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**FAL**  
FLORENCE  
ACCESSIBILITY LAB



florence  $\alpha$ ccessibility lab

Accessibility to Cultural Heritage & Human Development



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## 1. FOREWORD

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The Research Unit **\*florence accessibility lab – Accessibility to Cultural Heritage and Human Development\*** was established with the idea of defining, consolidating and promoting a new accessibility culture according to which environmental accessibility is a great common resource for human empowerment, to make local communities safer, more cohesive and more dynamic and to enhance the architectural and landscape heritage.

This aspiration recalls the idea of the 'common good', which is based on two main principles: active citizenship and community empowerment.

The **\*florence accessibility lab\*** Research Unit seeks to become a benchmark for public, private and third sector entities in the fields of research (basic and applied), education and consulting on environmental accessibility for human development at local level.



## 2. CULTURAL VISION: ACCESSIBILITY & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Our cultural vision is based on the centrality of the person in environmental transformation processes and on the need for these processes to be guided by knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics and protection of the common goods which include, with good reason, the cultural heritage.

In this vision, the great paradigm of accessibility finds its cultural horizon and its ethical, social and economic target in the concept of human development.

In a broader sense, Accessibility expresses the ability of an environment to guarantee everyone an independent life<sup>1</sup> regardless of their age, gender, cultural background and physical, sensory or cognitive abilities.

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<sup>1</sup>See articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic.



Accessibility, like any cultural construct, is a “process” rather than a “product”; namely, it expresses a tendency towards an objective rather than the objective itself. Strictly speaking, in fact, “accessible” places, goods or services do not exist. Every place, good or service is characterized by a specific “degree of accessibility”. This assessment is, however, extremely complex as it depends on many factors, starting with the different and often conflicting needs and expectations of the different user profiles.

Accessibility concerns all human activities, the use of material goods and relationships with intangible elements/factors (communication, services, decision-making processes, participation, etc.).

A unique character of accessibility is its multi-scale dimension: it ranges, in fact, from the object of use to the territory, involving all scales of intervention. On the different scales, accessibility is expressed through the consistent and comprehensive satisfaction of various requirements: reachability, mobility, environmental communicativeness, comfort, prevention and environmental safety, safety in use, usability, etc. Accessibility is not a given sanctioned by a law, it is not limited to a regulatory dimension and it is misleading to think that it only concerns weak and disabled people: accessibility is a ‘value’ concerning each person’s right to determine their own existence and to participate in community life and the growth of the society on an equal basis with others.<sup>2</sup> Accessibility, except in special cases, should not shy away from policies or special interventions but, according to a mainstreaming strategy, it should filter and fuel the ordinary decision-making processes that concern the transformation of the anthropic space and human relations.<sup>3</sup>

In the specific debate on the regeneration of cultural heritage sites where a particular need is felt to develop a wise, sensitive and highly creative dimension to accessibility design – accessibility acquires a plurality of meanings: a civility indicator that our era will leave for the future, a ‘bridge’ towards culture and beauty and an opportunity for civic and economic well-being.

<sup>2</sup> See United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006

<sup>3</sup> See Council of Europe Disability Action Plan, 2006-2015. Recommendation Rec (2006) 5



The concept of **Human Development** was developed in the late 1980s by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in order to overcome and expand the traditional meaning of development focused only on economic growth. This concept is oriented to sustainable development processes in environmental, social, cultural and economic terms.

"Human development is the expansion of people's freedom to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human development, as individuals and in groups. This reaffirmation underlines the core of human development—its themes of sustainability, equity and empowerment and its inherent flexibility. (...) Human development is also about addressing structural disparities—it must be equitable. Moreover, it is about enabling people to exercise individual choice and to participate in, shape and benefit from processes at household, community and national levels—in other words, to be empowered."<sup>4</sup>

The paradigm of sustainable Human Development finds its primary, albeit not exclusive, application in local development processes where the characteristics and potential of the individual territories are assessed through mainly endogenous processes of change. In this perspective an essential factor is the active participation of inhabitants in both decision-making processes and project implementation and the verification of the results achieved. This strategic vision acquires greater value within innovative dynamics focused on guidelines for multi-dimensional transformation such as those outlined here.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development.

