AN I.D.E.A. OF CULTURAL CENTRE

"Un' I.D.E.A.[1] di centro culturale" è frutto di un invito, da parte di BASE Milano ad un gruppo di persone e realtà che si occupano di accessibilità a vario titolo e che appartengono a comunità sottorappresentate all'interno del settore culturale.

Da questo invito nasce un tavolo di lavoro condiviso con: Marina Cuollo, Chiara Bersani e Elia Covolan - Al.Di.Qua. Artists, Fabio Fornasari - Unione Ciechi di Bologna, Valeria La Corte - Associazione Fedora, Adama Sanneh - Moleskine Foundation, Gabe Silvan Nero - Fondazione Diversity, Francesco Ferreri - Espressy, Gaja Ikeagwana - Milano Mediterranea, Fabio di Girolamo e Licia Ciocca - Fondazione BPM, Ass. Francesca Gisotti - Municipio 6, Ass. Gaia Romani - Assessora ai Servizi Civici e Generali e alla Partecipazione - Comune di Milano. Zoe Romano ha coordinato le attività.

BASE Milano è un centro culturale ibrido che nasce dalla rigenerazione degli spazi industriali Ansaldo nel quartiere Tortona, un luogo dedicato alla produzione e co-produzione di iniziative culturali con valore sociale, e alla sperimentazione di nuovi linguaggi artistici.

"An I.D.E.A.[1] of Cultural Centre" is the result of an invitation by BASE, which led to the creation of a multistakeholder working group including of individuals and entities involved in accessibility in various capacities, and members of underrepresented communities within the cultural sector such as:

Marina Cuollo, Chiara Bersani, and Elia Covolan - Al.Di.Qua. Artists, Fabio Fornasari - Unione Ciechi di Bologna, Valeria La Corte - Fedora Association, Adama Sanneh - Moleskine Foundation, Gabe Silvan Nero - Diversity Foundation, Francesco Ferreri - Espressy, Gaja Ikeagwana - Milano Mediterranea, Fabio di Girolamo and Licia Ciocca - BPM Foundation, Francesca Gisotti - Municipality 6 Association, Gaia Romani - Councilor for Civil and General Services and Participation - Municipality of Milan. Zoe Romano coordinated the activities.

BASE Milano is a hybrid cultural centre based in the regenerated formal industrial spaces of Ansaldo in the Tortona district, a place dedicated to the production and co-production of cultural initiatives with social purpose, and to the experimentation of new artistic languages.

1 I.D.E.A. – Inclusione, Diversità, Equità, Accessibilità. Da: BAKER Jocelyn and VASSEUR Liette "Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Accessibility (IDEA) Good Practices for Researchers", Canadian Commission for UNESCO, Ottawa, Canada, September 2021.

1. AN I.D.E.A. OF CULTURAL CENTRE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This Manifesto was formulated in response to the urgency and the will to explore new approaches in constructing an **artistic institution** that is truely **diverse and accessible.** An institution that serves as amplifier for voices and energies who often sit at "the periphery" of public life – thus creating space for expression and narration, around which to build communities capable of generating social transformations.

The goal is to widen the area of what falls under the definition of "culture," starting with **those who have access** to cultural professions, and thus actively shape the sector. This involves recognizing our **positioning** as well as our limits as organizations, reformulating our objectives and indicators, reimagining our structure, staff, vision, content, collaborations, and public program to meet our values as an open and multifaceted cultural institution.

1.2 PRINCIPLES

Cultural accessibility bares a multitude of meanings to us. We use this expression to indicate a commitment to ensuring the right of **access, participation, and engagement** of individuals in cultural life, through an approach that acknowledges and regards the diverse needs and physical, motor, sensory, communicative, relational, intellectual, and psychological characteristics of all individuals.

Accessibility, furthermore, is a **continuous learning process**, a negotiation between new and evolving needs and desires of groups and communities, which aims, as far as possible, to achieve complete accessibility for everyone.

