

# Stereotypes Concerning Special Needs of Museum Visitors on the Example of the Museum of Engineering and Technology in Kraków

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## Abstract

Currently, there is a lot of talk pertaining to the special needs of museum visitors, and the ways of building dedicated exhibition spaces as well as preparing sightseeing tours. The lack of financial resources means that these accessibility tools cannot be fully created. Stereotypes of visitors with special needs then appear. Museum professionals try to eliminate them, which is why they increasingly include people with disabilities in the process of creating workshops, lessons, exhibitions and other museum projects. The article is an attempt at moving beyond the stereotype itself – through joint learning – to be open to others. It also provides a case study done on the example of the Museum of Engineering and Technology in Kraków that describes several years of activity and the steps taken by the museum towards improving its accessibility.

Keywords: disability, special needs, Visitor, exhibition, museum

## Introduction

Museums today have a very difficult task of showing how they can meet the requirements of their Visitors. Professional employees wonder how to create engaging exhibitions, education department employees create plans and activities connecting generations and various fields of science and art. All this lead to increase the number of Visitors and expand the group of recipients. Accessibility is somewhere in all of this. Today, people talk about it almost every day, and accessibility coordinators appear in institutions. However, it is still quite difficult to break through this stereotypical perception of people with disabilities, even in a place like a museum. This causes museums to face a dilemma of how to approach the issue of accessibility when financial resources are limited and, on the other hand, the group of recipients is still small. We quite stereotypically understand accessibility as a compulsion to change, but is it really so? The main goal of the article is to answer the question why we still have a very stereotypical approach to Visitors with special needs? What are stereotypes and why is it so hard for us to overcome them? The aim of the article is also to show the process of change in the perception of the needs of people with special needs on the example of the Museum of Engineering and Technology in Krakow (MIT). The article presents the last few years of the institution's activity and is, in a sense, a journal describing this process of change, from the first steps in accessibility to the highest museum trophy – Sybille, for *The City. Technosensitivity* exhibition and, among others, for its accessible solutions.

## Review of the literature

Preparing the article required a holistic approach to the topic of stereotype, therefore, for the part concerning the concept itself, literature was selected that allowed for the presentation of the epistemological meaning of two words that are important from the perspective of the article: *stereotype and prejudice*. The collected literature made it possible to present the definition, but also went deeper into the sphere of our perception of disabilities and people with special needs. In recent years, we have been talking more and more about accessibility, which is why the source base for this article are articles that have appeared in many magazines. The second part consists of articles and compact scientific publications that describe the processes of change taking place in cultural institutions. The collected literature became the starting material for a conversation about the situation of people with special needs in cultural institutions, a description of such Visitors and their needs. The article ends by presenting the history of changes introduced at MIT aimed at opening a new permanent exhibition. It became important to describe the steps taken that

allowed for capturing the changes that took place in the institution and in serving this group of Visitors.

## Methods

A significant number of publications in total and in individual years allows us to assess the research activity in a given field (Czakon 2011: 59) quite high. As a result, the obtained research material, the multitude of literature on the perception of people with disabilities and the analysis of achievements at MIT allowed for the enrichment of the analyzed material. The completed information and its processing facilitated reflection and allowed us to formulate our own observations about possible directions of activities of the Krakow museum that may take place in the future. Using the example of MIT, we can say that we see an increasing need to include various types of recipients in the life of cultural institutions. Because these have recently become the so-called third place, after home and school. This observation is, of course, very general and quite obvious and does not apply only to MIT, it can be applied to many similar places in the world. However, it is important that in the total number of Visitors, the percentage of people with disabilities is one of the key segments.

The article is dominated by elements of the descriptive (i.e. descriptive-explanatory) method. I used content analysis of existing materials and, additionally and to a lesser extent, I was guided by selected references to systemic analysis. The most frequently used research technique is the analysis of existing articles and statistics.