### 3. STRATEGIES

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In Italy, despite a broad and complex regulatory framework, accessibility is often a denied right and a deficient or disregarded environmental requirement.

The majority of public opinion sees accessibility as a 'problem' for disabled people rather than as a community 'resource' that includes social, civil, ethical, economic and environmental aspects that fall within a broad and open concept of economy.

Nevertheless, it would be easy to demonstrate that an increase in the degree of accessibility of a place, goods or services (and the consequent empowerment of the people) is usually associated with more favourable 'economic' indicators (an increase in the number of users, improved use of time, a reduction in the healthcare costs that fall on society as a whole induced by healthier lifestyles<sup>5</sup> and by the reduced risk of accidents, the promotion of a tourist supply that helps to make local societies more dynamic, etc.).

Above all in today's framework, which is mostly characterized by a lack of resources, accessibility is seen as a 'weak' factor of anthropic transformation. In other words, accessibility is not perceived as a factor that might trigger and consolidate consistent and lasting development processes.

Overcoming this criticism requires dealing with accessibility through **new strategic approaches**.

One hypothesis is to think about accessibility in connection with human needs perceived by the community as a priority because they express identity needs (e.g. the protection and preservation of cultural heritage) and/or because they are believed to generate work and wealth with greater clarity and immediacy such as health, communication, mobility, free time, tourism, etc.

According to this approach accessibility could play a twofold role: firstly as an operational tool to intercept, create synergies and support the 'strong' development factors that increase the community's quality of life, and secondly as an important side-effect because the environmental improvements brought about for tourists foster and promote an independent life for the local inhabitants.



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<sup>5</sup> See WHO Regional Office for Europe, Zagreb Declaration for Healthy Cities, 2009.

Italy is possibly the only case in the world where it is most appropriate to use the expression 'widespread museum' and the cultural heritage sites are a privileged field of application not only for combining ethical and economic profit but also for firmly establishing research activities at local level. In fact, the intrinsic *raison d'être* and effective cultural value of the artistic-cultural exemplars only exists if experienced in the contexts that expressed them, since these contexts are, at the same time, their cause and their effect.

The extensive dissemination of cultural heritage, combined with specific geo-morphological conformation, the atomization of the population and the production structure of the country also refers to the need to connect, according to a system logic, the small and large polarities that have historically structured the territory.

It is precisely the enhancement of cultural heritage as a vehicle for socio-economic and tourism development that the \*florence accessibility lab\* aims to address, first of all to act as a stimulant for the creation of more reachable, attractive and welcoming environments for guests and that are, at the same time, more accessible, safer and vital for the communities that live there.



In this regard it is interesting to note that in Italy the first acknowledgement of accessibility as a "means to foster the civil and economic development of the Country" can be traced to the prefaces of the MiBAC Decree of 28 March 2008, which approves the "Guidelines to overcome architectural barriers in cultural heritage sites". The cultural basis of these guidelines integrates the actual disciplinary ones ("Cultural heritage and landscape code") with the evolution of the concept of disability, from the medical concept to the bio-psycho-social one, as advocated by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).<sup>6</sup>

The challenge is particularly relevant with respect to lesser-known cultural sites which often are in hilly and mountainous internal areas. These sites are tourist destinations with strong unexpressed potential, sometimes characterized by depopulation and decay phenomena. For these sites, accessibility could represent an important factor of tourist attractiveness and competitiveness.

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<sup>6</sup> See WHO, ICF International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, 2001.

## 4. OBJECTIVES

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The \*florence accessibility lab\* Research Unit aims to help to improve the citizenship rights, participation and self-determination of the people as a significant factor of long-term socio-economic development for local communities.

