



# **International Perspectives on the Cultural Accessibility of People with Disabilities**

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A Project Access White Paper  
Art Beyond Sight



**PROJECT  
ACCESS**

**By Marcus Weisen**

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## Summary

This paper looks at progress achieved in the cultural accessibility of people with disabilities since 1982, United Nations Year of People with a Disability. It blends practical examples with the analysis of policy implementation and identifies some of the major challenges on the road to progress. This white paper also recommends a managed approach to change, with the adoption of short, medium and long-term objectives aimed at bringing about “significant and lasting improvements in access to culture for all people with a disability,” something the Council of Europe has called for since 1992.

In today’s world, we understand cultural accessibility as inseparable from an engagement with the inclusive design of cultural venues, products and services. An inclusive society in which culture is a shared space for all is our destination. This paper looks at a progress, challenges, and a roadmap to this destination.

## Background: The need for cultural accessibility

*Disabled people of all walks of life enjoyed very little cultural opportunity.*

“1982, United Nations Year of People with a Disability,” is a landmark for the cultural accessibility of people with disabilities. A number of seminal projects sprouted up around that time. The museum of Lons-le-Saulnier, France, used bodily re-enactment of scenes represented in paintings to introduce people with severe physical disabilities to the history of art, the Washington Metropolitan Ear (Washington, DC) took audio description into theatres and Japanese broadcaster NHK begun transmitting audio described TV programs. In London, Gina Leveté pioneered movement workshops with a range of severely disabled people, and founded Shape, an arts development agency for disability and the arts, which employs some twenty people today.

The road to cultural accessibility has always been bumpy. Disabled people in London still remember a conference about accessibility held at the South Bank music centre in a conference room that was not accessible to participants. In 1985, the UK Carnegie Trust published “The arts and disabled people,” which was perhaps the first national enquiry into cultural accessibility. The conclusions were sobering: Disabled people of all walks of life enjoyed very little cultural opportunity. Cultural accessibility was simply not part of the routines of arts and cultural practitioners, administrators, funders and decision makers. In short: cultural exclusion was the rule.

## Progress since 1982

Has the momentum unfolding since 1982 brought about deep and ample change? Has it brought about those “significant and lasting improvements in access to culture for all people with disabilities” called for by organizations such as the Council of Europe?

A small number of developments appear to have brought about sustainable improvements of scale. Visually impaired TV viewers can enjoy hundreds of hours of

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audio described programs per month in the UK. Some 200 cinemas in the UK provide optional audio description and closed captioning of most Hollywood films on the day of their release. Audio description is available in some 100 theatres in the UK, some 50 in France and probably, as one would expect, in even bigger numbers in the US. Sign Language interpreted performances are on the rise in a number of countries.

In the nineties, hearing Sign Language interpreters supported museum and heritage tours. Today, deaf guides are being recruited and trained to provide these tours. The change looks small, yet is fundamental. There is growing recognition that tours for deaf people ought to “arise from the ground of Sign Language.” A new sophistication in service provision is unfolding. For example, the Smithsonian offers tours in ASL which are interpreted for all as well as tours in ASL only. The former provides an inclusive experience, the latter offers greatest fluency of communication.

At the Cité des Sciences in Paris, educational videos feature deaf actors presenting learning content for all. Animation movies explain scientific processes, using very few words. Kids and parents enjoy sitting and lying on the floor to view the movies: Deaf kids, hearing adults, deaf adults, hearing kids. This is an example of how engagement with people with a disability frequently leads to improved services for wider audiences. In some places, such inclusive cultural environments have become an everyday reality.

***Put simply, measures of cultural accessibility do not exist at a national and international level.***

In the nineties, talking about the disability of great artists was frowned upon by art critics. Today, there is renewed interest in how artists such as Matisse, Degas, Kahlo, Klee and Hesse responded to the existential challenge of disability and illness to create new ways in their art, powerfully nurturing artistic developments. When blind dancer Saïd Gharbi dances with the world renowned Wim van de Keybus Company, the athletic yet weightless gravity-defying dancers find a counter-point of stability in his energetic earth-based dance. They need him and he needs them. These dancers are a fully integrated organism.

## **Challenges and barriers**

How are we to assess the extent of changes over the past thirty years? Put simply, measures of cultural accessibility do not exist at a national and international level. They ought to be user-focused and assess whether “significant and lasting improvements” have been achieved. The absence of such measures is but one sign of a prevailing culture of neglect for cultural accessibility within national cultural administrations. We cannot in any way speak of “significant improvements” in museum access, for instance, for deaf people, when only a handful of museums in any country provide very limited information in Sign Language. One could call it cultural starvation.

Cultural funding remains deeply discriminating. Over the past ten years, tens of billions have been spent worldwide on prestigious new museums and major extensions. As a rule, intellectual and sensory access to collections to people with a sensory disability or with learning disabilities is extremely poor. Few conscious efforts are being made to bring the best of the world’s fabulous cultural collections accessible within reach of people with a disability. Too often public funding is mis-used to maintain and strengthen cultural segregation. Worldwide cultural accessibility and inclusive design of cultural services remain an after-thought.

