

Article

# Disability, Accessibility and Inclusion in the Arts: Changing Paradigms and Practices

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## Abstract

The notions of disability and accessibility have been the object of thorough revision over the past few decades, spurred by the actions and documents set forth by international institutions and organizations. Accessibility for people with disabilities has recently undergone major conceptual and practical changes, moving increasingly and steadily towards inclusion and design for all. This article reflects on the evolution of the notions of disability and accessibility in inclusive terms, also considering shifts in terms of identity, recognition and participation. For practical insights, the article discusses four instances of inclusive co-design and enjoyment of live performances and events, which have naturally led to the empowerment of people with and without disabilities who were involved.

**Keywords:** disability; accessibility; performing arts; participation; belonging

## 1. Introduction

Disability has been an integral part of every society, nation, and community since the dawn of history. Yet its significance, visibility, and very definition have undergone continuous transformation over time, particularly in recent decades. Focusing on Western societies—especially North America and Europe—it is evident that the past fifty years have witnessed a profound shift in how disability is perceived and understood. This remains a dynamic process that continues to evolve today.

The social model of disability, developed within sociological studies beginning in the 1980s and subsequently cited and reinterpreted extensively, was effectively incorporated into the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) [1], adopted in 2006 and entered into force in 2008, with the ratification of the first twenty signatory countries (currently numbering 192). This momentous document, built on the principles of the social model of disability which first introduced by disability studies expert Mike Oliver in 1983 [2] and further developed in the following years [3], emphasizes that the recurring challenges faced by persons with disabilities—in everyday life, in accessing information, and in participating in cultural activities—are the result of a human-made world that has been conceived of, and developed for, abled individuals. The notion of ableism has therefore become central in contemporary discourse, imbued with negative connotations and positioned in direct opposition to that of disability. As Nario-Redmond notes when seeking to define ableism as broadly as possible:

Ableism is you feeling like I should be grateful for the ramps and the parking spaces as if access was not a basic right. Ableism is the way media portrays us as either objects of pity or inspiration. Ableism is our story told by nondisabled voices captured through a nondisabled lens [4].



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In this article, we will first examine the concept of disability and its most recent transformations, propelled and enhanced by international bodies such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the World Health Organization. Through a series of policy actions and documents, these institutions have contributed to a profound reconfiguration of perspectives, attitudes and therefore actions. In analysing these developments, we will explore how the social position and perception of persons with disabilities have evolved—and, consequently, how their sense of identity has been reshaped.

In the second section, we will focus on the concept of accessibility, which is closely interlinked with that of disability and has itself undergone a significant paradigmatic transformation; one that continues to unfold to date and is undoubtedly driven by broader shifts in how disability and its social perception are perceived worldwide.

Finally, in the third section, theoretical and conceptual reflections will give way to a series of practical illustrations. The focus will, therefore, shift from a critical approach to the notions of disability and accessibility to several examples of collaborative accessibility experiences, including people with and without abilities, in order to highlight their importance, added value, and, last but not least, the unforeseen discoveries that invariably emerge from such collaborative practices. This final section will also lead us to shortly address the notions of well-being and empowerment, particularly in relation to involvement in participatory activities for the overall enjoyment of live events for all.

## 2. The Concept of Disability and the Renewed Value of the Individual

As Beth Haller observes [5], disability is still today generally conceptualized and represented in binary terms—on one side, the presence of a visible and largely permanent disability, and on the other, the absence of any disability. This perspective, which remains common even in contemporary media representations, has the disadvantage of excluding many forms of disability currently recognized as less visible, or even invisible yet highly prevalent, such as numerous cognitive conditions, much of the autism spectrum, and various chronic illnesses, to name but a few. Moreover, this binary view poses a significant problem, as it implicitly reinforces the notion of ableism [4]—a concept increasingly debated today—and frames disability as a fixed, lifelong condition, thereby confining it to specific categories and individuals. As Haller further emphasizes [5], this dynamic is also due to the fact that representations of disability, both in literature and in the media, have almost always been produced by nondisabled people—often in partial or stereotypical ways that perpetuate existing prejudices.

