

# 9. The museum from the perspective of cultural proximity

Ico Migliore

## 9.1 What do art and a handle have in common?

The aim of this essay is to emphasize the urgent need for change in the design approach for cultural spaces in light of new technological tools, a shift in feelings and a new style of using the spaces.

In this scenario, reformulation of the museum exhibition space must take place from the perspective of what we call *Cultural Proximity*, that is, a paradigm within which the visitor goes from being a mere passive guest of the itinerary to becoming a true protagonist called upon to carry out constructive actions throughout the itinerary, building an unprecedented relationship of closeness and personal connection to the cultural contents. This new paradigm necessarily implies that the accessibility of the design is conceived not only in physical terms but also in ergonomic terms; that is, paying attention to the visitor's ability to read and memorize.

Starting from the assumption that every object (whether artistic or instrumental) is much more than the mere fruit of the technical

knowledge used to make it – it is, rather, also a reflection on the context in which it is inscribed, on what this artefact is and why we use it – I would like my reflection on the accessibility of culture and its places to be based on the principle of this seemingly bizarre question posed by Alva Noë in his book *Strange Tools. Art and human nature*: what do art and a handle have in common?



We all use handles to open and close doors. We could therefore say that we are all able to describe what a handle is. But imagine for a moment that our civilization disappears and that, in the future, a new population finds an abandoned handle on Earth. It is a curious, apparently banal object, but one that is not at all simple for them to decode. In order to understand the meaning of this object, it would not be enough to study its mechanism.

Rather, it would be necessary to understand an entire culture: a system of relationships built by people who have bodies, with hands shaped in a certain way, who inhabit spaces where one enters and exits, and where there are doors that must be closed or opened. The new population should then understand the reason for closed

**Figure 1.** Natural History of Humans Gallery, Natural History Museum of Milan, Milan 2023, Migliore+Servetto, photo by Andrea Martiradonna.

spaces, our need to protect ourselves and the fear of being *violated* in our property (and who knows what property is, then), the possibility of violence and, finally, the very concept of inhabiting *one's own* space.

And yet none of us can claim to think of all this when using a handle normally. Now let's add in another condition: let's imagine that an artist isolates this object by proposing it as a work of art. In this case we would be forced to reflect on everything that the use of a handle means to us. And, necessarily, to reflect on the practice of entering and leaving a room, of opening and closing doors, on how this very everyday activity organizes our lives in a certain way. That is why we can say that an art object is not only the fruit of the technical knowledge used to make it but, rather, a reflection on what that object is and why we use it.

So what do art and a handle have in common? From the point of view of the American philosopher from whom we have chosen to borrow this thought experiment, all the tools we create make us what we are in a continuous process of organization and reorganization. Art illuminates the way we engage with our practices and technologies to organize our lives in an optimal way. This is because art is an organized activity, whose purpose is to show us our practices: by pointing to a handle, the artist reveals everything that is normally hidden behind the use of this artefact. Art removes tools from their contexts and makes them strange. Making them strange is like showing them for the first time.

Accepting Noë's assumption on the decontextualization of an object of use, I believe at the same time that while on the one hand, a handle becomes a mute object when isolated from its function, on the other, an art object is in itself an artefact whose disruptive force lies in the ability to be able to involve, excite and make people think, establishing multiple and personal connections with contexts, meanings, languages or signs. For this reason, places for using art must offer visitors the best opportunities to approach these perspectives of vision and personal growth.

This broad premise is useful for once again suggesting the centrality and value of cultural spaces and museums. They are places of community and sharing, propagators of identity and historical consciousness, promoters of critical thinking and, it should be noted,

places of belonging and communities primarily dedicated to initiating dialogues, including with themselves. Having been historically founded through the progressive transformation of private collections into institutions open to the public, the mission of social inclusion and cultural sustainability through art and culture resides in their DNA.

## 9.2 The future of cultural places

As a scholar and designer, I imagine a future for the places designated to welcome these *strange tools*, works of art, where even the concept of sustainability, which is sometimes used as an umbrella term for approximate contents today, takes on a precise and new meaning. Indeed, the focus of the reflection shifts from the topic of the material to the question of the actual accessibility of the museum, which is all the more sustainable insofar as it manages to open up to different audiences, as well as being a source of enrichment and cultural evolution.

