



Accessibility in diversity

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Accessibility in diversity

Based in the heart of Paris and set at the crossroads of fine arts and ethnology, musée du quai Branly offers a 100,000 square-foot panorama of African, American, Asian, and Oceanian arts and cultures. The complex, championed by former French President Jacques Chirac and designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, opened to the public in June 2006. The compound encapsulates the museum itself, as well as a theatre-auditorium, a cinema, the multi-media centre and reading room, two restaurants, and the museum shop, all taking advantage of the landscaped Gilles Clément forest-garden.

Today, the collection holds 300,000 objects, 3,500 of which are presented in the museum's permanent gallery. In addition, an average of 10 temporary exhibits are presented each year, including but not limited to performing arts, cinema and documentaries, readings and seminars, conferences and special events. Operations are managed by around 250 museum staff, with about just as many contractors supporting its day-to-day operations, projects and programmes. It is a national museum under

the dual aegis of the Ministry of Culture and of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, both of which contribute to its funding.

In 2017, visitorship stood at 1.2 million, with French nationals making up 80 per cent of the total. Among them were 3,000 school groups, 650 groups representing not-for-profit organisations tending to socio-economically disadvantaged audiences, and 300 groups of visitors with disabilities.

It is because of this focus on non-western forms and traditions, and the demographic composition of its visitors, that accessibility in diversity is an especially rich topic at quai Branly. The museum believes that to take into account diversity means to make all types of visitors feel welcome and comfortable with its offerings, whatever their age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity may be.

Accessibility can be understood in two ways. In many cultural institutions, it is viewed literally, in terms of the architectural adaptation, dedicated equipment available, as well as the programmes and tools aimed at serving visitors with disabilities (most often, but not

exclusively, those with physical, sensorial and/or mental disabilities). This has translated into an extensive array of targeted offerings.

The notion of accessibility in a French national museum such as quai Branly, however, has a much broader approach fostered by France's public policies and known as *accessibilité universelle* (universal accessibility). In short, this is the idea that in order to reach the largest, most diverse audience right from the get-go, accessibility must be integrated right from the planning stages and woven into areas like the buildings, equipment, cultural approach, programmes, and tools. When this is done, as many offerings as possible will be conceived with the goal of universal accessibility in mind. Offerings will also be easily adaptable from one audience segment to another in the most inclusive way possible.

Diversity and the goals of the Department of Visitor experience

The mission of the Department of Visitor Experience is fourfold. It strives to

- study and analyse audience behaviour and preferences;
- provide the best possible experience to every visitor;
- design special events, visitor tools and cultural activities in order to make the permanent collection and temporary exhibition more attractive and accessible;
- boost visitorship and visitor loyalty.

First steps and general approach

Although physical accessibility was integrated from the planning stages of quai Branly, it had to be refined in the years following the museum's opening. Most of this was done between 2008 and 2018, as adjustments were needed and discussions had to be conducted in detail with France's major not-for-profit organisations, each of which represented the various groups of citizens with disabilities.

Overall, accessibility at quai Branly is approached in two ways: Targeted, which includes special programmes for specific requests, and inclusive, which encompasses universal accessibility. This concept of universal accessibility holds that whenever possible, all visitors may share the experience of a common space, for a common time, using common tools, whether dealing with access to the building itself, access to cultural offerings, or access to information.

Organising accessibility at quai Branly

At the museum level, there are dedicated staff to handle different aspects of accessibility. For example, in the Department of Visitor Experience, staff overseeing specific audience segments might hold a specialised academic and/or professional background. They might have been in charge of schools and educators, or they would have a graduate degree in cultural management and/or humanities with strong organisational skills, complemented by field experience acquired during their years at the museum. This experience could be in areas of handling disadvantaged audiences, young adult audiences, visitors with disabilities and family audiences.

The dialogue with not-for-profits representing the various groups with disabilities is held by the yearly Accessibility Committee, chaired by the quai Branly President, Stéphane Martin, and involving several representatives of specialised not-for-profits. There are also year-long partnerships in various fields with these not-for-profits.

Inclusive accessibility and special accessibility

Surroundings and cultural offerings

Inclusive accessibility is deployed in the forest-garden and in the building itself, with guiding strips, few stairs and many elevators. There is also a gentle, sloped ramp to and from the permanent collections gallery and a “main street” meandering through the collections, fitted with sensorial devices. Inclusive cultural offerings come in the form of guided or narrated tours in the exhibition spaces, as well as activities and workshops in the reading lounge and at the lower garden level, all designed to be followed by all audiences—achieving the quality of universal accessibility.

Among special accessibility cultural offerings are the ALPHA visits (for audiences with beginner’s level French), easy to read and understand French visits (for persons with developmental disabilities), descriptive visits and tactile visits (for persons who are blind) and sign-language visits. There are also lip-read visits and code-with-speech visits, both which have individual magnetic loops available upon request for the deaf.