This Manifesto, is embedded in the specific context of a cultural centre in Milan, and is therefore partial and still **evolving**. Over time, its development will necessarily involve a multitude of contributions and intersect other national and international initiatives - as we have seen this happen with the "Protocollo d'Intesa", written by the Italian network Europe Beyond Access, promoted by the Festival Oriente Occidente in collaboration with british Council, and the Manifesto of Il Campo Innocente.

What is crucial in this transformation process is to keep in mind some principles that have directed all the writing work, ensuring that the protocol's core objectives continue to guide its development:

"Nothing about us without us"
Meaning, we don't define political actions without the direct involvement of the affected individuals. Acknowledging that unfair systems are deeply rooted in our societies, it is essential to create space for plural initiatives, thus allowing underrepresented groups and communities to actively participate in decision-making processes. This challenges a hegemonic "standard" model that is increasingly proving ineffective, as well as discriminatory and unfair.

Transform yourself before transforming others
The social and cultural transformation we aspire to must start first and foremost with a radical reconfiguration of the organizations themselves, beginning with the conditions of access to cultural professions, and by following a process of de-canonization.
This entails dismantling systemic and social structures that produce canons, and radically questioning power mechanisms and normalizing methods involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

A designing approach addressing the "unexpected" person
Meaning consedering accessibility as the starting point in project ideation, rather than a compromised adaptation of services, spaces, and contents directed to specific groups of people who do not belong to the "standard public." This allows the creation of places and experiences that are far more accessible to a wider range of people, as well as being more welcoming, safe, and comfortable for everyone.

"We are not your inspiration"
Artistic practices of all kinds have always drawn inspiration from the themes of marginalized communities. In order to paint new outlooks, rather than simply fueling them, it is necessary to shift the perspective. This entails operating directly on cultural accessibility, starting from those who produce culture (artists, entertainment workers, creatives, architects, communication experts), so that those who benefit from it can feel represented by it.

Practising a policy of listening and dialogue
Coordinating collective and participatory processes constantly nurtures a collective pact based on reciprocity and mutual recognition, according to an approach of care, confrontation, and conflict. It is essential to provide open channels for communication in order to increase the receptiveness of the organisation towards change initiatives that rise within their communities of reference.

Monitoring and legacy
To effect this transformation, it is crucial to set traceable goals that allow measuring the effectiveness and consistency of our actions concerning the desired impact. In this process - regarding the definition of objectives and their monitoring tools, as well as in the collection and analysis of data - it is necessary to directly involve people experiencing the change - in an outlook of transparency.

2. GUIDELINES FOR AN ACCESSIBLE CULTURAL CENTER

The following guidelines have been drafted in a **multilevel and intersectional** perspective.

In order to make the reading smoother, we have come up with five sections that progressively touch upon the themes of cultural programming, the construction of accessible physical spaces (including workspaces), fair staff selection processes, a communication approach capable of reaching the widest possible public, and strategies to engage new cultural audiences.

These guidelines should be read as interdependent suggestions that may be **implemented gradually**, and yet rely on each other's application to achieve their final purposes.

2.1 MAKING SPACE
A Plural Cultural Program

The objective is to "design with" rather than "organize for", in the pursuit of a broad, diverse and inclusive cultural program. This entails directly **co-curating** contents with members of underrepresented communities, and recognizing their contributions. This allows for a decentralization of the symbolic power of those who produce culture, redirecting the focus toward voices that have limited access to public arenas.

How?

- Acknowledging that all individuals, regardless of their individual characteristics, can have **artistic dignity**.

- Turning **co-curation and collective curation** practices into a standard part of programming, regarding them as moments of listening and continuous learning exercise.

- Being weary of the **risk of tokenism**, as the presence of underrepresented groups in cultural programming is often treated as a symbolic concession rather than a transformative gesture.

- Supporting **emerging underrepresented entities** throughout the artistic-cultural production, by sharing knowledge, resources and know-how.

