

Design for All in Vilamuseu (Villajoyosa, Spain): How we work day by day to make cultural heritage inclusive in one of the World's main tourist regions.

Antonio Espinosa-Ruiz, Director of Vilamuseu (Museums and Monuments of Villajoyosa)

Villajoyosa is a coastal medium-size city —33,000 inhabitants—, capital of the Marina Baixa district, one of the main tourist regions of the world, with other internationally well-known landmarks like Benidorm. It has one of the most outstanding and monumental cultural heritage (especially archaeological and monumental from many different ages) of the Valencian Community, a long coastal region of the Spanish Mediterranean.

For more than two decades Vilamuseu, the Municipal Museum of Villajoyosa, has been applying the principles of Universal Design both to its museography and to all the educational and cultural programmes. In October 2016 opened its doors the main facility, conceived with a high degree of accessibility. Also, the valorisation of important monuments and archaeological sites such as the Iberian and Roman sanctuary of the Malladeta, the Barbera dels Aragones Manor House (with a splendid heritage from 18th and 19th centuries), The Roman funerary tower of Sant Josep (2nd century) or the cultural park of the Medieval Castle (14th-19th c.), we took very much into account those same inclusive criteria. The nine actual routes that connect the numerous sites of heritage interest are now equipped with 60 inclusive interpretive panels and, being the city quite accessible, we check these itineraries together with the Municipal Area of Urbanism to eliminate the remaining urban barriers.

We cannot explain here the programmatic principles of all this museographic philosophy and praxis, which are widely presented in the Manual of Accessibility and Inclusion in Museums and Places of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Manual de Accesibilidad e Inclusión en Museos y Lugares del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural) published by Editorial Trea in Spain in 2013, coordinated by Carmina Bonmatí (Chief of the Education and Interpretation Department at Vilamuseu) and myself, and written together with a score of Spanish and Brazilian specialists.

The importance of accessibility and inclusion in exhibitions of cultural and natural heritage is, in our times, extraordinary. And yet, most of the professionals of the museography in Europe do not consider it in their work, or do it partially. In Vilamuseu we care a lot to enable physical, sensorial and cognitive access to all our public and effectively communicate the values and fragility of the heritage we exhibit. Design, technology, and any other aspect serve the same purpose.

In our Museology Plan, Design for All is a strategic horizontal axis: it can't be waived; nothing can be done without it. So, we do not 'adapt': we do not create something (an exhibition, a website, an educational workshop...) and then think how to make it inclusive, but we design for all from the beginning. We believe that only an inclusive exhibition is a good one: we consider the rest as a failure, a lost opportunity, an expression of a creative incapacity or a defect of formation or preparation. As we do not adapt, the inclusive approach is not perceived as a complication or an extra expense, but as a *sine qua non* question.



1 DfA in cultural heritage: Bronze tactile model at the Cultural park of the Medieval Castle in Villajoyosa.



2 Inclusive dramatized visit to the Roman funerary tower of Sant Josep (courtesy of Paula Doncel).

Vilamuseu belongs to a bilingual community, with a vernacular Catalan language and a Castilian —more commonly known as Spanish— originally imposed, but today settled among the population, predominant among our tourists and more known among our foreign residents (especially British, Norwegians and Maghrebi). Far from representing a problem, cultural and linguistic richness has become an advantage in our exhibitions, for it forces us to use very short texts in Catalan, Spanish and with easy-to-read criteria for all audiences, especially for those who know but do not understand or speak fluently one of our two languages.

Other languages are available in audio-visual support by means of QR codes that redirect to a web App where we also upload contents in Spanish sign language (and soon in International Sign Language), as well as more extensive information using a link to Wikipedia pages that we maintain as private editors, to our accessible website and so on.

We specially try to create accessible resources that are usable and useful for everybody. This is the case, for example, of the new 25 very accessible panels spread throughout the municipality, where embossed images contain relevant information not only for blind people but for everybody.

The large 3000-kg lift in Vilamuseu allows us to move in seconds groups with a number of wheelchair users between the different floors of the building, but also moving large volumes of pieces or museum furniture. UD gives multiple advantages for everybody and for everything.