An intelligent and empathetic museum. The museum goes from being a place *to visit* to a place *in which to stay and a place to come back to*.

This kind of new way forward conceives museums as lively laboratories in the broad sense of experimentation, in which the experiential trait is predominant and experience becomes a tool of knowledge *par excellence*, unseating mute observation of the exhibits. In order for the visitor to approach these exhibitions positively, an underlying design idea is required that develops from experiences, from the actions that each person is invited to carry out along the way, a viaticum for getting to know the subject and entering into an empathetic relationship with it.

But when is an exhibition really designed and set up for everyone? The answer that I have come up with over the years is as follows: when it not only makes the guest autonomous and a protagonist of the knowledge process – at all levels of cognitive and perceptual abilities determined by age, or physical or cultural abilities – but when it also manages to produce or trigger a transformation in this guest, who should therefore be able to develop a new relationship with the place of culture as a place of exchange and elaboration in their own path of knowledge/awareness, a place of experimentation with concepts such as infinity, diversity and love of difference.



**Figure 2.**  
*Leonardiana. Un museo nuovo, Castle of Vigevano (Pavia) 2016, Migliore+Servetto, photo by Andrea Martiradonna.*

Ultimately, the concept of museum inclusivity coincides with the ability to look at visitors as subjects in transformation (not passive objects) and to make them independent and curious, opening them up to the new and the different and, consequently, encouraging their empathy, their stance and their critical spirit. This is a two-way process in which the museum itself must become equipped with structures capable of evolving and changing according to the interactions with its public.

Searching for new narratives in the cultural field to respond to the needs of an accelerated changing world must therefore be a fundamental requirement for designers. This means grasping the importance of shifting the attention of the gaze from the subject of the exhibition to the people who benefit from it, understanding their needs, desires and learning skills, as well as their limits. This therefore opens up a reflection on what kind of culture there is a need for today. It may seem complex to identify a unique answer; however, from our point of view, key themes such as curiosity, understanding of the world and comprehensibility of messages, reflection and critical spirit, valuable content (that promotes genuine dissemination and information), empathy, awareness and entertainment certainly contribute to outlining its profile.

## 9.3 Museum accessibility

We must acknowledge that the issue of museum accessibility is very topical today. Not surprisingly, ICOM (International Council of Museums), the international organization that sets professional and ethical standards for museum activities, has recently released a new definition of the museum, which differs from the previous one presented in Vienna in 2007, precisely because it introduces the concepts of accessibility and inclusiveness. In fact, the new definition stresses that museums must be «Open to the public, accessible and inclusive», and that they must promote diversity and sustainability. But what can designers do to make this possible?

Before answering this question, we should briefly consider the meaning of accessibility. As Riccò points out, the European *Concept of Accessibility* – a study on the legislation and practice of accessibility that began in 1985 at the request of the European Community – led to the publication of the European Manual for Accessibility (1990, first ed.):

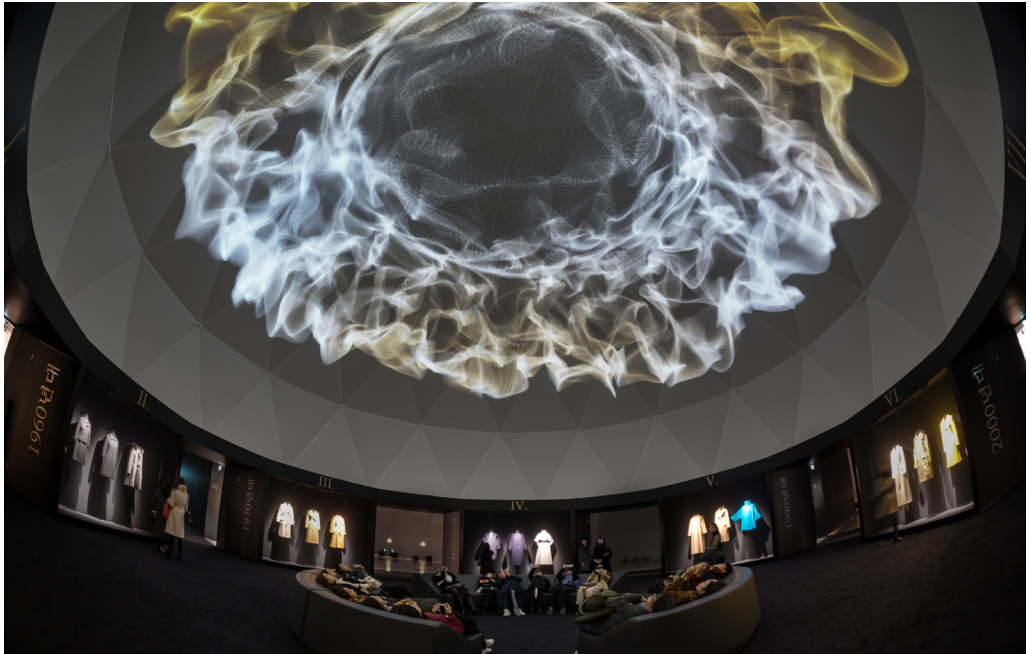
**a first European manual in which accessibility criteria and standards are indicated, which took the title of "European Concept for Accessibility" (1996) in a later edition; until the 2003 edition, in which accessibility is simply defined as an essential attribute of a "person-centred environment" (Riccò, 2023).**