- Launching open calls and selection processes addressed to individuals operating in cultural sectors that are active in **marginalized contexts**.

- Sharing access rider/access agreement documents, providing information on **individual accessibility requirements**, in order to effectively organize collaborative work.

- Ensuring that inter-organizational and strategic discussion events such as boards, decision-making processes, and cultural programming moments give voice to **plural viewpoints**, and expect a direct engagement of marginalized individuals.

- Maintaining continuous and/or **long-term relationships** with partners of said communities, involving them in one or more projects.

- Including informative events in the programme, drawing **wider audiences closer to complex themes**, as well as setting up initiatives for further exploration and discussion of said issues, allowing the formulation and exchange of ideas.

- Decentralizing the fruition of art, by co-creating content and experiences set to take place **outside conventional cultural venues**.

- Overcoming the isolation of artists with disabilities and from underrepresented communities by promoting their **creative development** and presenting their most relevant and innovative works to the European audience (EBA protocol).

2.2 FEELING AT HOME
Accessible Cultural Spaces

Being a cultural space entails performing a public function, and it therefore comes with the responsibility to build **safe, accessible, and welcoming physical environments** for all individuals. Here, the "unexpected" person becomes the design standard and reference, in the construction of spaces that do not practically and emotionally represent an obstacle, but rather intimate a sense of belonging to a material (space) and immaterial (environment) notion of common good. The accessibility of spaces should also assert the right to beauty, understood both as an aesthetic factor, as well as an element of well-being associated with a space, and which is too often placed in opposition to the concept of functionality. In meeting this demand, the creative sector can play a leading role by finding new ways and reshape services and experiences to combine accessibility and beauty.

How?

Reducing physical barriers — elements that hinder individuals with motor disabilities from moving freely in space

- Making sure that reception areas are easily accessible to everyone.

- Designing and creating spaces and tools with a flexible design, adaptable to a wider variety of needs and uses.

- Coming up with spaces that tend to specific requests, such as breastfeeding areas or praying rooms for individuals of different religious beliefs.

- Setting up child-care assistance, finding ways to involve kids with the institution, rather than overlooking their engagement.

- Designing physical spaces that may be used autonomously by any individual, for instance, adjusting the height of windows, shelves, switches, and tools, as well as the weight and size of doors.

- Implementing ramps and dedicated pathways for individuals with limited mobility (temporary or permanent) inside and outside the structure.

- Providing dedicated parking spaces outside the facility for individuals with limited mobility.

- Allocating designated seating spots inside the facility for individuals with limited mobility.

Reducing sensorial barriers — obstacles that hinder or make it difficult for neurodivergent individuals and those with sensory disabilities (blindness, deafness, etc.) to engage with spaces and events

- Providing tactile and/or virtual maps and space descriptions, to facilitate orientation in space for all individuals.

- Implementing audio description services, subtitling, captioning, and translations in on-site and digital communication, to simplify navigation.

- Establishing a lighting system that ensures adequate visibility and visual appeal, avoiding excessive or sudden sensory impact (e.g., very bright or flickering lights).

- Designing resting and decompression areas.

Reducing cognitive barriers — obstacles that limit a fluent understanding and navigation of spaces and events.

- Creating simple and clear signage (way-finding).

- Communicating a clear schedule/ time organization of programmed events, as well as the physical configuration of the spaces they will take place in, avoiding any significant last-minute changes.

2.3 THE RIGHT WORK
Fair Recruitment and Work Processes

The goal is to promote **equal access to work** and ensure professional conditions able to accommodate diverse needs and perspectives, introducing diversity in the staff and in cultural spaces, to better represent the territories they inhabit.

We believe that the future of the cultural sector significantly relies on its ability to speak for and reflect the social contexts in which it operates, **attracting and increasingly opening up** to individuals and groups that are currently underrepresented within public life.

How?

Recruitment Team Training

- Engaging staff members in training programs that focus on cognitive biases and practices of respectful approaches toward all individuals.

