

# THE ACCESSIBILITY TO CULTURAL HERITAGE AS A KEY FACTOR FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TERRITORIES

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## Introduction

Today the cultural heritage is internationally recognised as a powerful driver for economic development. Some of the best known alternatives are:

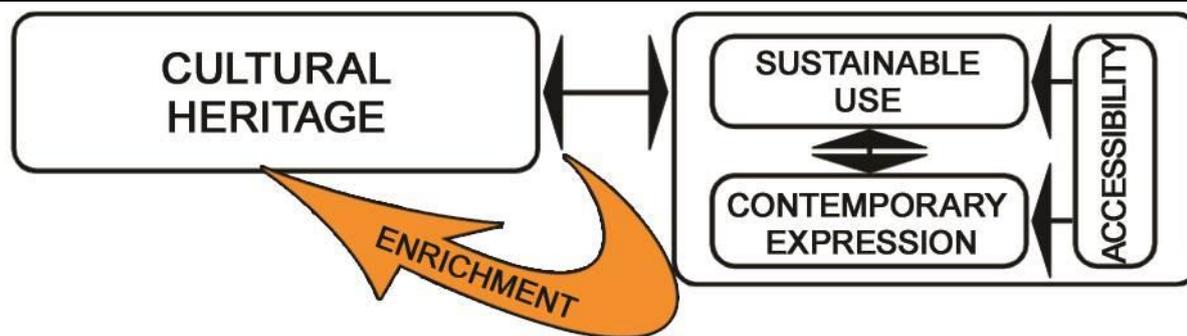
- stimulation of trade activities that take advantage of the inherited environment qualities and thus create a prestigious commercial climate;
- growth of specific small industries associated with traditional building techniques and local products that require craft skills – like production of bricks or roof tiles, cuisine or textiles;
- use within the framework of cultural tourism being one of the leading tendencies of the world tourism<sup>1</sup> that emphasises the unique cultures of a region as a tool for distinction in present-day context of globalisation and strong market competition.

Undoubtedly, the cultural heritage could contribute to the development of territories by providing opportunities for its sustainable use and contemporary expression within the environment. In the context of heritage the development could be explained as actions for revealing the cultural potential and for shaping the environment that continues to maintain its qualities and significance.

But to make this happen we need first to provide accessibility to cultural heritage as accessibility plays a key role when choosing both the adequate opportunity for sustainable use and the approach to contemporary expression (Fig.1). The sustainable use should propose activities familiar to the understanding and needs of our society and should provide the corresponding adequate access. And the contemporary expression should provide the accessible interpretation and presentation.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization – UNWTO



**Fig.1.** Accessibility – an integral part of the sustainable use and contemporary expression of the cultural heritage

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The requirements for the accessibility to cultural heritage have been growing considerably since the 1990s of the twentieth century together with the idea for using the heritage sites for the development and improvement of the quality of our living environment. But the topic is a relatively new one. Its relevance gradually increased only in the last decades<sup>2</sup>. While the initial efforts were primary focused on improving the physical accessibility today there is a growing international emphasis on the need to improve also the *social, cultural and intellectual accessibility* [3] for all.

### **The challenges of the accessibility to cultural heritage**

The stress here is the accessibility which is not limited to the purely physical point of view but also includes the aspects of cognition and usage. To make it clearer let's have a quick look at the two main concepts – heritage and accessibility.

The cultural heritage is part of our environment. These are single buildings or entire territories, tangible or intangible sites, movable or immovable items. These are sites that we, the people, recognize today as valuable. But the cultural heritage is significant only because of the people who evaluate it. Therefore the accessibility to cultural heritage is important for all of us. It is the individual who determines the dependence “*value – accessibility*”. So logically the challenges of the topic arise from the development of our understanding for the cultural heritage and from the change of our expectations related to the contemporary standards for its accessibility.