Over the past fifteen years—particularly following the adoption and entry into force of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) in 2006—the very concept of disability has undergone a profound and ongoing transformation. The Convention has played a pivotal role in dismantling long-standing paradigms of discrimination associated with disability, thereby catalysing major social and cultural change. Without retracing developments too far back, it is sufficient to recall that until the last decades of the past century, disability was conceived primarily in medical terms, i.e., as a disease to be concealed, segregated, or, at best, cured. The almost complete transition from a medical model to a social one, repeatedly reaffirmed by the CRPD, has fundamentally redefined the notion of disability on two key levels. First, disability is no longer regarded as an illness but as a psychophysical condition that may affect many individuals at various stages of their lives. It should, therefore, be understood not as a pathological state but as a multifaceted condition that must be acknowledged, supported, and valued in all its diverse manifestations. Second, given that it is the world itself which—through its historical and structural evolution—has become disabling, having been shaped largely around the needs

and experiences of nondisabled people, it is society as a whole that must be reimaged in less ableist and more inclusive terms.

This profound and multifaceted conceptual revolution has given rise both to new definitions that reinforce the principles enshrined in the UN Convention and to a series of methodological and practical reconsiderations regarding the design of spaces and services, in accordance with the principles of universal and inclusive design, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

As for new definitions of disability, a key reference is the one adopted by the *World Health Organization* (WHO) at the beginning of this century—most notably in its *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (2001) [6]—and subsequently revised about a decade later, in terms closely aligned with the framework established by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

Disability is part of being human. An estimated 1.3 billion people—about 16% of the global population—currently experience significant disability. This number is increasing due in part to population ageing and an increase in the prevalence of noncommunicable diseases. Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support. A person's environment has a huge effect on the experience and extent of disability. Inaccessible environments create barriers that often hinder the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others. Progress on improving social participation can be made by addressing these barriers and facilitating persons with disabilities in their day-to-day lives [6].

Therefore, according to the WHO, disability is an inherent part of human life and is increasing worldwide—both as a result of population ageing and of the growing prevalence of new, often invisible, and significantly disabling conditions. The WHO's definition essentially reiterates the principles established by the UN Convention, further emphasizing that the environments in which people live must be designed to be barrier-free and responsive to human diversity, thereby enabling as many individuals as possible to participate fully and actively in all aspects of life.

The European Union, for its part, has been active for decades in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities through a wide range of initiatives undertaken by its various institutions, as well as through continuous support for national and transnational organizations—such as the European Blind Union, the European Union of the Deaf, the consortium Inclusion Europe, and many others—in their efforts to dismantle all forms of barriers. In June 2017, the European Parliament issued the *European Disability Policy* (EDP), an analytical document that traces the evolution of the concept of disability from a diachronic perspective and moves toward the identification of systemic strategies aimed at supporting persons with disabilities and safeguarding their rights. In its opening pages, the EDP outlines the most significant changes to the concept of disability recorded across the centuries—from antiquity to the present day—highlighting the shift from perceiving persons with disabilities as deformed, monstrous beings (a view prevalent from ancient times through the Middle Ages), or as bearers of a curse to be eradicated, all of this through a succession of historical phases characterized by profoundly negative conceptions of disability. The trajectory outlined in the EDP ultimately leads to contemporary thought, which no longer regards disability as a misfortune or an illness, but rather as a manifestation of human diversity—one that should be acknowledged and, wherever possible, integrated at every level of society. With regard to the definition of disability, the document also emphasizes the variability of this concept today across Member States, while recalling several key milestones—most notably the WHO's development of the *International Classification*

of *Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) to be used as a constant reference but without prejudice. The framework designed by the World Health Organization, as anticipated, sought to integrate clinical, psychological, and social models of disability into a single, three-dimensional paradigm encompassing three fundamental components: the functioning of an individual's body, their ability to perform daily activities, and the capacities that enable them to participate actively in social life. Last but not least, rather than offering a single, fixed definition—acknowledged in the document itself as an evolving concept—the *European Disability Policy* proposes to perform regular mappings of the various forms of disability and monitor their prevalence, so as to encourage or enforce the related measures to be taken by Member States.