However, accessibility comes in different degrees and forms, especially when referring to the museum or cultural environment, where it is necessary to ensure that the visit experience (online and offline) is equal and inclusive for all visitors, regardless of their ability, gender, age, social background and culture. In the aforementioned document, it is argued that:

**accessibility criteria are to be determined on the basis of human characteristics, considering that people are different, no one corresponds to the average person, everyone deviates from the average in terms of height, sight, hearing, strength, speed, etc. (Riccò, 2023).**

Ultimately, as Riccò argues, it is precisely the differences that constitute the criteria for designing the built environment.

Faced with the question to be asked – that is: in what direction is the museum going, and should it go, today as a place to be designed? – a possible answer is then given by a new installation concept, which cannot be separated from design understood as part of a total direction that involves not only the curatorship but also the visitor as an active interlocutor.



**Figure 3.**  
*Coats! Max Mara*  
*Exhibition, Dongdaemun*  
*Design Plaza (DDP),*  
*Seoul 2017,*  
*Migliore+Servetto,*  
*Digital Installation*  
*by Yiyun Kang,*  
*photo by Jae Young Park.*

Within a renewed design inclusiveness that conceives the visitor as a dynamic subject and activator of the designed space, they are, in fact, the active protagonist and activator of the articulated narrative scheme imagined with the almost directorial skill of the designer alongside the curator.

For this reason, it is urgent to focus attention on an aspect of accessibility that, in general, is considered less than others, and is difficult to detect and therefore more insidious: cultural accessibility. Although considerable efforts are being invested in many museums to make them welcoming places for everyone, there are still sections of the population who consider them to be places with a high cultural

level in which it is easy to feel inadequate and ill-equipped to understand their contents.

As Miglietta also highlighted, it is possible to identify cultural barriers in all situations that:

**lead the visitor to a state of discomfort (or even refusal to visit a museum) for reasons often related to the contents (already known or presumed): little or nothing is understandable in relation to their level of schooling, or it is simply not relevant or of little interest, or too virtuous, too serious, requiring considerable effort to be understood (Miglietta, 2017).**

In the study, Miglietta also points out that, for some people:

**visiting museums does not fall within life's priorities, and that others, often younger people, detect a disconnect between activities considered to be "cultural" and their personal problems, recognizing the museum as an environment that is unable to reflect their identity or self-perception (Miglietta, 2017).**

There are also negative aspects related to orientation within museums or difficulty understanding the informational media made available to museums. In fact, the study in question shows that the content proposed by museums is, from the point of view of the average visitor, inaccessible, as it is expressed in a specialist language. It also emerges that digital content is considered to be of poor quality or infrequently updated. This is why the younger public often does not identify the museum as a stimulating place for creativity or a place for social gathering. «Not feeling at ease in a place from the point of view of one's cultural background» Miglietta specifies, «means, for example, simply not being able to decode the explanatory texts of the panels or the contents of the audiovisuals: communication and language are the first and most important form of accessibility».