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Cultural funding worldwide appears to stop at the doorsteps of care home institutions for older adults. A recent report by the European Centre for Cultural Accessibility (2012) shows that very few homes for older people (assisted living facilities) employ an art worker. In these “homes,” millions of people worldwide are denied cultural opportunity.

Arts and cultural practitioners list the development and dissemination of good practices, guidance, standards and training as one of the biggest challenges for cultural accessibility, as is shown in the Resolution of the international “In Touch with Art 2010” conference (2010). As an example, you will find the only available guidelines about audio description in museums on the Art Beyond Sight website. Digital media is omnipresent in the cultural sector, yet I cannot find a comprehensive easy-to-use guidance about its accessible uses. Overstretched small disability agencies and small cultural organizations cannot fill such yawning gaps on their own. It takes government commitment to create a national perspective, vision and strategy for change. Committed practitioners are all too aware of how much cultural accessibility projects still rely on personal initiative and short-term funding. This leads almost invariably to faltering project legacies. Knowledge gained is not being passed on.

***It takes government commitment to create a national perspective, vision and strategy for change.***

Lack of serious engagement by national and regional cultural administrations is clearly a major stumbling block. Inside cultural organizations, the major stumbling blocks include lack of awareness, skills and organizational policies and procedures. Such policies would put the cultural equality of people with a disability and inclusive design for all at the heart of any planning process.

### **Poor levels of policy implementation**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognised the right of people with a disability to take part “on equal terms” in cultural life (article 30). Signatory states, including the US and the 27 member states of the European Union, pledged to undertake every appropriate action to make cultural accessibility an everyday reality for people with a disability. The European Blind Union (2012) found, however, that according to 82.5 percent of its national member organizations, the cultural rights of blind and partially sighted people are being poorly or very poorly implemented. Yet, cultural participation is not a luxury, it is part of the very fabric of life in society and for many, it is a path to self-realisation. The Council of Europe (2006) states “The right of people with disabilities as individuals to be fully integrated into society is dependent on them being able to participate in the cultural life of that society...”

### **Recommendations - Something everyone can do**

Being able to listen is one of the greatest cost-free resources on the way towards cultural accessibility. What do users say about their experiences? What is really unique in our cultural events and collections and how can we make the best of these accessible? It all starts with a listening mind, with a listening institution.

Money is a scarce resource in many countries and in little funded arts and cultural organizations. A welcoming attitude works wonders even in places where access to cultural wonders is loaded with barriers. Anyone who engages with audiences gets

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this message.” Access on a shoestring,” a practical guide by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, England (2003) is awash with creative low-cost ideas for improving access to information, collections, and learning.

## Changing mind-sets

Changing institutional mind-sets, seeing possibilities where one previously saw limitations may be more of a challenge, but comes also cost-free. It expands the institutional mind, infuses it with life-enhancing lightness, frees up its creativity.

Resistance to widening access is frequently expressed the following way, “We don’t want to do any dunning down.” The news is good for those who suffer from this syndrome. “Not for the Likes of You,” by Arts Council England (2005), shows that organizations that open up to new under-represented audiences do not compromise the quality of their artistic work.

## Embracing organizational change

A demonstrable commitment to cultural accessibility and inclusive design takes more than the deployment of free and low-cost resources. It takes culture change within cultural organizations and a great deal of work. Guidance on organizational change for the cultural accessibility of people with disabilities is pretty common sense. Core guidelines do not change much over the years and many have been rephrased recently by the European Blind (2012):

- Embed accessibility and inclusive design principles into every project development process, right from the start.
- Consult and involve users in project design.
- Build accessibility and inclusive design into every budget.
- Commission an access audit that covers premises, services, events, information (including website), marketing, organizational vision, mission, values, policies, practices, procedures.
- Assess what makes your cultural events and collections unique and what audiences most love. Focus on making these accessible. (Don’t be satisfied with giving people with disabilities mere crumbs and broken fragments. That is an insult to the beauty of culture.)
- Develop an Access Statement and Access Plan, with short-, medium-, and long-term objectives aimed at bringing about “significant and lasting improvements for all people with disabilities.”
- Train staff so they enjoy the learning journey and grow with it.
- Last but not least: directors and senior administration should demonstrate leadership and take full responsibility for progress in cultural accessibility.

“A long journey starts with a first step.” (Laotse) You have already taken a few or many steps. Good luck on your journey!

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## Resources

Council of Europe (2005), Action Plan (2006-2015) on “Full Participation of People with Disabilities in Society”, chapters 3.2, p 13 (2005), [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

Council of Europe (1992), Council of Europe Recommendation R (92)6, chapter VIII, section 8.5, [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

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European Centre for Cultural Accessibility (2012), Discrimination in Access to Culture against People with a Disability and Older People in Need of Care, André Fertier, [www.culturalaccessibility.org](http://www.culturalaccessibility.org)

European (Union) Council (of Ministers) (2003), Resolution of 6 May 2003 on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and cultural activities for people with disabilities, Official Journal (of the European Community) C 134, 07/06/2003 P. 0007- 0008

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United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 30 (2006), [www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml)

United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27 (1948), [www.un.org/en/documents/udhr](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr)

Weisen Marcus (2010), Disability discrimination in museums is systemic – the case for national strategic approaches in the UK and the world over, p48-72, [www.vam.ac.uk...](http://www.vam.ac.uk...)

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