Naturally the cultural heritage is not equally accessible. The fortresses and fortifications are built in a way to be physically difficult to access. And this is an important feature of their identity. The underground facilities, the tombs and some monasteries are designed in a manner that makes them hardly recognizable in the environment. And this is an aspect of their cultural

<sup>2</sup> The accessibility to cultural heritage is considered in various specialized studies, national documents and standards (UK, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, USA) with target groups the professionals in the field of heritage, the owners and the management bodies of the cultural heritage sites.

meaning. The religious sites and places of worship are erected to fulfil a specific experience only for a limited group of people with certain beliefs. And here lies their significance.

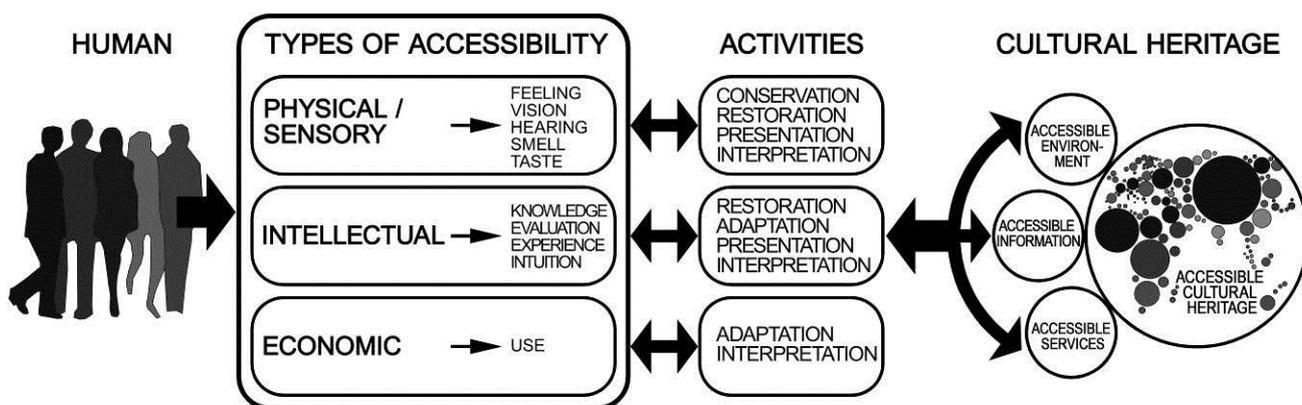
So we face a paradox. Sometimes today we judge analogous features of the cultural heritage as limiting the accessibility. But along with this we define the same features as part of the specific heritage values. We could conclude that beyond a certain point, ensuring physical accessibility can lead to the loss of knowledge about heritage and thus rather lead to its inaccessibility.

Why is that happening? Often the concept of accessibility is limited only to the physical contact with the environment for people with disabilities. Dealing with the accessibility to cultural heritage, though, it is not enough. Because by placing too much stress on the physical disabilities we risk ignoring other human needs and abilities. So rather than separating a priori the disabled in a distinct group we need to recognise their needs as part of an overall policy that assures various possibilities to understand the cultural heritage. Through the accessibility we should provide an optimal set of possibilities without compromising the significant heritage features. And thus to guarantee everyone's right to visit, evaluate, experience and use the cultural heritage in their own unique way.

So today we rediscover the challenges of the *ethical and philosophical dimensions* [4] of the accessibility to cultural heritage with potential impact on all our senses and perceptions.

### Types of accessibility to cultural heritage

Then what types of accessibility to cultural heritage could we define? We, the people, stand in the core of the today's understanding of cultural heritage so we should consider the accessibility in terms of our needs and potentials. So we could directly connect the types of accessibility with the individual in order to respond to their subjective perceptions. On this basis we could define three groups of accessibility to cultural heritage (Fig.2).



**Fig.2.** Types of accessibility to cultural heritage

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**Physical accessibility** is associated with all human senses. It is not limited only to the means providing the physical approach to cultural heritage but also includes the ability to touch, embrace with a look, hear the sounds, smell or taste. So we could call it also sensory accessibility.

**Intellectual accessibility** concerns the mental abilities of a person. It is associated with cognitive information about cultural heritage. It is information of different type that facilitates our appreciation of heritage, enables our personal experience, reveals an opportunity for own interpretation and insight.