## 9.4 The museum seed in the perspective of cultural proximity

Therefore, this fact relating to the perception of museums emerges as increasingly urgent for defining the characteristics of the museum of the future in the perspective of Cultural Proximity. In this scenario, new technologies will be useful for expanding the museum experience. Aiming to achieve a fertile crossover between analogue and digital, the museum of the future will be a sort of *augmented museum*, an environment almost devoid of perceptual boundaries. It will be a place where, by touching materials and objects with their own hands and smelling the scents, visitors will be able to access a concrete experience, and not just a passive experience of visual beauty. We also know that this aspect is very important for the majority of younger visitors, even before they physically approach the museum: 80% of visitors under 35 (Millennials and Gen. Z) prefer to visit interactive museums with integrated technologies, while 42% of young people visit social media channels and the website before going to a museum to understand how the institutions apply technology, from primary services to the installations. In this perspective, the exhibition model that imagines the museum as a neutral and hermetic container, that is, the concept of the *White Cube*, is considered obsolete. In contrast to this, we speak instead of the *Dynamic Cube*: a formula that expresses the sensory interaction component, even synaesthetic, of an exhibition space capable of determining its form according to the narrative that can be built on a case-by-case basis at will.

From the point of view of Cultural Proximity, therefore, it is desirable to adopt a new conception of places of culture and aggregation that revolves around the concept that we define as the *Museum Seed*. According to this perspective, like a seed, a place of culture must be able to graft itself into the urban and social fabric of the surrounding territory to become an activator of new behaviours and a reference to the community. In this design vision, museums and places of culture are not interpreted as *architectural safes*, closed spaces for fencing in objects, but rather as dynamic systems that are permeable and open to exchange, capable of building awareness and community. It becomes a place of culture, from the museum to the urban installation, where all



the design elements are crossed by a common thread, which we could define as a sort of narrative dramaturgy.

In this perspective, like a seed, the museum grows, transforms and extends itself to take on an *increased* version in constant evolution, which, moving between conservation and narrative, opens up new forms of accessibility and inclusion. Inhabiting spaces of culture today requires a new design capable of integrating architecture, design and graphic design in the encounter with the evolution of technologies, neuroscience and artificial intelligence.

It is not just a matter of exploiting the potential of the visual components, to which we have become accustomed over the last 50 years, since the advent of the internet. Rather, while computers and smartphones have unleashed their potential, today, with the emergence of artificial intelligence, this wave is becoming even more impressive, with surprising effects and repercussions, including in the field of space design. This means the possibility of generating increasingly high-quality visual or spatial narratives in extremely compressed times.

Although it is of fundamental importance to question the limits and possible dangers inherent to this tool, we cannot fail to highlight

**Figure 4.**  
*Chopin Museum,*  
*Ostrowski Palace,*  
*Warsaw 2010,*  
*Migliore+Servetto, photo*  
*by Źelazowa Wola.*

its benefits. In the luxury industry, for example, personalization has always been central to delivering a unique customer experience. Artificial intelligence, combined with the Metaverse, opens up multiple opportunities for hyper-personalization. By exploiting artificial intelligence algorithms and data analysis, museums can therefore also gain in-depth knowledge of the preferences, behaviours and desires of their visitors. This knowledge will allow museums to create routes that are specifically tailored to the individual visitor, thus offering increasingly accessible experiences.

The museums of tomorrow, with a view to Cultural Proximity, should increasingly equip themselves with a clear *hypertextual learning* system, which allows visitors to select the level of in-depth study they feel up to facing at that precise moment. In fact, it is established that the more rewarding the experience (due to a suitable level of learning), the greater the increase in skills and knowledge, and the more the visitor will tend to consider the museum a place to revisit. Within this future scenario, the role of neuroscience is central: a series of studies conducted at the neurobiological level offers important measurement tools. Think, for example, of Brain Imaging techniques, which are at the centre of considerable advances in analyzing the brain *in action*, that is, studying the reactions and brain mechanisms of individuals involved in motor, cognitive or perceptual activities.

Now more than ever, places of culture have enormous potential to be sites of reference for the communities in which they are rooted, shared places for encounters that are accessible to all according to the most diverse objectives and interests. They can be places that provide awareness, belonging and relationships, even before knowledge.

