



In a league of its own

Smart walking canes, design contests and multi-accessible information points are just some of the innovations under development by the eight foundations participating in the League of Historical and Accessible Cities, the first-ever operational project of the European Foundation Centre (EFC). At a meeting in Turin on 16 and 17 June, participants in the League shared their progress on developing 1km tourist itineraries for people with disabilities in five European cities: Avila (Spain), Mulhouse (France), Lucca (Italy), Turin (Italy) and Viborg (Denmark).

Established in 2010 within the European Consortium of Foundations on Human Rights and Disability, the League aims to reconcile accessibility with cultural heritage, which is no easy feat considering how highly prized and protected historical cities and buildings are in Europe. This is the one of the biggest challenges in Europe regarding accessibility and an important field for the foundation sector to engage in, believes Maria Orejas-Chantelot, who coordinates the League at the EFC. 'But we believe that it is possible to reconcile the stones' rights with the rights of people. It is a question of being a bit innovative and creative.'

In its first phase (ending in 2012), eight foundations have teamed up with local authorities, disabilities groups, architects and town planning experts to design itineraries of a minimum of 1km in length through which people with all types of disabilities can visit shops, restaurants, museums and other key tourist attractions of the cities in question. Based on these experiences, the League aims to develop a common methodology and best practice guide to help other foundations and their partners interested in implementing a similar project in historical cities elsewhere in Europe.

Each of the cities is at different stages in the process of designing their itineraries. Some have benefited from a head start, such as the partners working in Turin, a city which made some significant inroads in accessibility in preparation for hosting the 2006 Winter Paralympics, thanks in part to the funding of Fondazione CRT, one of the League members. Similarly, Avila, whose motto is "A City for Everyone", is also quite advanced: It recently won

the 2011 Accessible City by the EU for its long-standing work to make its famous, medieval walls and other tourist attractions widely accessible. Meanwhile, Mulhouse's city centre is currently undergoing a large regeneration project, thereby facilitating the League's work.

However, project partners in cities like Lucca and Viborg found themselves literally starting from scratch. In the case of Lucca, Elizabeth Franchini, Fondazione Banca Monte di Lucca, one of the pioneers of the League, was convinced that more had to be done to make sure that people with disabilities could also enjoy the impressively intact Renaissance walls of Lucca, as well as other attractions the city has to offer. To gain a better understanding of accessibility, Ms Franchini teamed up with disability associations and accessibility experts to develop a project before approaching Lucca's municipal authorities, which were very receptive to the proposal. Sharing experiences within the League has therefore been very beneficial in acquiring knowledge and new ideas: 'We can see how other people are working and solving problems that maybe you don't know how to solve alone.'

Although the League aims to come up with a best practice guide to help other cities develop similar itineraries, standardisation per se would be near impossible given the diversity of historical townscapes and legal contexts. Mindful of this, the League remains an open platform, encouraging each of the participating projects to find the approach best suited to their city. This openness has allowed for a great deal of progress in a very short space of time as well as some impressive innovations. For instance in the city of Mulhouse, the project partners, led by Fondation Réunion, have developed an intuitive diagnostic tool which can scan buildings, streets, key spots in the city centre, and in real time, give a reading of the level of accessibility or inaccessibility.

In Avila, the project partners led by Fundación ONCE, have developed a range of solutions within the tourist information points to assist people on their tour of the medieval walls and other tourist spots. These include a small scale model of the walls, guides in Braille of all the services available including restaurant menus, wheelchair rental services and a tactile screen with information accessible to the blind, deaf and those with reduced mobility. Beatriz Rabadan Lopez, Fundación ONCE, hopes that the League will encourage other cities to review their accessibility and in doing so improve the quality of lives of people with disabilities: 'after all, that is the most important thing'.

Meanwhile in Turin, the itinerary is developed around and within the Palazzo Madama museum, offering people a whole range of multimedia services. Angelo Miglietta, Fondazione CRT, believes the accessibility work that museum has undergone has not been just structural in its nature 'There was also a change of mindset in the

people working there and it became a point of strength for the normal activities of the museum, which is a beautiful way to show that disability helps society as a whole,' he notes.

Perhaps the most exciting innovation to come out of the League so far is the smart walking cane being developed by a project funded by Fondazione Banca Monte di Lucca at the University of Pisa. Using Bluetooth technology and GPS, a smart cane communicates with indicators laid 10m below the ground to allow users to follow the itinerary. 'The innovation is also that you don't have to make a big hole in the ground, otherwise you might find something Roman or older that you cannot touch!' remarks Ms Franchini.

Innovation is also displayed within the League in the serious and sensitive way the individual projects are consulting disability groups and experts in the field. This is particularly true of Realdania and the other partners in Viborg which have chosen to launch a design contest to find the best designed itinerary for Viborg. After a rather grueling selection process, five design projects are now being evaluated according to a detailed set of criteria. On accessibility, a steering group provided input on the design criteria and as a result the project partners have decided to expand on the 1km itinerary to a larger and more diversified route. 'The steering group gave us the advice to be careful [...] because if we say we have a route that is accessible to all we have already made a choice on behalf of the users and in doing so we may already be discriminating,' explains Signe Marie Rohde of Bygningsarv, which is coordinating the project in Viborg on behalf of Realdania and the other participating foundations. 'So we are now focusing on giving more of a continuous experience of the city than a specific route or itinerary.'

In the next phase, the League hopes to expand to countries of Central and Eastern Europe. As Ms Orejas-Chantelot explains, foundations interested in participating do not necessarily have to be based in the city where they wish to design their project: 'the League is open to any foundation who wishes to take up the challenge of becoming a little operational with regard to disabilities, even if they are grantmakers or have no experience in accessibility'.

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View interviews with League participants:

- [Overview of the work of the League](#) (Maria Orejas-Chantelot, EFC)

- [Avila](#) (Beatriz Rabadan Lopez, Fundación ONCE)
- [Mulhouse](#) (Eliane Hervé-Bazin, Fondation Réunica)
- [Lucca](#) (Elizabeth Franchini, Fondazione Banca Monte di Lucca)
- [Turin](#) (Angelo Miglietta, Fondazione CRT)
- [Viborg](#) (Christian Andersen (Realdania) and Signe Marie Rohde (Bygningsarv))