In this section, our aim was to analyse the nature and impact of the paradigmatic revolution promoted by the United Nations Convention and a series of related documents and provisions, all leading to a substantial change of vision for disability. Likewise, we have sought to emphasize the practical reconsiderations that such a paradigmatic shift has brought about, pushing institutions, companies and communities to think and plan in more inclusive terms.

The widespread adoption of the principles of *universal* and *inclusive design* is closely connected to this evolving perspective on accessibility, marking a gradual progression toward the broader and more complex concept of inclusion. This will be the focus of the following section.

### 3. Accessibility Redefined: Towards a Universal and Collaborative Approach

The concept of disability is inherently intertwined with that of accessibility. Whenever an individual's abilities are limited—whether permanently or temporarily—and whenever spaces, contexts, or cultural environments present disabling barriers, access becomes essential to ensure that life can unfold as smoothly and independently as possible. As the definitions of disability discussed above have made clear, accessibility concerns not only persons with disabilities but, in fact, every one of us in different circumstances. For instance, when travelling in a country whose language we do not understand, access to information and services can become challenging; similarly, if one were to break a leg in an accident, mobility would suddenly depend on assistive devices and specific forms of access. Within the framework of the United Nations Convention, accessibility is identified—starting from Article 3—as one of its fundamental principles, serving as the key mechanism that “enables persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life” [1]. Furthermore, Article 9 of the Convention is devoted entirely to accessibility, defining it as an inalienable human right, on par with the right to life itself.

Moreover, as has happened for disability, the notion of accessibility has itself undergone profound transformations—particularly over the past two decades—and has evolved largely in parallel with the former. Precisely during the years of the paradigmatic revolution spurred by the UN Convention, a new, complex, and influential definition of accessibility was proposed in 2009 by Andrea Gossett et al. [7], a group of American scholars specializing in disability studies and clinical–psychological research. In an article published around the time of the wider ratification of the UN Convention, Gossett and his colleagues sought to chart the transition from a traditional understanding of accessibility to a more universal and inclusive vision. They note that in the United States, the first major wave of awareness regarding accessibility emerged after World War II, when many veterans returned home with a range of impairments that required unprecedented attention and specialized accommodations. Moreover, as the authors recall, in 1990 the United States enacted the landmark *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) [8], one of the first international references to explicitly recognize the lack of accessibility as a form of discrimination, thereby bringing the issue

squarely into the ideological and political arena. In describing the notion of accessibility that still predominated during the years of the ADA, Gossett and her colleagues associate it with a largely segregationist perspective—one in which providing access to persons with disabilities essentially meant helping them move beyond a confined and restricted space by attempting to remove physical and structural barriers. This perspective clearly aligns with the broader sociopolitical context that characterized the 1970s through the 1990s, both in the United States and elsewhere. These decades were, in any case, crucial in laying the groundwork for the conceptual and practical revolution that has continued to evolve since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In their article, Gossett and her colleagues describe an ongoing shift from an earlier conception of accessibility—rooted in a negative and compensatory logic—toward a more neutral, universal, and proactive understanding that embraces the principles of universal design:

Where accessibility is seen as based on assumptions of particular barriers for a specific group of people, universal design is seen as a framework for developing solutions to anticipated needs of all end users [7].

As early as 2006—that is, anticipating the publication of the UN Convention later that December—Andrea Gossett and several other colleagues engaged in clinical and psychiatric studies on disability published an article advocating a move beyond the traditional barrier perspective toward a focus on integration and participation [9]. Further on, in the previously-mentioned 2009 essay titled “Beyond Access” [7], after recalling the pioneering work of Ronald Mace—who first coined the term and definition of universal design in 1985—Gossett and her collaborators go on to articulate, from a contemporary standpoint, the conceptual and practical intersections between accessibility, understood in its positive and universal sense, and the notion of design for all. In doing so, they became among the earliest advocates of a series of reflections and practices that would soon proliferate and evolve across multiple, even non-adjacent, fields of research and application.

