Chapter 21

Conservation Meets Inclusion. Model Meets Reality

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21.1 Introduction

Our research starts from the notion that people living with certain disabilities are able to appreciate spatial qualities or detect obstacles in the built environment that most architects are not always aware of. This holds for mobility and sensory disabilities (Herssens & Heylighen 2008), but also mental capacities can play a role, *e.g.* autism spectrum disorders (de Roeck 1997) or dementia (Zeisel 2001). This line of thought forms the basis for exploring how the design process in architecture can be enriched by establishing a dialogue between architects/designers and people living with a disability (Heylighen *et al.* 2009). As such, our research can be framed in a cultural model of disability (Devlieger *et al.* 2003). Beyond considering disability as reflecting the complex interaction between a person and his/her environment, the cultural model emphasizes the potential and transformative power of disability. It acknowledges that disability questions the way society is organized, but also represents a resource to contribute to it.

In this paper, we report on an attempt to extend the [theoretical] line of thought underlying our research to [the reality of] our daily work environment: the university campus. In case of our university, this is particularly challenging given the historic nature of its facilities. Historic buildings are often not accessible to everyone, even though by law many of them ought to be. Diversity and inclusion policy pleads for integral accessibility meaning that people with the widest range of abilities in the widest range of situations can independently reach, enter, interpret and use all facilities. Proposals to make protected monuments integrally accessible, however, often bump into objections from conservation authorities.

To address this complex matter in a systematic way, we adopt a framework that reconciles conservation and inclusion policy. The framework offers something to

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hold on to in making built heritage more integrally accessible while respecting its historic value. After briefly introducing the key elements of the framework, we report on its application to a real-world situation: the development of a master plan for a protected historic building accommodating our university's student services and student housing. We zoom in on one element in this application, which strongly impacts the inclusivity of the concept for the master plan: the perspective of people living with a disability.

21.2 Towards Built Heritage for All

A major challenge today results from the growing demand for sustainable treatment of the built environment, a considerable portion of which consists of historic buildings and, on the other hand, for buildings that can be reached, entered and used by the real diversity of people. In trying to address this complex matter, we investigate how the foundations of conservation and inclusion can be reconciled. This leads us to adopting a framework—an informed strategy and concrete scenario that offers something to hold on to in making built heritage more inclusive while respecting its historic value.

21.2.1 Reconciling Visions

Inclusion and conservation have their own specific foundations that shape their visions. Through the pursuit of integral accessibility, participation and inclusion become reality. People with a broad spectrum of diverse and evolving capacities—the new norm—participate in society and are able to actively shape their environment.

Just like diversity and inclusion policy strives for people's participation in society, integrated conservation gives built heritage a role in (contemporary) society. As tangible greetings from the past, historic buildings demand a place in the present and future (Adriaenssens *et al.* 1998; Gobyn & Knops 2000). Their social relevance is inextricably linked to sustainability. Appropriate use guarantees protection from decline. By opening up and integrating monuments into society, their upkeep is best secured.

When the diversity of people fully participate in all aspects of society and monuments play an actual role within that same society, both are eye to eye. Built heritage intends to meet people through its actual role; people want to be able to reach, enter and interpret built heritage. From the perspective of both conservation and inclusion, integral accessibility is desirable. Ultimately, the challenge is to implement solutions that will become part of the monument's history as a supplementary layer, improving its integral accessibility and respecting its heritage values, so that future generations will read and interpret the adaptations as a shift in society's attitude towards the real diversity of people.

The matter is complex, however. A vague question—how to make built heritage integrally accessible?—needs to develop step-by-step into a phased

project, feasible in its objectives and with a clearly outlined approach towards its realisation. Every question is situated within a concrete cultural-historical and contemporary context. Since every monument is different, standard solutions do not apply. A methodological approach allows addressing this matter in a sound way.

21.2.2 A Methodological Approach

The framework we adopt offers such an approach (Neyt 2008). Methodologically, it is based on the strategic framework for access to historic and heritage buildings developed by English Heritage (Adams & Foster 2004). Case studies offered further insight on the relationship between the actors involved, the principle of feedback, the importance of mutual consultation and of continuously tuning people's needs to heritage values. Cases studied include local (on campus) and regional projects (e.g. Fort Napoleon; Froyen *et al.* 2006), as well as projects abroad (e.g. Kew Palace; Thwaites *et al.* 2006, Morris 2006, Hartman 2006).