**Economic accessibility** refers to the contemporary understanding for the use of cultural heritage. Many inherited sites or traditional practices still play a key role in today's life of local communities. For others, though, we seek for adequate integration of constant or cyclic function that could meet the needs of our society.

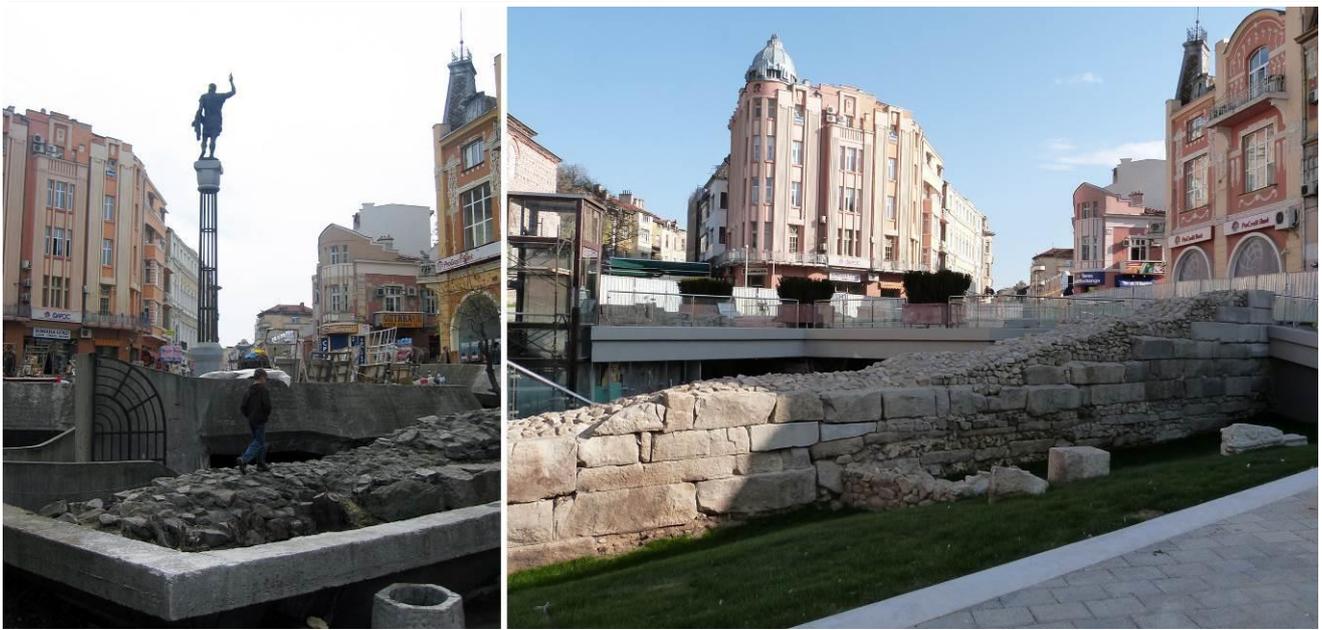
Ensuring the different types of accessibility implies certain professional activities related not only to the safeguarding of cultural heritage but also to its communication with people. But only a balanced interaction of all accessibility types could guarantee our complete contact with the cultural heritage – with an environment, information and services accessible to all.

An example for integration of the three types of accessibility is the recently completed rehabilitation<sup>3</sup> of the Ancient Stadium of Philippopolis in Plovdiv, Bulgaria ([www.ancient-stadium-plovdiv.eu](http://www.ancient-stadium-plovdiv.eu)). Situated under the main pedestrian street of the town with a single fragment presented at Dzhumaya square this great facility of ancient times was left inaccessible and unknown. A year after the inauguration of the reconstructed site the place is again a vital part of the city's life where different cultural activities take place.

The new green piazza to the North is just one illustration for integrated accessibility. The inclined urban space allows access to the ruins of the fortification wall and at the same time clearly shows that this place was beyond the walls of the ancient town and creates a unique venue for cultural events (Fig.3).

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<sup>3</sup> The project is supported by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism, 2009-2012. Authors of the preliminary project: Prof. arch. T. Kretev, Dsc, arch. D. Georgieva, arch. M. Velkov, arch. V. Kolarova.