The transition from a negative, compensatory view of accessibility to a more open and inclusive conception is repeatedly emphasized and further developed in the *Universal Access Handbook* [10], edited and partially authored by Konstantinos Stephanidis and published in 2009. Stephanidis had, in fact, been active in this field since the 1990s, when he already argued that accessibility, in its traditional sense, functioned merely as a corrective measure—a limited attempt at adaptation rather than a genuinely inclusive mode of access [11]. Although the 2009 volume focuses primarily on accessibility in relation to technology and digital information and communication, the paradigm shift it proposes—towards an inclusive and universal perspective—is evident from the very title. Stephanidis explicitly rejects the traditional notion of accessibility, replacing it with that of universal access: a concept deeply rooted in the principles of design for all and articulated by him and the contributing authors across multiple dimensions—theoretical, methodological, and empirical—as well as in diverse domains of application, ranging from legislation and architecture to clinical and psychological contexts. In the opening pages of the volume, Stephanidis outlines the shift from accessibility to universal access as follows:

Accessibility is not enough. The concept of universal access must be introduced and adaptations fully addressed as a real option for satisfying inclusion requirements. The related line of reasoning is that since users are different, and they have different accessibility and usability requirements, it is necessary to take all of them into account in a user-centred design process. Universal access aims to enable equitable access and active participation of potentially all people in existing and emerging computer-mediated human activities, by developing universally accessible and usable products and services [1].

Central to Stephanidis’s definition is, once again, the emphasis on participation—a concept already highlighted by Gossett et al., i.e., that of universal access [9], very much

in line with the notion of inclusion that in the ensuing ten years would come to describe not remedial but creative and genuinely participatory processes, is inherently person-centred, grounded in individuals' experiences and in the diversity of their abilities and (dis)abilities. The concept of participation is also pivotal to the methodological orientations that have subsequently emerged within interdisciplinary research focusing on disability and, increasingly, on inclusion [12–15].

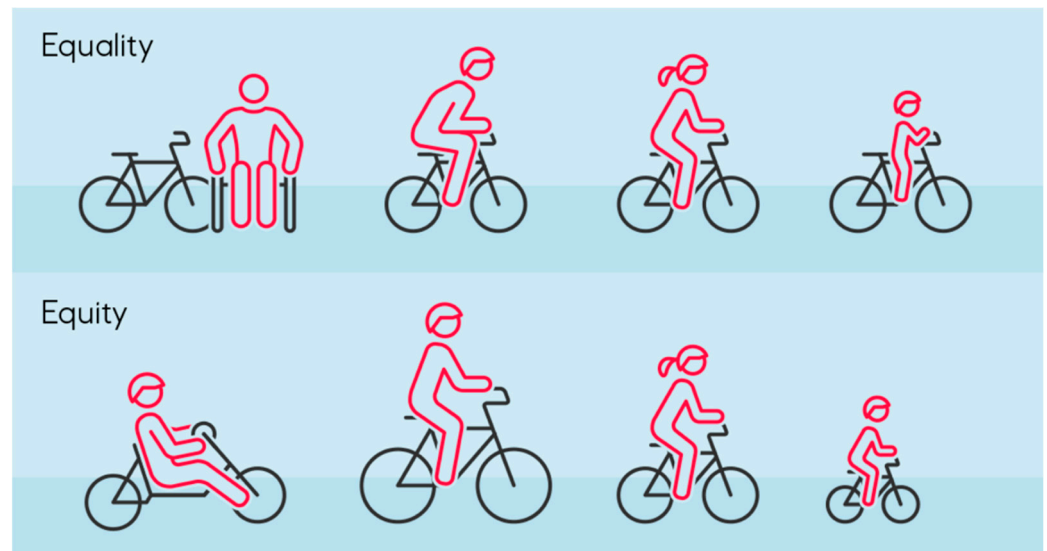
As has been noted elsewhere [13,16], participation is essential not only for achieving genuine inclusion—one that extends far beyond the mere removal of barriers—but also for strengthening mutual understanding among people with different abilities, fostering awareness of individual needs, and promoting respect for diverse identities. The concept of participation also occupies a central place in a recent and highly significant international document: the *Charter of Solfagnano* [17], signed by all the nations that took part in the first G7 on Disability and Inclusion, held in late 2024 in Solfagnano, near Assisi. This document, inspired both by the principles of the UN Convention and by influential movements such as those encapsulated in the motto *nothing about us without us*, which originated in the 1990s and was revamped by global institutions such as the World Health Organization [18], references the term participation no fewer than sixteen times within its roughly nineteen pages. Participation in everyday and cultural life, in all its forms, is recognized as a fundamental right for persons with disabilities and, as the document states, it must remain a lasting objective for policymakers, legislators, and society as a whole.