## Definitions and museum reality?

What are stereotypes and prejudices? Why do we follow them so often? And what about Visitors with special needs, how do we look at them, how do we feel about them in cultural institutions? The origins of this term date back to 1922, when Walter Lippmann introduced it to behavioral science. Originally, this term defined a typical image that came to mind when thinking about a relationship with a specific social group (Macrae et al. 1999: 225). Although stereotype as a term from the social sciences is over a hundred years old, after W. Lippman introduced it into the scientific discourse in his book *Public Opinion* (Henning-Hahn 2011: 71). W. Lippman's analysis shows that stereotypes tell us which of the social information reaching us from the environment should be noticed and which should be ignored (Nelson 2003: 25). This concept was introduced to psychology by John C. Brigham, who understood it as a false generalization, a generalization with unclear validity, characterized by rigidity and habits (Kapiszewski

1978: 14–15). It can be said that stereotypes were the product of incorrect thought processes, which led to incorrect judgments and beliefs. The analysis of the social functions of stereotypes includes the formation of identity (national and ethnic), mobilizing and defensive functions related to the involvement of the community in conflicts, and ideological and political functions consisting in the creation of a system of symbols, beliefs and views serving specific group interests (Jasińska-Kania 2003: 22). Andrzej Kapiszewski attempted to define the concept of ethnic stereotype. According to him “(...) a stereotype is the ideas about a given ethnic group existing in the minds of members of another group in the form of a set of interconnected belief judgments?” (Kapiszewski 1978: 27). The image of society, a social group or a single individual depends on existing stereotypes, opinions and views expressed in direct contacts and the mass media (Olędzki 1985: 11–12). However, in order to understand the content of a stereotype in this way, three basic factors must be distinguished:

- cultural (tradition) related to the upbringing process,
- socio-economic dependent on the interests of the own group,
- situational and emotional (Kapiszewski 1978: 27).

It is simplistic to approach a stereotype in purely pejorative terms. Formally, there are positive and negative biases (Aronson 2000: 280). Not everyone realizes that both of them can be harmful. It would seem that since the content of a stereotype is not offensive (e.g. it concerns outstanding abilities), it will not cause any harm. Nothing could be more deceptive. The potential danger is that these generalizations are offensive if only because they deprive the person of his right to be treated as an individual with his own individual characteristics, whether positive or negative (Aronson 2000: 282).

As is commonly known, people develop defense mechanisms in the form of mental stereotypes, which allow them to simplify reality and create patterns that make it easier to define other people. Unfortunately, this is most often untrue, and, consequently, very harmful to stereotyped people. Stereotypes are characterized by poverty of content and excessive simplification. Based on stereotypes, we do not verify their content, which is strongly emotional, over-general and little susceptible to change (Skalny 2017: 127–130). When we talk about stereotypes about a group, we are faced with ideas about the enemy, as well as (usually) ideas about allies who can become friends (Berting, Villain-Gandossi 2005: 25–26.). We talk about a stereotype when our specific emotions, assessments, attitudes (readiness to take appropriate actions) are a reaction not to our own experience in a given issue, but to a word-name that evokes these feelings, assessments and attitudes in us (Schaff 1981: 38). In generating them in this process, there is often a tendency to perceive others as inferior or hostile in order to maintain a positive image of oneself in consciousness (Pietrzak 2000: 51). The function of stereotypes is to rationalize and justify often harmful and incomprehensible prejudices about other nations, classes, strata or

social groups (Sobczak 1995: 95). Stereotypes have the nature of distorted images of reality that constantly escape conscious reflection, falsify perception and distort behavior. The terrifying power of a stereotype appears most clearly when groups that are discriminated against by it succumb to it (Florek 2008: 22).

The concept of prejudice is closely related to stereotypes. Prejudice has been defined as a negative attitude towards a social group and every person who belongs to it.

W. M. Newman claimed that "(...) prejudice is any set of ideas and beliefs through which groups or individuals are negatively judged, even before getting acquainted with the facts, on the basis of real or supposed group features or characteristics" (Kapiszewski 1978: 30). Stereotype is sometimes equated with prejudice. This is wrong because prejudice is an unjustified negative attitude (reluctance, antipathy) towards a group and its members (Jestal 2001: 25). In summary, stereotypes influence prejudice and discrimination – prejudice is negative attitudes and attitudes towards an out-group, discrimination is negative behavior. Stereotypes, whether we like it or not, are common cognitive constructs that enable quick and thoughtless perception of social reality (Budyta-Budzyńska 2010: 136–137). However, as Leszek Kołakowski noted in his book, he stated that "(...) by assessing others, we ourselves involuntarily reveal our own ways of perception, and thus also our own vices and advantages. In other words: stereotypes teach us no less about those who believe in them than about those to whom they apply" (Kołakowski 2004: 203).