**Fig.3.** The Ancient Stadium of Philippopolis, Plovdiv, Bulgaria – the fortification wall before (2008) and after the rehabilitation (2012) with the green piazza to the North

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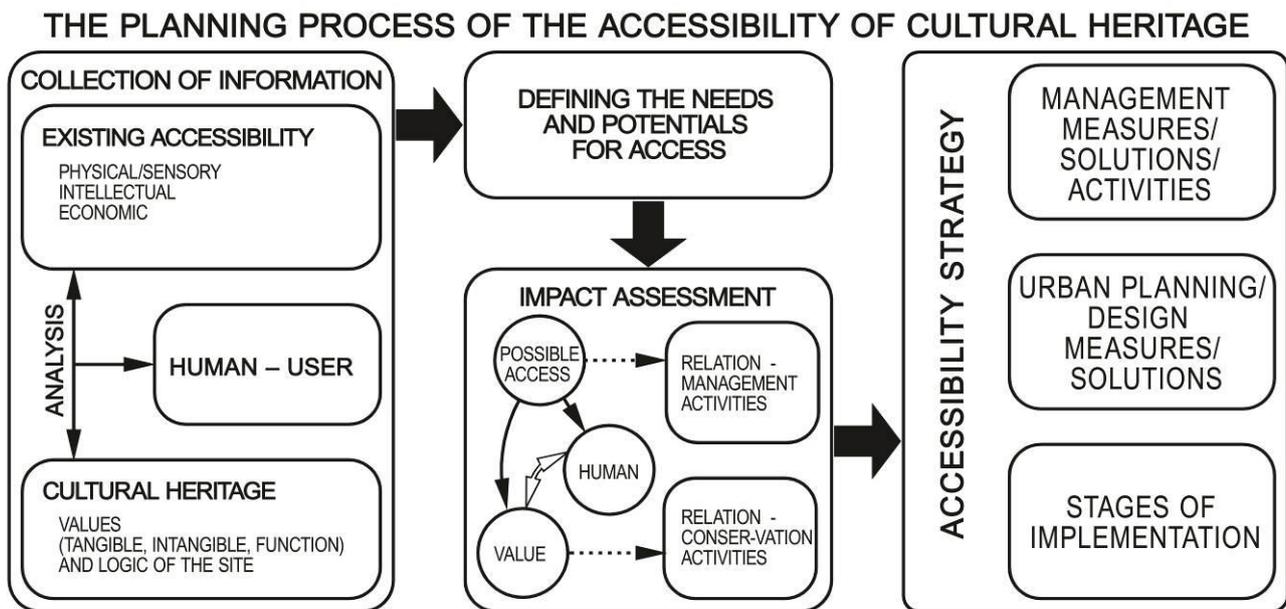
### **Planning process of the accessibility to cultural heritage**

Although the accessibility to cultural heritage is rarely considered as a separate aspect, it is an integral part in the process of its safeguarding. Very often the provision of accessibility just “happens” at a subconscious level. For example, the conservation activities to preserve the original archaeological structures also contribute to increase physical/sensory accessibility. Or the interpretation of a traditional practice aiming at economic activity supports the intellectual accessibility. Leaving, however, the accessibility to just “happen” we risk to miss opportunities for an alternative and unique for the place accessibility that could foster the sustainable development. In addition, we must consider that an overexposed accessibility also has its risks. Because the provision of a certain type of complete and easy contact is not always the best for the heritage.

This seemingly existing incompatibility between providing accessibility for all and preserving the heritage logic and its significant features could be overcome by planning the accessibility. In the recent years the topic is in the focus of various documents and standards in the UK, Ireland, Norway and others [1, 2, 5]. They recommend the development of strategies, audits and accessibility plans. The approach in these documents is based on the heritage values and highlights the need for integrated work of the physical intervention in the environment and the site management. Although these specialised documents acknowledge a wide range of problems (horizontal and vertical movement, lighting, signage, information) the emphasis falls on solving accessibility primary for the disabled.