Returning to the volume edited by Stephanidis, a large chapter devoted to the evolution of national and international legislation on accessibility defines and discusses the notion of universal access extensively as a form of non-discrimination—understood in ideological and ethical terms, but also, crucially, in empirical ones. Ensuring access and designing it collaboratively from the very earliest stages with persons of diverse abilities means acknowledging and upholding the value of every individual and recognizing the essential role each person can and should play in shaping a more equitable world.

To move one step forward, let us now focus on the notion of equity, which plays a fundamental role in defining what accessibility for persons with disabilities really means today and should be interpreted, particularly if we consider equity in relation to the notion of equality. The UN Convention repeatedly refers to equality—the right of persons with disabilities to enjoy equal opportunities, equal access to education, and equal participation in the labour market, among other spheres. In this sense, equality is both just and indispensable. However, in recent years, a growing need has emerged to distinguish between equality and equity, especially in connection with the rights of persons with disabilities—and foremost among these, the right to access. In general terms, the two concepts—equality and equity—are often at least partially confused and occasionally used as synonyms. Indeed, they both relate to human rights and to how individuals should be treated, and both are employed across domains such as law, politics, economics, and education. However, equality and equity are not synonymous, and the approaches required to achieve them differ significantly. The concept of equality refers to interventions through which every individual or group is granted the same resources or opportunities—in essence, everyone is entitled to receive the same things or benefits. Equity, by contrast, recognizes differences among individuals and their needs; it neither levels nor universalizes. Everyone should be able to access the same resources, structures, and opportunities—but in ways that are proportionate to their specific circumstances and free from discrimination arising from those differences. From a legal standpoint, equality ensures that each person has access to certain opportunities without restriction—the opportunity itself, therefore, must be available to all [18]. As for equity, Bopaiah offers a simple yet effective definition applicable to all individuals:

Equity is when everyone has what they need to thrive and participate fully. Equity does not fault people for being different; it makes room for difference and then leverages it. In other words, equitable cultures, systems, and organizations are designed so everyone in the system has an equal chance to thrive [19].

The concepts of equality and equity as defined here are well illustrated in Figure 1 below, which is frequently reproduced in various manuals and policy documents:



**Figure 1.** The concepts of equality and equity.

In the contemporary landscape—where accessibility has largely evolved into an inclusive and collaborative practice that values diverse abilities through the sharing of experiences and projects—equality can no longer be considered sufficient; it is equity that must be enhanced. Equity, in turn, stems from mutual exchange and active listening, from a sustained effort to understand individual needs and their inherent uniqueness, thus leading studies on accessibility and disability away from the notion of design for all, towards a more complex one, i.e., that of design for each.

Equity, recognition of diverse needs, and participation ultimately lead to an increased sense of belonging for people with disabilities who normally tend to feel excluded and marginalized at various levels. The notion of belonging is becoming increasingly central in studies on disability and accessibility, taking theories and practices one step forward into true integration.

For this purpose, it may be useful to refer here that Carter et al. [20] identified 10 features that capture and define one's sense of belonging (present, noticed, welcomed, cared for, supported, accepted, known, befriended, needed, loved), features that prove extremely relevant for the advancement of studies on accessibility as equity for people with disabilities.

From accessibility to inclusion, from universal rights to the recognition of individual needs, and ultimately to the acknowledgment of a shared sense of belonging that brings people with and without disabilities into contact without barriers, this section has traced a significant conceptual evolution—one whose practical implications are already widely observable and, hopefully, will become increasingly so. In the following section, we will present real-world examples of inclusive design, participation and empowerment referring to initiatives carried out with and for persons with disabilities, particularly in the context of live shows and museums.

#### 4. From Diverse Abilities to Empowerment: Stories of Inclusion in the Creation and Enjoyment of the Arts for All

As Angelo Battista argues, empowerment is a process of social action through which individuals, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their own lives, in order to change their social and political environment and thereby enhance equity and quality of life [21].