Although a stereotype evokes clearly negative associations and it is undoubtedly right to avoid stereotypical thinking, the common reception of a stereotype as a widespread falsehood constitutes its stereotyping and, as a result, creates something that could be called a metastereotype. The stereotype has a future also because of the convenience it creates. It is, as it were, knowledge in a nutshell (about the nation, professional or social groups, cultural phenomena, events), something quite important in an era when people have little time and are eager to use shortcuts. It flatters our laziness since it refers to existing knowledge, relatively easily acquired and easy to pass on to the next generation (Tazbir 1991: 29). However, we cannot forget about an alternative explanation of the cross-cultural universality of some stereotypical beliefs, based on the inherent modernity of information openness, which makes stereotypes begin to become unified (Florek 2008: 21–23).

The museum should move away from segregation towards full inclusion and building an inclusive model that strengthens the involvement and supports the participation of excluded groups (Parzyńska et al. 2017: 174). Antonina Ostrowska (Wójcik 2008: 41–46) writes that disabled people are often assessed on the basis of certain generalized images and stereotypes relating to entire groups of given disease or degree of disability. Because stereotypes often contain unfavorable content, they may lead to discrimination against disabled people as soon as they are defined in terms of their illness or disability. Lack of acceptance, negative attitudes and stereotypes also make it difficult to accept ourselves. Without understanding disability,

we impose our expectations on disabled people regarding their behavior in specific situations. We are unable to accept the fact that often the same needs as other people can be met in a different way.

After this dose of theory, it is worth moving on to showing and describing the stereotypical Visitor with special needs. I guess each of us has heard the term crippled, stupid, someone who has an uneven ceiling, but also mentally retarded or mentally retarded (Zakrzewska, Zima-Parjaszewska 2015: 18). Even in the 1990s, sociological research recorded a stereotype of disabled people and invalids, which did not differ significantly from the historical one. Their image – as disabled people – combined the most common (and closely related) negative features attributed to a disabled person as: weak, suspicious, complaining, fearful, secretive, insecure, lonely, poor. Disabled people were perceived as people who deserved sympathy and required help rather than partners who had certain limitations but also possibilities (Ostrowska 1994: 43).

In research conducted a few years ago in a small town in Lower Silesia, the most common positive emotions were noted: tolerance (58% of responses), respect (55%), compassion (52%), empathy (25%), appreciation (25%). Other emotions evoked by disabled people are in the vast minority. Among them, anxiety is the most frequently mentioned one (16% of responses). The others are: indifference (6%), disgust (4%), reluctance (3%). These studies reveal not only different attitudes towards disabled people. They also show a different image of disabled people than in the 1990s – usually nice, friendly, not standing out in any way from other people (Ostrowska 1994: 95). Despite many studies, disabled people are perceived as one of the groups whose members encounter greater difficulties and limitations in social life than others (Szafraniec, Szymborski 2015: 2). When we see people with Down Syndrome, we think that they are not ready to live independently in our society. But fortunately, it is only temporary. Because, as the initiative of Social Kafka in Krakow shows, everything is just our stereotypical thinking. By going beyond certain patterns, we are able to look at such people differently. We often wonder if saying goodbye to a blind person will it be *fau pax*, or if we grab a blind person's hand and force him to cross the street, will it be help or not? Here, apart from the stereotype of a person with special needs, our empathy and knowledge of accessibility savoir vivre come into play. We can see training courses appearing online more and more often. Does this mean that we do not really know those Visitors with special needs? Because again, stereotypically, we have created a group of people who, for some reason, differ from us in some very visible way, whether it is their movement style, signing, having a guide dog or a white cane. We forget about people whose special needs are not visible, e.g. people after cancer, people with a stoma, people with depression who are in therapy, elderly people or, closing this list, a mother with a stroller who needs more room to maneuver and a wider corridor. And here an almost immediate conclusion comes to mind: how stereotypically we still think,

how we are unable to accept that we are all people with special needs. What can help overcome these stereotypes? To answer – willingness to change, open heads and the empathy I mentioned earlier.

