Images © English Heritage, Stonehenge, 2005

ABANDON the HABIT and FACE new QUESTIONS

The accessibility to cultural heritage today would mean a possibility for every human – regardless of social background or ethnic origin, education or age, language or professional qualification, physical or mental health – to visit, appraise, experience, and use the cultural heritage in a personal unique manner. Providing an integral accessibility taking account of all its aspects would be the most ethical way not only to foster the better perception of cultural heritage and its further consideration as important part of our lives but also to involve the communities in the joint conservation efforts.

So it is time to integrate all aspects of accessibility to cultural heritage in the entire process of conservation. And it is time to abandon the habit to blindly follow (who knows when and how) established conservation axioms. We had better stick to the logic of the cultural heritage site in order to reveal its essence as we find it, not as we think it must have been. Because it is on the ethical professional conduct towards heritage sites that the ethical approach towards all of us depends.

The new challenges logically come with new questions to face. How to preserve the sites, not only for the sake of the valuable characteristics themselves but in order to

reveal to the people their significance according to the cultural understandings of the associated communities? How to provide balanced accessibility to cultural heritage not only for a certain separate group with specific requirements but for all? How to conciliate these two aspects for a better accessibility to cultural heritage using the unique logic inherent to each heritage site and the various human abilities?

These questions are the first step towards the development of a specialised directive document (the lack of which is getting more and more obvious in Bulgaria in recent years) to support the provision of the accessibility to cultural heritage.

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