The profound transformations outlined above—concerning the notions of disability, accessibility and inclusion—lead us to clearly identify an increasingly pronounced centrality of the individual, whose value lies precisely in diversity and uniqueness. As discussed in the preceding sections, these paradigmatic shifts have not only relocated the person at the very core of any reflection on accessibility and all that is related to it, but have also reviewed the roles that any person can play. Through active and inclusive participation in the design and reimagining of spaces and services, people gain not only in terms of overall well-being, but also in personal strength and growth, in other words, in empowerment. In this final section, we will examine four cases of inclusive design, co-creation and delivery of multisensory activities related to access to cultural heritage and live shows. Particular attention will be given to the elements of personal development experienced by participants with and without disabilities, as well as to the discoveries—often unexpected but invariably positive—that have emerged from these collaborative experiences.

Narrating these experiences here has no claim to exhaustivity or methodological innovation: rather, it aims to showcase real-life examples of action research that have led to increased well-being and empowerment for people with and without disabilities.

The first of the experiences to be presented here dates back to 2018, originated within the framework of an established accessibility project at the *Macerata Opera Festival* ([www.sferisterio.it](http://www.sferisterio.it) (accessed on 30 November 2025)), when the decision was made to experiment with participatory accessibility involving young people with visual impairments (6 to 16 years of age). In preparation for a children's performance inspired by Georges Bizet's *Carmen*—which included the active participation of young spectators in choral and dance scenes—the organizers of the initiative here described sought to make the show and all that was related to it (knowledge of characters, costumes, settings, symbols, etc.) equally accessible to blind and partially sighted children. To this end, an accessible workshop was created to engage this audience segment with the performance through music, singing, and storytelling, supported by a pianist and two young singers.

Within the workshop, blind and partially sighted children, together with their sighted friends or relatives, also participated in writing and subsequently recording the audio description that would later accompany the live show. Working from a draft of the audio description previously prepared by two accessibility professionals, the young participants collaboratively discussed and refined the descriptions of scenes, costumes, protagonists and actions based on their own needs and priorities for overall understanding before and during the show. Finally, a recording booth was set up so that the young participants could record their own voices, allowing the audio description to bear not only their textual but also their vocal imprint.

The most striking discovery to emerge from this first experiment in participatory accessibility occurred during the voice-recording phase: sighted children, when reading excerpts of the script, struggled to sound natural and expressive, whereas blind and partially sighted participants—demonstrating remarkable memorization skills—delivered their lines with spontaneity and authenticity [16]. Following this initial experience, the workshop was replicated over the next six years in several Italian theatres (Parma, Como, Milan, and Brescia), with all subsequent audio descriptions recorded using the voices of blind and partially sighted children.

The second experience related to inclusive design and participatory access took place in 2019 and, once again, it focused on an opera performance in preparation—this time for an adult audience. At the Teatro Grande in Brescia, Italy, in collaboration with the provincial branch of the National Association of the Deaf (Ente Nazionale Sordi), a project was launched to identify the most effective inclusive services and experiences that would enable deaf spectators to fully appreciate opera performances.

On the occasion of a series of meetings and on-site visits involving theatre professionals, accessibility experts, and deaf participants, several key aspects were examined, in favour of an increasing participation in opera performances by deaf people: (1) the most suitable seating arrangements to ensure optimal viewing conditions; (2) the tools and materials—such as subtitled videos and preparatory texts in Italian Sign Language—needed to help deaf audience members engage more deeply with the performances; and (3) other inclusive experiences to be developed and promoted before and after the shows, for true inclusion.

On the occasion of a dress rehearsal for an opera performance, the inclusive team—comprising theatre staff, accessibility specialists, and three deaf persons—found themselves on stage during a choir practice. As the choir was singing, the three deaf persons knelt down to touch the wooden surface of the stage, perceiving through vibrations the sound waves generated by the voices. As wood is an excellent conductor of sound, this spontaneous gesture led to an unexpected discovery: the tactile perception of music could become an important preparatory or complementary experience for deaf audiences.

This almost casual experience led to the integration of the activity into the theatre's accessibility program, which, in the following years, attracted enthusiastic participation from deaf spectators while also offering hearing participants a new and enriching way of experiencing music and singing.