Through the framework, the interface between conservation and inclusion acquires content and form. The tension between heritage values and people's needs is refuted by the development of a heritage-accessibility plan. Different options and their impact on the historic matter are thoroughly investigated and assessed. Working in a process-driven way is crucial in this approach. The process can be subdivided in several phases, which are outlined in the next section.

The framework incorporates the varying need for expertise, ranging from specific specialisation (conservation experts, accessibility advisors) to—the focus of this paper and our research at large—expertise acquired by experience, c.q. the experience of living with a disability. Collaboration across sectors and disciplines is necessary throughout the entire process. Client and architect/designer stand as 'mediators' in between these different domains. They play a key role in entering into dialogue with the different parties involved and maintaining this dialogue throughout all phases to ensure continuous interaction and feedback.

21.3 Model Meets Reality

21.3.1 Context

Having sketched the key elements of the framework in general terms, we now report on its ongoing application to a specific building on our university campus. The report is based on notes made during participation in an ad-hoc working group (author 1) and in building visits with persons with a disability (authors 3-5). These notes are complemented with document analysis of articles in the student newspaper, meeting minutes, reports and e-mail communication with several actors involved.

The Van Dale college is a historic, protected building from the 16th century. It is built around two connected courtyards, covered in cobble stones (Fig. 1.1). An

arched doorway gives access to the main courtyard which is surrounded by the knight house in the NE corner and a chapel in the NW corner. A U-shaped building closes off this courtyard. An arched gate between chapel and knight house leads to the second courtyard. It is rectangular and surrounded by what used to be auxiliary buildings for the former college. It has a less public atmosphere than the main courtyard, which is square and enclosed by two-storey buildings. Internally the knight house is organised around a central spiral staircase. The U-shaped building is opened up through a gallery around the courtyard plus two staircases and an elevator in the corners.

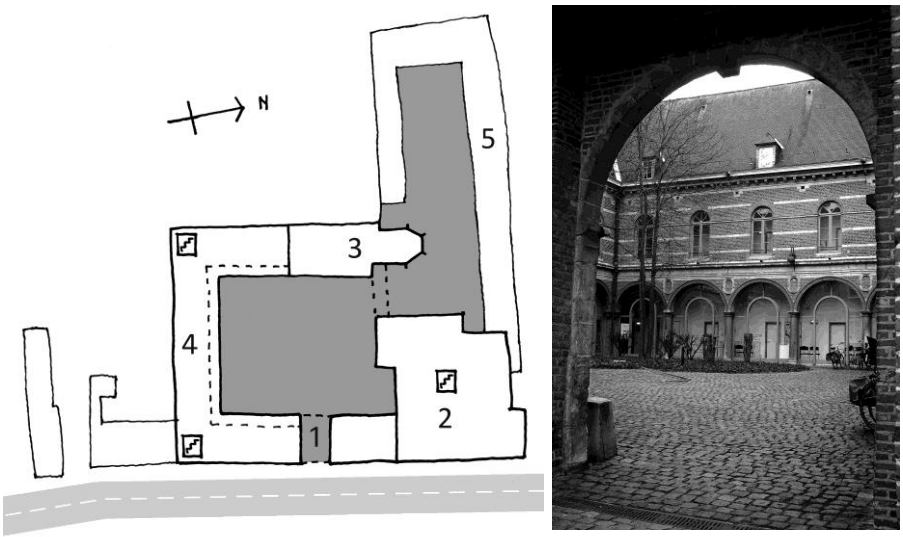

Figure 1.1. Left: Layout of the Van Dale college: 1 arched doorway, 2 knight house, 3 chapel, 4 U-shaped building, 5 auxiliary buildings (P.-W. Vermeersch); Right: view from the arched doorway (photo: S. Verbeken)

As we write, the college is the nerve centre of the university's student services and student housing: the knight house holds the directorate of the student services, juridical and social services (ground floor), and study advisory services (1st floor); the U-shaped building accommodates medical and housing services (ground floor), psycho-therapeutic service (1st floor), and student housing (attic); residential and job services are situated in the auxiliary buildings. Besides the central reception, next to the arched doorway, most services have their own reception and waiting room.