## Museums and Visitors with special needs

In recent years, access to culture and education for people with special needs has become more and more accepted and is not perceived solely as an element of occupational therapy. More and more often we see people with various types of dysfunctions on the streets, we try to notice each other and each other's needs. This happened because schools, social support and rehabilitation institutions, occupational therapy workshops, culture and art centers, as well as other organizations began to become more and more active in activities supporting the promotion and promotion of culture among groups of people with disabilities (Ploch 2009: 2). More and more often, such people visit, participate in classes and use the institution's offer. It is great that people with disabilities visit institutions, but one of the problems museums still struggle with is low attendance.

Museums, like other institutions that earn their living from the sale of products and services, are burdened with a productivity paradigm rooted in capitalist societies, which not only puts pressure on societies, but also encourages them to adopt beliefs, attitudes and values consistent with the productivity paradigm (Porter 2003: 78). Accordingly, cultural institutions emphasize primarily those solutions that will prove attractive to the widest possible audience. As the Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights notes, it is cheaper and easier to build an accessible building, website or application than to later adapt them to the needs of people with disabilities with a huge amount of work and costs. However, there is still a misconception that special buildings, special websites or special applications should be created for a specific group of recipients, for example blind people. This line of thinking leads to questions such as how many people should we make adjustments for? (*Dostępność infrastruktury...* 2011: 59–60). Unfortunately, this resulted in us reducing disability to a slogan and making the term extremely shallow.

Recent years have been a time of major changes for cultural institutions in their approach to accessibility, both architectural and information and communication. Pursuant to these regulations, people with disabilities have had legally guaranteed access to digital content and technologies since 2019. Thus, they have obtained an important tool for enforcing their rights regarding the availability of applications and digital resources (Parzyńska et al. 2017: 168), but they do not use it very often (Skalny 2017: 128–129). Museums today face a major social challenge: removing barriers to access to collections and including excluded people (Sandell 2003).

Many museums, opening up to people with disabilities, create special solutions dedicated to people with specific types of disabilities, e.g. audio descriptions, typhlographics for Visitors with visual disabilities (Józwiak 2021; Pawłowska 2019; Knappek 2021). There is an increasing emphasis on treating culture as an area in which old social relations are nurtured and new ones are built (Szlendak 2014: 159–160). Museums that contribute to the cultural panorama have become one of the places where, apart from the institution's statutory activities, the educational offer is increasingly expanding. Moreover, it is possible – which is sometimes only a semblance of participation, which looks good in statistics but is socially sterile – to create a space for something more than just visiting museums (Kłosowski 2011: 43).

To sum up, it can be said that thanks to the increased interest in the audience on the part of museums themselves, it is gradually becoming possible to work on designing activities that are more and more carefully thought out in terms of the needs of museum viewers, as well as work on expanding the circle of the audience to include new groups (Nessel-Łukasik 2017: 313), also those requiring a completely different approach, one that requires us to change, without a stereotypical view of disability.

## The City. Technosensitivity exhibition and the special needs of Visitors at MIT

MIT had undertaken activities related to accessibility a few years earlier, and the opening of itself in 2023 has become an important step towards this accessibility. The pandemic and the lack of access to culture caused the Museum to develop forms of contact with viewers such as podcasts and walks. At the beginning of 2021, the Museum implemented several educational projects, including: *SPINaj naukę* or *W LEMbirynicie przyszłości*. They included 20 podcasts and 5 walking tours for people with disabilities. The form of the modules is in line with the trend of conducting inclusive activities in difficult, unusual times.

MIT began intensified work on accessibility in 2021, with the process of developing a new website, fully compliant with the WCAG 2.1 standard. The implementation of the website was confirmed by an accessibility audit. In accordance with the action plan being implemented, by the end of 2021 all media (website, social media of the Museum - in terms of new materials) became available and complied with accessibility standards. In the educational and promotional materials produced by MIT on social media, we have also gradually focused on the needs of people with disabilities, and currently subtitles are added to all new video materials.

