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Research paper

Re-imagining the museum through “touch”: Reflections of individuals with visual disability on their experience of museum-visiting in Greece



*Imaginer le musée en le « touchant » : réflexions
de personnes avec handicaps visuels à partir de leur
expérience de visites de musées en Grèce*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 September 2013

Accepted 20 September 2014

Available online 12 February 2015

Keywords:

Visual disability

Museums

Accessibility

Orientation and mobility

Design for all

ABSTRACT

The research aim of the present study was to investigate the experiences of individuals with visual disability regarding their visits to museums. To obtain relevant information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Greek individuals with visual disability aged between 19–59 years. The participants highlighted issues relevant to factors which facilitated or/and hindered their accessibility to Greek museums, such as escorts, museum tour guides, tactile access, prohibition signs “do not touch”, museum services and museum websites. Also, they referred to positive and negative emotions which were associated with their museum visits. Finally, they made suggestions aiming to improve the participation of people with visual disability to museums.

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R É S U M É

Mots clés :

Handicap visuel
Musée
Accessibilité
Orientation et mobilité
Conception pour tous

L'objectif de cet article est d'étudier les expériences des personnes avec handicap visuel lors de visites au musée. L'étude se fonde sur l'analyse d'entretiens semi-directifs réalisés auprès de trente Grecs avec handicap visuel âgés de 19 à 59 ans. Les participants à l'étude soulignent aussi bien les facteurs rendant l'accessibilité plus aisée et ceux la rendant plus compliquée. Parmi ces facteurs, ils citent la présence d'accompagnant, les guides des visites de musée, les accès tactiles, les panneaux d'interdiction « ne pas toucher », les sites Internet et les services des musées. L'étude analyse les émotions positives et négatives ressenties lors des visites au musée. Enfin, elle analyse les suggestions que font les participants à l'étude pour accroître la participation des visiteurs avec handicaps visuels dans les musées.

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1. Introduction

Museums are not only institutions for the collection, preservation and display of objects but audience-centred spaces with a wide educational and social role (Black, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 1999a, 2007; Sandell, 2002; Vergo, 1989). As Black (2005) argues museums of the 21st century are expected to be among others, “agents of physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration, accessible to all, promoters of social cohesion and inclusion, resources for structured educational use, community meeting spaces, integral to the learning community, tourist attractions, etc.” (p.5). Over the past decades, intensive discussions have taken place about the development of new audiences in museums, the equal access, the multidimensional nature of access and ways to remove different barriers to access. The very concept of access not only refers to physical access but also to multisensory, intellectual, financial, emotional, cultural, educational as well as to information access (Dodd & Sandell, 1998; Hartley, 1995; Hetherington, 2000; McGinnis, 1999).

Furthermore, museums in the 21st century seek to be inclusive by developing various activities, initiatives and practices, such as “serving communities, consulting with audiences and communities, collecting and interpreting, collaborating with external bodies, working across disciplines, staffing and training and mainstreaming diversity awareness” all of which, according to Coxall (2006:139) contribute to “aspects of inclusive practice”. Museums are also exploring issues related to social exclusion and their actual or potential role towards social inclusion as well as the impact of their activities on creating social inclusion at different levels – individual, community and societal level – and for various people including people with disabilities (Black, 2005; Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2000; Newman, McLean, & Urquhart, 2005; Sandell, 2002, 2003).

The present research focuses on the experiences of individuals with visual disabilities – those who are blind or have low vision – from Greece regarding visits in museums. Generally speaking for people with disabilities, over the past decades and in many countries, there has been an increasing awareness within museums for people with disabilities or/and special educational needs in order to improve their access to museums. This awareness is the result of many factors, such as the role that museums are expected to have in the 21st century (Black, 2005), the socio-anthropological paradigm for disability and the impact of many political and social movements of people with disabilities (Black, 2005; Oliver, 1990; Tsitouri, 2005) as well as the influence of legislation related to discriminations and equality (Confino-Rehter, 2010; McGinnis, 1999). The adoption of the social model of disability in contrast to the individual or medical model of disability had a significant impact on policies and practices towards disability, including those of museums (Moussouri, 2007; Sandell & Dodd, 2010). The prevalence for many years of the individual or medical model of disability imposed the notion

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