Since the student services need to be reachable by all students and the college is not accessible to all students, more and more discussion arises. This culminates in the publication by the student newspaper of an open letter entitled 'Physical inaccessibility. The scandal of the student services' (Lietaer 2008). Eventually, the directorate of the student services explicitly pose the question: is it possible to make the building integrally accessible, *i.e.* ensure that all students can independently reach, enter, interpret and use it? Or do the student services need to move to another location?

21.3.2 Set-up

The (ongoing) development of a master plan for the Van Dale college largely follows the different phases of the strategic framework mentioned above (Adams and Foster 2004). The directorate's question marks the *heritage-accessibility engagement*, which indicates the client's willingness to take up the challenge of making a historic building integrally accessible. In order to do so, the directorate invites people with different backgrounds and expertise to join an ad-hoc working group: an architect/designer from the university's technical services, who is also conservation expert; the head of the university's cell 'Studying with a Disability' (part of the student services); a staff member of the student services using a wheelchair; and a faculty member of the architecture department (author 1).

Once the working group is established, the central question is unravelled into several sub-questions, which are then addressed in the *imaging* phase. On the one hand, the *accessibility needs* in the Van Dale college are inventoried, in two ways: an accessibility advisor is hired to perform an 'objective' audit of the building; in addition, 'subjective' needs are identified by people living with a disability in collaboration with architecture students (Master and PhD level, including authors 3 to 5). On the other hand, the *heritage values* of the college had already been inventoried through a historic study, commissioned by the technical services. This inventory allows assessing the monument's capacity and delineating the frame within which specific solutions are possible.

The reports of the 'objective' audit (made by the accessibility advisor) and the 'subjective' inventory (made by the architecture students) are presented to and discussed in the ad-hoc working group. Taking into account the issues raised during this discussion, the architect then explores the *possibilities and feasibility* to reconcile the needs inventoried with the building's heritage values. This results in a *concept heritage-accessibility plan* that tunes the proposed interventions to the heritage values. In general, interventions can include organisational and (permanent or temporary) physical changes. In this case, to start with, major interventions are proposed at organisational level, to arrange the student services more logically in the available space so that all students can consult them (concentrating all student services in the U-shaped building, and student housing in the auxiliary buildings; combining reception and waiting room for several services in the chapel; moving consultation rooms of all services to the ground level around the gallery, and back offices to the higher levels). Where necessary, permanent physical (spatial and/or technological) interventions can then be limited mainly to the U-shaped building.

The concept plan is then presented to and discussed with the staff of the student services. While the organisational changes would considerably impact the daily working of the services, the staff members recognise that it would offer some improvements for them as well (e.g. a better located staff room than the current one in the basement and extra meeting rooms). As we write, the architect and directorate are further refining the organisational changes in dialogue with the staff. In addition, the permanent interventions in the U-shaped building need to be further elaborated. Once all parties explicitly approve the proposed interventions, they will be cast in the *final heritage-accessibility plan*. It will be specific for the

Van Dale college, contain all envisaged interventions, and determine the implementation order depending on which requirements get priority.

Eventually the plan will need to be *implemented*, evaluated and adjusted where necessary. After *evaluation*, however, the plan is not finalised. Its implementation is a continuous process whereby evaluation provides input for further improving the Van Dale college and/or other projects in the future. Regular revisions should allow actualising needs, addressing changes in legislation or exploiting new technologies.

21.3.3 The perspective of people with a disability

In the development of the concept heritage-accessibility plan for the Van Dale college, the perspective of people with a disability plays a determining role. Insights gained from their visits to the building directly inspire and motivate the major organisational interventions outlined above. For this reason, this element is further elaborated.

Six persons living with a disability are teamed up with two architecture students. Except for one, all have some connection with the university: four are enrolled as students, one works at the student services. Three are mobility impaired (two use a wheelchair), two are visually impaired (one has low vision, one is blind), and one lives with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Four are contacted via the university's cell 'Studying with a Disability', two via personal contacts. All participate voluntarily in the study.

Teams are asked to visit the Van Dale college and identify needs from the specific perspective of the team member who lives with a disability. Each team can go about the task as they prefer. Afterwards, the architecture students write a report summarising the major insights gained during the visit, documented with photos and plans.