3 Visit of the famous blogger with disability Elena Prous to the Bou Ferrer shipwreck in 2013.

Some believe that accessible museography is unsightly. They fear the idea of increasing the size of the texts. In fact, texts will be the last bastion of misunderstood minimalism in

exhibitions. We need to evolve towards a new accessible aesthetic. We see more beauty in a counter for all people than in another that is not, no matter if its designer is a famous architect.

Design for All (DfA) or Universal design (UD) fit well into an authentic New Museology, a movement born in the 80s to open museums to society, making them people-centred. But most of museums and museologists didn't understand or follow this new trend, and searched for the public as a number, as statistics, putting museum architecture and technological resources in the spotlight much more than the public, for instance.

A real New Museology must be a Museology for All. Focused on people, on all the people. We insist here on the importance of a term that usually goes hand in hand with the DU: usability, or ease of use, especially in technological devices and resources.

The Anglo-Saxon concept "inclusive design" insisted on the adjective "reasonable." In museums, we could say that DfA is not "all or nothing", but a process in which we will take major or minor steps, to the extent of our resources. A new temporary exhibition or a reform of the permanent one are good opportunities to implement the DU, even to convince the need and the advantages of doing so to reticent technical or political leaders.

The Design for All trend insists not only on final results, but specially on management, sustainability and information — updated, detailed and verified information— for all: that's why we inform in our various channels —both personal and online— about the percentage of slope of our ramps; the number of toilets accessible; the existence of a lactation room, of magnetic loops in reception and lecture hall; the museographic accessible resources, etc. They will decide if these conditions enable them to make the visit, individually or in groups: let us consider that common technology —such as smartphones— or technical aids — solutions exclusive to certain groups, such as motorized chairs or scooters— are enabling many people with functional limitations to reduce their disability.

To guarantee the application of these principles in any facility, activity or program and the maintenance of accessible resources, we have designated a person responsible for the transversal axis of our Museological Plan called "Design for All axis".¹

In the access chain, any broken link can avoid or interrupt a museum or heritage experience: from public transport to the museum gates, vertical and horizontal interior routes, signage, wayfinding, toilets, lockers... and all the museography —heights of furniture and texts², typography, selection of originals and tactile reproductions, models, etc.-

We took all of this very much into account in our permanent exhibition project —financed by the Ministry of Culture and pending execution— and is the hallmark of each temporary exhibition we produce.

¹ The other four axis are Heritage interpretation, Public participation, Local development and Quality. For each of them there is a responsible in Vilamuseu

² The average height of the panels, for example, are located in Vilamuseu at 135-140 cm above the ground, significantly inferior to the museographic theory to use, in order to facilitate visual access to all people.



4 Accessible reception desk at Vilamuseu.

In this chain is also important information, as we said before: both written (brochures, screens, press, publications...) as well as personal and online (web, social networks ...). In everything that depends on us (such as the website www.vilamuseu.es, self published information leaflets or reception and guided visits staff) we also apply the principles of DU and inclusive behaviour. The information must flow properly and continuously, and be in possession of both the people dedicated to distribute it and the rest of the team, for which we have a brief White Book of Accessibility and Inclusion in Vilamuseu, which must be read by all staff, both permanent and temporary.

The use of principles and techniques of Heritage Interpretation are necessary for the understanding of texts or audios. As a basic measure for intellectual accessibility for everybody, not only people with mental disabilities (Ham, 2013), we use them always, not only in museography, even in press releases or lectures.

Above all, it is necessary to know human diversity, and especially the different types of disability, to realize the specific needs and solutions for each person: thus, we have mobility and organic impairments, especially sensitive to the famous Museum fatigue, for which we have areas and points of rest, ramps, wide circulation spaces, accessible museum furniture, etc.

Secondly there are sensory disabilities, especially visual and hearing impairments. Exhibitions, let's not forget it, are predominantly audio-visual environments. It is necessary to take into account both people with hearing loss and the so-called "deaf community", with their different needs; as well as people with total blindness and those who have some visual

rest, or those with dyschromatopsia, who need different resources. For them we have enough lighting in all our halls, avoiding dark spaces; accessible texts and signs; tactile floor plans or tacto-visual floors (projected and pending installation), etc.