- Promoting a company culture whose values are rooted in accessibility, diversity, and fairness, by setting up awareness-rising initiatives as well as adopting an Anti-Discrimination Ethical Code shared with staff, partners, suppliers, and audiences.

- Integrating "intermediary bodies" to the workforce, such as professional figures that act as mediators between the work context and the candidate (e.g., community / accessibility / disability manager).

- Initiating "inclusive language" training programs for recruiters.

Internal Policies for Accessibility

- Cherishing the diversity of people within the staff and promoting all diverging and hybrid career paths.

- Favouring permanent contracts in the hiring protocol, to foster a perspective of stability.

- Engaging recruiters who can introduce a non-dominant perspective.

- Facilitating salary equity (e.g., including accessibility fees; accounting for facilitated access costs).

- Collecting input and observations from the staff, to identify flaws in the system and develop fairer recruitment initiatives, such as organizing strategic team-building gatherings and sharing with them progress and commitments concerning accessibility and diversity in hiring policies.

- Promoting multilingualism.

- Supporting affirmative action.

Accessible Job Postings

- Posting job advertisements in multiple languages, easy to understand and written in a tactful and respectful manner in regard to the diverse identities it addresses.

- Providing clear information to candidates regarding the selection process and associated expectations.

- Including disclaimers that explicitly outline specific positive discrimination policies.

- Informing candidates about the accessibility of the interview spaces by providing a technical datasheet.

Neutral Selection Process

- Reviewing and regularly questioning selection criteria, to make sure they are neutral and do not produce discrimination.

- Ceasing to request personal portraits in the curriculum vitae, to prevent biases related to physical appearance.

- Where necessary, implementing a blind recruitment approach in the candidate selection process, so to solely base the choices on skills and efficiency, and looking beyond gender, name, or origin.

- Arranging comfortable conditions for the candidates, requesting their needs and sharing interview procedures, as well as offering time and adequate space for breaks through the process.

- Ensuring the interview space is accessible and welcoming, by, for instance, arranging tables facing each other to facilitate voice clarity and lip-reading.

- Analysing the pre-recruiting process in the formulation of the interview model.

Internships and Apprenticeship Programs

- Establishing scholarships for advanced education in the cultural field.

- Allocating work and study grants to members of underrepresented communities.

Proactive Research

- Implementing proactive research strategies to reach a wider diversity of individuals.

- Engaging with networks linked to communities, organizations, and local institutions that advocate for underrepresented groups.

- Collaborating with educational institutions to create education and training programs for individuals from a variety of backgrounds.

2.4 TALKING WITH ONE MORE PERSON
Communication, Languages and Diverse Audiences

The goal of communication should be **to establish or to further strengthen a relationship**. For this reason, it is necessary, first and foremost, for it to be easily comprehensible, by defining communicative methods that are accessible and are shaped to make the audience feel included, valued, and represented. This is why it is fundamental to establish a direct connection with individuals, rather than addressing a generalised public – diversifying languages and communication styles, and constructively utilizing their fluidity to reach specific groups, communities, and sensitivities.

Lastly, communication constitutes the first step in constructing the pact of fairness featured in programming. For this reason, communicative projects must reflect and deliver the same **plurality of voices** that conceived them, as well as the audience they will address throughout the cultural program.

How?

Language

- Using a simple and clear language.

- Employing all forms of language, adjusting it consistently to meet communication needs, making sure flexibility and editorial coherence are in balance. Examples of assets to adopt include: asterisk (*); slash (/); neutral pronouns (they, them); schwa (ə); neutral plural (3); underscore (_) etc.

- Including notes/disclaimers about language use in communication and promotional materials.

- Avoiding the use of terms or expressions that may result offensive and/or exclusive to specific groups of people; for example, gender stereotypes or racist terms.

- Adopting, as much as possible, circumlocutions to prevent misunderstanding and alienation in relationships and communications with people.

- Utilizing languages and formats compatible with screen readers, alongside accessible reading tools.