At the very start of the process, the directorate of the student services seemed to assume that the college's inaccessibility lies in the multiple differences in levels and cobblestones, which are difficult to negotiate for wheelchair users. However, the findings of the subjective inventory sketch a much more nuanced picture.

One student involved has difficulty walking, but is not using a wheelchair. While differences in levels and cobblestones indeed cause him troubles, visiting the college in his company revealed other issues as well: the doors are too heavy and along some corridors points to rest are lacking.

The persons who are visually impaired point at the college's lack of clear organisation. What strikes the student with low vision most is that the building complex does not seem to be designed as a whole. The fact that you constantly need to search for a room is not very user-friendly, he comments, and increases the importance of inclusive signage. From his perspective, both the organisation and signage show considerable room for improvement.

The person who is blind, for her part, finds the building inconveniently arranged. Before she could use this building independently, she would need a clear explanation of its appearance, location, orientation and structure. However, even without such support, she is able to find the reception, because it is near the

entrance (where she would seek intuitively) and because of its smell (reminding her of a library or journals). When leaving the building she manages to locate the reception again based on the sound of traffic on the street and the displacement of air (less breeze under the arched doorway). From that point on, the initiative and clear explanation of the staff at the reception would enable her to find any service in the building, she states. Especially the arrangement of the ground level seems relatively convenient to her (except for the cobblestones) and would be easy to remember after, say, two weeks. On the higher levels, however, a corridor with a few twists constitutes a true obstacle and finding the door of a certain room is highly problematic. Overall, she characterises the building as a true labyrinth requiring supreme concentration to navigate. Moreover, she has the impression that the atmosphere in the building is unpleasant: the spaces do not smell nor sound well, the ventilation seems inadequate, there is way too much resonance and the spaces feel empty.

The student with autism also has trouble with the lack of clear organisation and signage. In general, people living with ASD are known to have a strong need for structure. Except in places the student is familiar with, it is difficult for him to locate at which point in the building he is. However, as he describes how the missing clarity troubles his use of the building, the main problem seems not so much the illogical organisation, but the fact that the different spaces and spatial elements are not recognisable to him. For instance, the waiting room of the job service, with its ornamental ceiling and non-matching chairs, looks like a theatre to him. Spaces do not invite him to use them as they are conceived: although signs indicate that the service he is looking for is located upstairs, the staircase itself cannot convince him to go there; and even every door to be crossed causes some hesitation, as it does not show him whether it is open to the public or not. It is a mental threshold to overcome, without any hold that he is really allowed to take the next step. He confirms that this building needs more clarity, and less “absurd” things—things that, although he is convinced that they probably have a usefulness, do not immediately fit the image.

In summary, the perspective of the people living with a disability teaches us a lot about the college. It reveals that making it integrally accessible involves much more than overcoming differences in levels and cobblestones, and even shows directions to do so. There are a lot of problems (and possible solutions) that we are not (always) aware of. Even the staff member who is wheelchair user, and uses the building on a daily basis, reports that insights from the visits have taught him a lot about the college’s (in)accessibility. Together these insights are an important building block of the concept heritage-accessibility plan for the Van Dale college that is currently being negotiated and refined.

21.4 Discussion and future work

The application of the heritage-accessibility framework to the Van Dale college is still in progress. Yet, some lessons can be learned from the phases completed so far.

Since the *heritage-accessibility engagement* a long way has been covered: the process started in a rather negative atmosphere—witness the open letter in the student newspaper—yet gradually evolved towards a positive, constructive endeavour. An element that seems to have been instrumental in this evolution is taking enough time; from engagement to discussing the concept plan with the staff took about 10 months. Time is needed to simplify the highly complex question by unravelling it into more manageable sub-questions and to get on the same page with all stakeholders involved. Time is needed, also, to involve and communicate with external parties, who are not direct stakeholders (historian, accessibility advisor, people with a disability, architecture students) and to fully comprehend their perspective so that it can inform the process.

A case in point is the involvement of people living with a disability. This involvement was motivated by the rich knowledge they have about the environment, yet this knowledge is largely tacit in that they are not always aware of it. The student with low vision, for instance, tended to solve problems as they arose without giving them too much thought. However, there is a difference between dealing with the environment and being aware of one's perception of it. The architecture students thus needed to find ways to unlock the person's tacit knowledge, to make certain reactions or difficulties discussable.