## References

- Basso Peressut L. (2014), *Allestimenti e musei nell'età della comunicazione globale*, in Basso Peressut L., Bosoni G. and Salvadeo P., eds., *Mettere in mostra. Mettere in scena*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa.
- Bishop C. (2013), *Radical Museology. Or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?*, Koenig Books, London.
- Bodo S., Cimoli A.C., eds. (2023), *Il museo necessario. Mappe per tempi complessi*, Nomos Edizioni, Busto Arsizio.

- Boisi A. (2019), "Il museo narrante", *Interni*, 4: 74-77.
- Bosoni G. (2018), *Allestimento e grafica. Il sodalizio Castiglioni-Huber I Installation and graphics. The Castiglioni-Huber partnership*, in Migliore I., Servetto M., Lupi I. and Ossanna Cavadini N., eds., *Achille Castiglioni visionario. L'alfabeto allestitivo di un designer regista*, Skira, Milan.
- Cataldo L. and Paraventi M. (2023), *Il museo oggi: modelli museologici e museografici nell'era della digital transformation*, Hoepli, Milan.
- Christillin E. and Greco C. (2021), *Le memorie del futuro*, Einaudi, Turin.
- Del Puglia S. (2022), *Exhibition Design Stories. Metodi e pratiche di fruizione della cultura*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa.
- Falchetti E. (2010), "Perché visito i musei scientifici. Risultati preliminari di un'inchiesta sui pubblici del Museo Civico di Zoologia di Roma", *Museologia Scientifica Memorie*, 6: 242-247.
- Ferrari D. and Pinotti A. (2018), *La cornice. Storie, teorie, testi*, Johan & Levi, Monza.
- Helg F. (1990), "La mostra è come un giornale", *Progex*, 2.
- Mandarano N. (2019), *Musei e media digitali*, Carocci Editore, Rome.
- Marani P. C. (2006), *Il rinnovato rapporto tra contenitore e contenuti*, in Marani P. C. and Pavoni R., *Musei. Trasformazioni di un'istituzione dall'età moderna al contemporaneo*, Marsilio, Venice.
- Miglietta A. M. (2017), "Il museo accessibile: barriere, azioni e riflessioni", *Museologia Scientifica. Nuova serie*, 11: 11-30.
- Migliore I. (2014), *Nuova estetica dei comportamenti*, in Basso Peressut L., Bosoni G. and Salvadeo P., eds., *Mettere in mostra. Mettere in scena*, Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa.
- Migliore I. (2019), *Time to Exhibit. Directing Spatial Design and New Narrative Pathways*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.
- Migliore I. (2019 A), "Spazi per la cultura polifonici", *Modulo*, 417.
- Migliore I. (2019 B), *Shaping Pathways and Behaviours*, in Bucci F. and Collina L., eds., *Padiglione Italia. 4 Elements / Taking Care*, Corraini, Mantova.
- Migliore I. (2024), *L'architettura espositiva come nuova narrazione* in Irace F., ed., *Musei possibili. Storia, sfide, sperimentazioni*, Carocci, Rome.
- Migliore I. and Servetto M. (2007), "Paesaggi per comunicare", *Inside Quality Design*, 6.
- Migliore I. and Servetto M. (2016), *Verso l'opera: una processione laica/Towards the Work: a Lay Procession*, in Francone M., ed., *Piero della Francesca. La Madonna della Misericordia*, Skira, Milan.
- Migliore I. and Servetto M. (2023), *L'ADI Design Museum: il nuovo museo narrante*, in Curzi V., ed., *Musei e patrimonio culturale. Forme di narrazione della Contemporaneità*, Skira, Milan.
- Migliore I. and Servetto M. (2023), *Verso una nuova concezione del museo: il Museum Seed*, *Seed. Design Action for Future*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli.
- Migliore I. and Servetto M. (2024), *Museum Seed. The Futurability of Cultural Places*, Electa, Milan.
- O'Doherty B. (2000), *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Riccò D. (2023), "L'accessibilità ai contenuti museali. Prospettive per il design della comunicazione", *Accessibilità museale. Le prospettive per il design della comunicazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Solima L. (2022), *Le parole del museo: un percorso tra management, tecnologie digitali e sostenibilità*, Carocci Editore, Rome.