Empathic Communication

- Promoting active listening when interacting with the audience, allowing space for people's voices and manifesting interest in their personal experiences and concerns.

- Accepting the possibility of error, both during the project development phase and afterward, by gathering feedback from various audiences and partners.

- Maintaining a solid commitment to the public during the on-site experience, through communication, providing specific and coordinated training to all staff on hospitality practices and crowd management.

- Openly sharing the established lists of measures acquired to make spaces, content, and experiences more accessible, as well as the ones in line for future adoption.

- Adopting inclusive language and active listening as they represent forms of training toward change.

Immersive/Interactive Tools

- Providing simple and clear descriptions that allow individuals to explore cultural spaces both in person, as well as online, facilitating on-site navigation and serving as an additional tool for understanding the organization.

- Developing guidelines/handbooks for the staff on hospitality protocols, accessibility tools, and vocabulary to use in internal and external communication processes.

2.5 NICE TO MEET US
Engaging New Audiences

Engaging people in the activities of an organization must entail the adoption of a caring approach, a sustained, **collective commitment** where each constituent of 'the audience' and 'the organization' **wholeheartedly identifies with a shared vision**. Therefore, it is crucial that both parties understand the values and individual desires that drive action and cultural involvement, initiating dialogues and collecting feedback. This way, it is possible to co-create organizations that effectively respond to the **needs and aspirations** of those who engage with them, regarding the intelligence of the audiences and acting as platforms for individual and collective empowerment and emancipation.

How?

Feedback Collection Systems

- Arranging welcome, information, and support areas in the space, where interpersonal oral communication can take place – and appropriately communicating their availability.

- Introducing a feedback collection tool, both digital and paper-based, adaptable to the needs of all individuals.

- Defining evaluation criteria and change/result monitoring method by directly involving those whom the changes are addressed to.

- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation team to collect, analyse, and interpret stakeholder-related data, engaging them directly to foster continuous learning flow between audiences and the organization.

Economic Accessibility

- Diversifying fees and costs to enable access to spaces and activities for individuals with lower economical means.

- Incorporating free or reduced-price days/ time slots to the schedule.

- Offering membership programs that, besides facilitating economic participation in activities, consolidate relationships based on communication, sharing, and mutual understanding.

Multimedia Tools/Assistive Technology

- Facilitating access to cultural programming by providing audio-guides.

- Introducing digital assets that feature augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) functionalities.

- Creating the conditions for anyone to take part in cultural activities by introducing assistive technologies such as subtitles and super-titles in offered activities.

- Introducing interactive touch screens to make projects and initiatives accessible to blind individuals, and generally more effective for everyone.

Specialized Staff

- Arranging the presence of professional figures throughout the course of the events to facilitate participation, such as guides and interpreters.

- Identifying figures to cover the role of "critical friends" or intermediaries, who encourage feedback exchange, by highlighting accessibility issues and corrections.

- Defining a working team designated to offer continuous support to individuals (external and internal to the organization) who are involved in a process of care and recognition.

A MANIFESTO IN BECOMING

Accessibility is a complex and challenging process when understood as the dismantling and reconstruction of an idea of a cultural institution. This Manifesto outlines a rich set of guidelines, incremental and context-specific in nature, open to continuous **revision and adaptation** to the socio-political conditions of the contexts in which they are applied.

Some of these measures can be immediately implemented within many cultural centres, others are likely to take longer time to sink in, and some require **systemic changes** before the can show tangible effects. To bring about systemic change, it is essential to promote investment plans for accessibility measures, as it constitutes a strategic priority for cultural centres.

We hope that this Manifesto may **welcome new voices, concrete contributions, and constructive criticism**, and in such process, increasingly assert itself as a tool to encourage a wholesome transformation of the sector.

To contribute to this open process, you can send comments and proposals to samesame@base.milano.it.

DO YOU THINK SOMETHING IS MISSING?
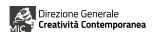
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Con il patrocinio di:

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