The third of the four experiences presented in this article originated from the deliberate initiative of a team of experts in cultural heritage accessibility who sought to create a training program for inclusive young guides—that is, individuals with sensory and intellectual disabilities between the ages of 15 and 30. The aim was to provide an intensive two-day course combining theoretical, methodological, and practical components, after which the participants could be employed as guides for all audiences during visits to museums, theatres, and other cultural venues, along with at least one other person without disabilities.

The first of these courses was held in June 2021 at a museum in the city of Macerata, Italy. Similar training programs were later implemented in Brescia, Modena and Milano, and they have been running recurrently between 2022 and 2025. Organized and delivered in collaboration with leading associations for persons with sensory and intellectual disabilities, this inclusive form of training always culminates in hands-on field experiences, during which participants with disabilities serve as inclusive guides and receive regular payment for their work.

In this type of initiative, the element of surprise was twofold: on the one hand, it emerged in the creativity and adaptability demonstrated by participants with different disabilities as they devised unique languages and tools for mutual communication; on the other, it was reflected in the remarkable ability of blind people to describe in vivid detail paintings and frescoes they perceived solely through verbal mediation. Serving as guides for all, these people offer visitors to cultural venues the twofold experience of the venue and a unique, multisensory narrative.

The fourth and final inclusive experience presented here does not directly concern the enjoyment of accessible spaces or events, but rather the organization of an experiential train-

ing activity conducted by a university researcher without disabilities, a blind accessibility manager, and a deaf–blind music and singing teacher.

In the spring of 2025, within the framework of an international conference devoted to access to culture for persons with disabilities, these three individuals co-organized and co-led a workshop designed to illustrate—both from their respective perspectives and through collective reflection—how diverse abilities can in fact be complementary, and how multisensory competences, when combined, can give rise to genuinely inclusive experiences.

The workshop, intended for university students and lecturers as well as professionals and those interested in accessibility, clearly highlighted the power that derives from the conscious use of one or more senses in different life situations, including the enjoyment of cultural spaces and events.

In this case, among the unexpected and striking outcomes was the extraordinary communicative ability demonstrated by the instructor who, despite being deaf and partially sighted, was able to engage and connect with all participants, as well as the mutual sense of strength and empowerment experienced by both disabled and nondisabled individuals involved in designing and conducting this form of training activity—before, during, and after the event itself.

## 5. Conclusions

As Ed Diener has repeatedly argued in his studies on subjective and collective well-being [15,22], exposure to inclusive events, spaces, and experiences—where each person’s abilities are not questioned but rather recognized and equally valued—typically results in increased well-being and, as an additional consequence, in the development of a sense of belonging. Increased well-being is typically measured by means of validated, scientifically recognized indicators such as happiness, security, and relational capacity [22]. The latter factor is especially significant for persons with disabilities, particularly those with sensory impairments: blind and deaf individuals often exhibit lower levels of social interaction, both because they tend to have fewer opportunities to socialize and because of issues related to low self-esteem or generalized mistrust.

Yet, as shown elsewhere [13,14], active participation in creative processes aimed at inclusion often not only enhances well-being but also implicitly fosters confidence and self-assurance among persons with disabilities, thus also boosting a sense of belonging. The four inclusive initiatives briefly outlined above have aimed to demonstrate that the benefits they generate extend to everyone involved, and that even the unforeseen elements emerging from such initiatives point to an increased happiness and well-being. Moreover, in the context of a series of studies on the perception and overall reception of inclusive events and activities, especially in relation to live performances and museum attendance in Italy [12,16], evidence has repeatedly emerged in support of increased values for the ten features that, according to Carter et al., define belonging (see Section 3 above).

All in all, from the evolution of the concept of disability toward a proactive and universalistic perspective, to the shift from a restrictive notion of accessibility toward an inclusive and empowering vision of access-oriented processes aiming to foster empowerment, well-being and belonging, this essay has sought to trace a path centered on the growing appreciation of the individual in all his/her multiple and unique identities. It is therefore to be hoped that this trajectory will continue, sustained and reinforced by appropriate national and international policies and legislation as well as by further action-based research.

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