Visitor tools

Quai Branly visitor tools are also designed with accessibility in mind. In addition to offering audio-guides and visual-guides, the sign-language programme also covers the same scope as the standard ones. There is the Les Experts app and iPad guide to bring visitors through the collections and sign-language videos screens at the entrance of temporary exhibits. Easy to read and understand French, and large type A3-format plates are found at exhibition spaces. There are also items like the *My little exploration* bag themed set of objects on loan at the reception desk, and audio-text-braille-tactile image visitor stations in the collections and in select temporary exhibits, all of which aid understanding and can enrich the visitor experience.

The museum has found that these tools are used on a regular basis by a variety of visitors. Some visitors are looking for a specific feature, but others just enjoy a more global approach using a tool they might not have thought of otherwise.

Similarly, guides working for the museum have realised over time that the tools they originally used for certain audience segments (e.g., pieces of cloth or bits of spice, for audiences with beginners’ level French) can be used to improve the experience of a wide variety of visitors.

Information and communication

Museum’s website

Available in three languages and improved in 2017, the museum’s website is rated “A” on the

French RGAA scale of accessibility compliance. The site offers sections dedicated to different audience segments (notably for visitors with disabilities). For the media, press packages focusing on accessibility, both inclusive and specific, have been designed in conjunction with the Department of Communication.

Specific brochures and e-newsletters

The Department of Visitor Experience writes and edits dedicated brochures and e-newsletters for audiences with disabilities and for not-for-profit groups tending to socio-economically disadvantaged audiences. The corresponding 40-page *Accessible museum* and *Not-for-profit groups* brochures are complemented by leaflet formats available at the museum's reception desk. To highlight programmes or events, dedicated e-newsletters are also sent to our targeted contacts at least three times a year.

Inclusive special projects

At the museum

Among inclusive special projects at quai Branly, two are worth noting in the context of Culture Academy Singapore's conference. These are "All Access Week", designed for visitors with disabilities, and "Not-for-profits Days", targeted at not-for-profits groups tending to socio-economically disadvantaged audiences.

"All Access Week", which is held every two years at quai Branly, offers specialised visits and activities, including roundtable discussions with thinkers and professionals, thematic

documentaries and more. Programming is designed with various types of visitors with disabilities in mind, but the intention is to attract and acquaint all visitors with what others may perceive and feel. For that reason, the event is held during normal opening days and hours for a mixed audience.

"Not-for-profits Days", which started as a one-day targeted event for a single audience segment, has evolved into a three-day format held during normal opening days and hours, also catering to a mixed audience. The 2019 edition, for example, attracted 87 not-for-profit groups tending to socio-economically disadvantaged audiences to the museum during the three-day event, allowing them to participate in programmes which offered multiple opportunities to interact with the general public.

Outside the museum

A large-scale format conducted outside of the museum, "Ateliers nomades" (or nomadic workshops) is an inclusive two-year coordinated programme developed with one or several cities on the outskirts of Paris. It comprises a co-constructed series of activities, including on-site presentations of select pieces from the museum's collection. The 2016 to 2018 edition was conducted with six cities in the southeastern suburbs, and involved 200 cultural activities with 57 museum pieces on display at various locations. Over 10,000 people attended these events, of which 9,000 also came to quai Branly. Most of these visitors had never visited the museum before.

The museum also has specific accessibility projects, through partnerships with Paris public hospitals and with various Paris-area detention centers. These partnerships include on-site as well as at-the-museum initiatives, with around 30 to 50 sessions held each year.

Inter-museum accessibility task forces

Each year, quai Branly organises its audience studies and analysis plans using both internal and contracted resources. These studies often focus on targeted audience segments and contribute to improving accessibility, both general and specific.

As a national museum, quai Branly uses the French ministry of culture's guides, notably the *Building an accessible exhibit* volume. Finally, the museum is included in the *La Visite* (The Visit) series of short films that introduces a selection of major French museums with accessibility options for visitors with disabilities.

Lessons learned and perspectives

Living up to the universal accessibility approach requires constant commitment. Even with substantial human and financial resources, not all specialised equipment, educational documents and tools, activities or special events can be made available once needed. This is especially true of temporary exhibits, where leeway is often a function of the exhibition curator's openness to universal accessibility. Addressing all areas is therefore an ongoing effort and calls for frequent interaction with museum users and their representatives.

On a more specific note, as more and more visitors with disabilities are becoming interconnected via dedicated social media pages, quai Branly is looking into adding such pages to the museum's existing social media offerings, and developing at least a few private groups. Further down the line, we are contemplating developing a GPS system usable inside the exhibition spaces, primarily for visitors who are blind, although we do not discount how the benefits can also extend to many more.

Lastly, it should be kept in mind that the way quai Branly implements accessibility in diversity, is part of a large ecosystem of French national public policies designed to promote education and exposure to the arts and culture to as many people as possible. It is with this foundation that our projects and programmes can thrive.