The student living with autism, for instance, was not very talkative, so the architecture students were forced to explicitly formulate questions about the building, and sometimes even formulate a first answer, to trigger a reaction. As a result, it was not always clear whether his answer was his opinion or whether he echoed the students'. To gain more clarity about what was going on in his mind during the visit, the architecture students orally went over the visit again afterwards. Even more, they continued their questioning by e-mail, to give the student more time to think about his answers and avoid putting words in his mouth. In working with persons with a disability and reporting their experiences, communication clearly is a major point of attention.

While involving and communicating with external parties may require time, it clearly showed major advantages. The objective audit by the accessibility advisor, for instance, was attributed more authority than an audit by the technical services because he comes from outside. The inventory of subjective needs by persons with a disability and architecture students offered a fresh view by pointing out unforeseen issues to address, but also unforeseen opportunities for improvement.

Part of the subjective inventory confirms our own experiences and expectations. However, it also includes elements that one may easily overlook or are rather unexpected. The person who is blind, for instance, reminds us that our experience of the built environment is intrinsically multi-sensory in nature, and that non-visual qualities (smell, sound, air quality) contribute to the possibilities for using and interpreting a building. As one architecture student put it: "*Her description of architecture is so much different than ours: where we recognise paintings and ornaments on the wall, and thus see a filled up space, she hears an unpleasantly echoing room, which is poorly ventilated and unpleasant to stay in*." In addition, her praise of the staff at the reception reminds us of the interplay between physical and social environment. The experience of the person with autism surprised most in the positive sense: he uncovered in a very direct way

problems (mainly with regard to thresholds) that we all somehow feel, but never can point to so well. As an architecture student who worked with him formulates it: "*Before this visit, we would never have spent so much attention to mental thresholds.*"

Together, the visits with people living with a disability turned out to be a very enriching experience, which became highly influential in the exploration of *possibilities and feasibility* and, eventually, the formulation of the *concept heritage-accessibility plan*. Major issues identified in these visits can be largely addressed without touching the historic fabric of the building, by organising the student services more logically, optimizing the signage and personnel training.

However, the story has not finished yet. As we write, the organisational interventions proposed in the concept heritage-accessibility plan are being negotiated further with the staff of the student services. In addition, the spatial and technological interventions in the U-shaped building need to be further elaborated, taking into account the (objective and subjective) needs inventoried and heritage values identified, and then discussed with the conservation authorities.

In doing so, it seems most efficient to start with needs identified by several teams, rather than addressing the findings of each team separately. For although the people involved in the subjective inventory clearly differ in terms of the disabilities they live with, some elements cause troubles for several of them. Comparing the findings of the different teams reveals fundamental problems that return repeatedly. One example is the (lack of clear) organisation, which inspired the proposed interventions at the organisational level. Another example concerns the doors: certain doors are literally too heavy for the student with a mobility impairment, other doors are figuratively too heavy for the student with autism (every door is experienced as a threshold), and yet other doors are unrecognisable for the person who is blind. A solution thus needs to be sought that improves the doors' physical and sensory accessibility, and, at the same time, gives them a more accessible appearance, so as to reduce or remove the threshold to enter.

Awaiting the *final heritage-accessibility plan*, its *implementation* and *evaluation*, the results and reactions of the people involved so far strongly suggest that the [theoretical] line of thought underlying our research is applicable to [the reality of] our daily work environment: establishing a dialogue, however embryonic, between architects/designers and people living with a disability seems to be experienced as highly valuable by both sides. The architect is already looking forward to repeating the subjective inventory for other university buildings in the near future. Also for the people with a disability involved, the approach seems to bear repetition. In this respect, a very telling quote to conclude with is what the student with autism wrote in an e-mail to his team members: "*I hope that your task was not fruitless, but really has a sensible goal: improving the Van Dale college. It was very useful to visit it with 3. Each has his own perspective on something. You 2 from your architecture studies and I from my experience of the building. It could be an annoying task when you 2 had acted arrogantly in the sense of "we study architecture and we know it better" but this was not the case. You listened well in order to then reformulate things, or view them in another way, or be strengthened in an opinion.*"

21.5 Acknowledgements

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