The general purposes of our work are:

- Demonstrating that accessibility is a particularly efficient factor in triggering and consolidating consistent, lasting and sustainable processes of human and economic development, aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles and elevating the 'social capital' of a community;
- Demonstrating that an accessible town fosters urban quality and safety and opposes urban decay phenomena, predatory crimes and incivilities;
- Demonstrating that accessibility can offer added value to the architectural and landscape heritage of the region, making it more attractive to tourists and more usable for the inhabitants;
- Proposing points for reflection and solutions concerning tourist enhancement as well as the safeguarding and regeneration of the architectural and landscape heritage of the regions, within an accessibility, sustainability and active citizenship perspective;
- Promoting the architectural design culture as a strategic element in the interpretation, control and implementation of applications related to the broader dimension of accessibility;
- Supporting public system strategies that lead to the better use of resources for the creation of current and future overall value in local communities;
- Promoting social inclusion and increasing the well-being and autonomy of people also through the development of knowledge, procedures, technological tools, and advanced automation techniques;
- Designing and creating, together with Small and Medium Enterprises, systems, tools and technologies for accessibility and environmental awareness;
- Producing solid hypotheses of accessibility also in terms of economic sustainability, through the implementation of business management methods, mainly non-profit and with a social purpose, and the active role of citizens in the various design and implementation stages;
- Re-conceptualizing the tourism culture from the perspective of accessibility and sustainability guiding the actions of public, private and third sector entities keen to anticipate the demand of tourists with special needs (disabled people, elderly people, families with small children, people with eating disorders, etc.). This demand is largely unfulfilled despite growing steadily primarily due to the effect of the ageing population and the increased propensity of the elderly to travel.

The purposes of the Research Unit are consistent with the Societal Changes strategic objective of the Horizon 2020 Program and, in particular, with the challenge of "Inclusive, innovative and secure societies".



## 5. SCENARIOS OF INTEREST AND KEY PARTNERS

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Within the field of study identified – the cultural heritage – the \*florence accessibility lab\* Research Unit wishes to focus its attention on the following scenarios:

- cultural sites
- natural parks and constrained areas
- urban areas
- archaeological areas
- common goods
- public buildings and buildings intended for public use

To this end, the key partners of the Research Unit will be:

- The European Union
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- State Administrations
- Local and regional authorities
- Universities and Research Centres
- Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)
- Social entrepreneurs
- Associations for vulnerable and disabled people



## 6. ACCESSIBLE DESIGN STRATEGIES

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As the real objective of accessibility is to increase the autonomy and social practice of people (starting with the most vulnerable segments of the population which are less represented due to their being external or on the edges of the production system and the workplace such as children, the elderly, adolescents, immigrants, disabled people, etc.), eliminating the sources of any type or kind of obstacle (use, communication, architectural, town planning, etc.) must only be considered an operative instrument to achieve accessibility.

In our cultural approach, the concept of an “accessible place” from a place “free from architectural barriers” or “in accordance with the rules” takes on the broader meaning of an inclusive place. A place, in other words, suited to different needs and capable of comfortably and securely accommodating people with different characteristics and levels of freedom. This means rethinking otherwise standardized design solutions in order to compensate for the typical handicaps of weak and disabled people and, at same time, to improve the quality of life for all, but also to foresee, if necessary, devices for raising environmental awareness and support for particular users, even based on ICT and advanced automation systems.

The Research Unit will therefore apply two design strategies. The first and main one concerns the possibility of ensuring each person the use of places, goods and services (including those relating to communication), according to the Universal Design principles; the second – in synergy with the first – concerns the setting up of specific support devices and specific technologies (Assistive Technologies/Adaptive Technologies) aimed at providing people who have particular physical, sensory-perceptive or cognitive requirements with a better quality of life.



## 7. WORK UNIT

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The \*florence accessibility lab\* Research Unit originated from the joint decision of professors of the University of Florence to unite skills and experiences gained in different fields of knowledge in a broad new field of scientific investigation. The complex nature of the problem under examination led to the establishment of an interdisciplinary research group. The group unites a main core of researchers from design disciplines (linked to the Department of Architecture and the Department of Industrial Engineering) with economic-social sciences researchers (linked to the Department of Economics and Management and the Department of Political and Social Sciences).

The interdisciplinary characterization is essential for the analysis, understanding and interpretation of the phenomena and economic and socio-cultural dynamics, as well as for foreseeing the strategies, policies and actions of the proposed framework. At the same time, the disciplines characterized by their design dimension in the environmental transformation processes will aim to draw together different aspects. Indeed, action on the physical context, its quality and its intelligibility can always be found at the basis of each virtuous mechanism connected with accessibility.



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