People with mental disabilities need very good orientation and wayfinding resources, a sense of security and inclusive personal attention. Easy-to-read and augmentative communication through pictograms —these are our current challenges— can help these people understand the messages we provide. Both systems are even very helpful for tourists who don't understand the languages of the panels.³

We could still add the cultural handicap due to lack of prior knowledge of the subject matter of the museum or exhibition. Here we must introduce the concept of interculturalism, of which there are very remarkable initiatives in many museums and exhibitions in a Europe that must look in the mirror and recognize itself in all its cultural richness.

A recurrent discussion on accessibility to museums is the communicative profitability of traditional resources, both physical (models, reproductions, braille, macro types, reliefs, tactile original pieces, etc.) and personal resources, compared to those provided by information and communication technologies (ICT). We have both because both are necessary in an increasingly technological society (Espinosa and Bonmatí —ed.—, 2013, 183). The former must in any case be present, not only because we cannot avoid the digital divide (especially in the elderly), but also because they continue to be operative when the electric power, battery, hardware, software or WiFi signal fail. ICTs, wellconceived and developed according to DU criteria, are a museographic revolution, but not a panacea. The best multimedia guide (either a device or a Smartphone app, for example: Vilamuseu is opting for the latter) is bad when it has low usability or non-inclusive content, such as long texts with technical words. And we must pay attention to the versatility of an interpretive mean frequently supplanted by technology: specialized guides, which may be the best guarantee of a quality interactive experience, even though politicians cannot inaugurate it.

Thanks to the collaboration of Espiritu Santo Centre of Educative Resources of the ONCE (National Organization for the Spanish Blind) in Alicante we have had constant advice during all these years on haptic resources, and used interesting low-cost materials such as microcapsule paper sheets that represent monuments or pieces. Also, the Fesord (Federation of the Deaf of the Valencian Community) has collaborated in actions directed to the deaf community, like sign language translations in real time or in video. The relationship with this associationism at local, regional or national level is of the utmost importance. Besides, the wordof-mouth effect is crucial for inclusive tourism and certainly they can help.

When we design museums, exhibition or cultural and natural parks, a holistic approach to the architectural and museographic project is needed. We need a teamwork of curators and professionals in architecture, design and museography, in which all of us inevitably have to park egos. A good example of teamwork was the writing and execution of the Vilamuseu architectural project, work of the Arts Studio, led by Tomás Soriano, along with the

³ About all these disabilities and their needs to make museum communication effective to everybody, see the manual quoted above (Espinosa and Bonmatí - ed.-, 2013).

museographic project, led by Joan Sibina, all under the agreed and respected coordination of Vilamuseu. Vilamuseu's corporate identity, created by Avanti Avanti Studio (www.avanti-avanti.com), gives also the idea of both accessible city full of monuments and museum (Vila — 'village' — is the popular name for Villajoyosa).

To do this, curators and museum staff should know how to design an inclusive project and direct their writing and execution. That is why we insist on the need for training, which will enable us to solve doubts, to guide or demand DfA to architects, exhibition companies or designers. We also ask for advice from other experts and ask for the opinions of users, who can help us in the evaluation in any moment of the process. We need more usable museums, where people feel comfortable and the sacred halo of our fetishes is deconstructed and transformed into understanding, functionality and enjoyment; in which people discover themselves in their past and decide to project it towards a better future.

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FOOTNOTES TO PICTURES

1. DfA in cultural heritage: Bronze tactile model at the Cultural park of the Medieval Castle in Villajoyosa.
2. Inclusive dramatized visit to the Roman funerary tower of Sant Josep (courtesy of Paula Doncel). The Tower of Sant Josep has been recently restored and around it we planted a Roman-type funeral garden with multiple olfactory and tactile resources.
3. Visit of the famous blogger with disability Elena Prous to the Bou Ferrer shipwreck in 2013. The Bou Ferrer Project, led by the Valencian Government, the Villajoyosa Town Hall, the Villajoyosa Marina and the General Foundation of the University of Alicante, offers accessible visits to the largest ancient ship in excavation in the Mediterranean.
4. Accessible reception desk at Vilamuseu.