The presented here **planning process of the accessibility of cultural heritage** is based on the interaction “value – human – accessibility”. And

human means all people – regardless of social background or ethnic origin, education or age, language or professional qualification. The diverse human needs and abilities (including the people with physical or mental disabilities) are considered to be the basis for seeking alternative and even challenging solutions that could provide the balance between “sustainable use with equal access for all” and “preservation and contemporary expression of the heritage values”. Choosing the most appropriate solution is unique and depends on the specific site features. The proposed planning process aims to facilitate the implementation of a reasonable and practicable approach (Fig.4).



**Fig.4.** The planning process of the accessibility of cultural heritage  
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The start of the planning is the **collection of information** into two main groups: existing types of accessibility and significant values of the cultural heritage. This information has to be analysed in different directions in relation to the human – the heritage user: cultural background (local community or visitor); professional qualification (professional or amateur); type of visit (daily, periodically, group, individual), age (child, youth, adult, senior), language (native, foreign), health (physical and mental).

On this basis, the next step is to define the **needs and potentials** for the access to cultural heritage.

The following **impact assessment** is a key stage in the process. It should take into account the impact and the consequences of each defined alternative for possible access: (1) on the value characteristics and significance of the cultural heritage; (2) and on the human needs. Occasionally alternative solutions leading to some negative consequences for the heritage may appear. Therefore the assessment of the extent to which such solutions improve the communication of human with the heritage is indispensable. In cases of severe compromise it is important to provide the necessary information to explain the opportunities and explain the choice

taken [5]. At this stage is also important to outline the relation with the management activities and the professional conservation activities.

The final stage of the planning process is the development of the **accessibility strategy**. It integrates three interrelated activities the unique and adequate for the particular cultural heritage decisions.

Similar approach is implemented in the project<sup>4</sup> for conservation of St. John the Baptist church in the Ancient City Nessebar (a World Heritage Site). The main values of the building are defined in four major groups. For each value a concept for its expression and accessibility is proposed.

The first group presents the church as a unique representative of the church architecture – a transitional type expressed in the forms and the construction. Here some of the key values are the plan scheme, the volumes and spatial composition, the architectural appearance, the construction, the acoustics. Respectively the project provides for emphasis of the contour of the canonical model by floor-recessed lighting, the overall perception of the building, the lost entrances to the side naves by metal lattices, the way of building by leaving some parts of the interior uncovered, the acoustics by adaptation for chamber performances.

The second group presents the murals – in the interior and the unique treatment of the facades with assumed full murals. The project respects all found murals and proposes to present the whole range of hypotheses for the overall painting of the church by contemporary means.

The third group of values focuses on the patron saint that could also be presented in a contemporary interactive way.

In the last fourth group of values the rich historical stratification of functions is revealed: the original function of a church, later – home of the first archaeological exhibition, and some years ago – a gallery. Respectful to all previous functions, the project suggests additional activities related to education and expression of art.

Thus the integrated action of the different type of accessibility targeted toward different people could evoke certain subjective sensations. After the completion of conservation works the church (until recently abandoned) would start a new life, again appreciated and serving people as a temple of culture (Fig.5).

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<sup>4</sup> The project is under implementation with the support of Operational Programme “Regional Development”, 2010-2013. Authors: arch. V. Pandjarova, arch. D. Georgieva, arch. M. Velkov, eng. A. Georgiev, K. Frangova, eng. M. Atanasova, eng. R. Radulov, eng. E. Petkov.



**Fig.5.** *St. John the Baptist Church under conservation works (June, 2013) and project proposal perspective – views towards the altar.*

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The proposed strategy could be developed not only for a single site or custom but also on a higher level for a complex heritage sites – historic towns, cultural landscapes, cultural routes.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it must be stressed once again that each site has its individuality and therefore requires an independent approach. Nonetheless, in the recent years there is an increase of the need of establishment of guidelines for planning the accessibility to cultural heritage. On one hand this is related to the fact that our democratic society is increasingly recognising the diversity of human needs and respectively the opportunities of using the cultural heritage. On the other hand the emerging of new technical solutions in the information technologies era provides probably countless alternatives for contemporary expression and interpretation.

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