In the second half of 2021, special regulations were prepared enabling parents, legal guardians and therapists to make reservations for dedicated classes with the possibility of paying attention to the needs of the child attending them. Special needs may be related to the slow and clear style of conducting classes, access to light or darkening of the space, as well as the preferred diet and the need to take

breaks during classes. As of mid-2021, the Museum employed a person on its team who serves as the accessibility coordinator. This person supports and helps those interested in the offer and ensures the comfort of the visit.

With regard to the activities undertaken by the Museum, in July 2021 we started cooperation with ROPS in the *My way to Culture* project. This project aimed to prepare an application enabling people with various types of disabilities to move around the exhibition grounds. Together with people with special needs, we tested 2 temporary exhibitions. The pilot application that was created at that time operated on the basis of distributed beacons that connected to the telephone of the Visitors-Testers. The implementation of the application facilitated access to the ticket office and then to 5 objects included in temporary exhibitions. We completed the project in the first quarter of 2022.

Thanks to the funding received, MIT was able to start implementing a project to increase the accessibility of the exhibition in mid-July 2022 and educational and cultural offer for people with special needs. The project was carried out as part of the Culture without Barriers program, implemented by the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON) with funds from the European Union under the Operational Program Knowledge Education Development 2014–2020, Measure 4.3. The museum received funding in the amount of PLN 133,690, becoming one of over 140 selected institutions from all over Poland to receive the grant.

At MIT, we started the first stage of change with employees. In 2022, we carried out training to increase the team's competences in the field of accessibility. The training took place on October 17–18, 2022. The meetings were hosted by people with disabilities and accessibility specialists from the entire Lesser Poland Voivodeship. The invited guests and speakers included: Angelika Chrapkiewicz – Gądek, Tomasz Włodarski, Szymon Laciuga, Magdalena Sipowicz, Iwona Parzyńska, Daniel Lachor, Adam Goch, Adam Stromidło, Tomasz Koźmiński and Monika Tryboń. Two days of training allowed for deepening knowledge about the culture of people with various types of disabilities, learning the principles of work and methods of working with this group of recipients.

As part of the project, we purchased equipment that improved the conditions for moving around our new permanent exhibition, but also allowed for better communication and influenced the development of accessibility standards. The purchased equipment includes: wheelchairs, walking sticks, noise-cancelling headphones, a ramp, toilet callers, an induction loop at the cash register and an evacuation chair.

The second part of the project was implemented from January to June 2023. The implementation began with two additional training sessions for the cashiers and the Education and Exhibition Services Department (DEW) in handling difficult customers and a training in PJM (Polish Sign Language). The second stage of the project was to acquire specialists and experts in the field of accessibility who supported DEW in developing accessible lesson scenarios in 5 areas: I move, I understand,

I feel, I see and I hear. PJM translator Jakub Studziński participated in the meetings. At the end of May 2023, all scenarios were tested with groups from 5 areas. 10 accessibility experts, but also our Visitors, took part in testing the scenario. Thanks to this cooperation, we gained new lesson plans, which allowed us to introduce a new type of inclusive tour - with the possibility of participation by people with special needs. The Museum used the support obtained and tips on how to prepare an educational offer for these special groups of recipients by building a permanent exhibition in 2023.

Almost simultaneously, after the opening of our exhibition, we have taken steps to improve the path that people with special needs must follow to and from our Museum, from the moment of obtaining information about classes or tours to participating in them. As part of this activity, instructional videos were prepared on how to get to the Museum, how to move around the Entrance Zone and how to visit the exhibition. In addition, additional equipment was ordered, including: 2 typhlographic plans, 10 typhlographic leaflets showing the tour route of *The City. Technosensitivity* exhibition, 3D models of the depot to better guide people with disabilities around the Museum. Together with the curators of the exhibition, 10 animations and 10 objects were selected for which audio descriptions were prepared. The obtained grant allowed us to make the entrance area to the exhibition more accessible, with contrasting stair markings and protrusions appearing on the visiting paths. The Museum has prepared a wide promotional campaign. Two advertisements appeared in the media, one on the website [www.rampa.pl](http://www.rampa.pl) and the other in the supplement of "Gazeta Wyborcza". In order to reach as many recipients as possible, the Museum used external mailing (on the [onet.pl](http://onet.pl) portal), which was a kind of closing gate for the project and at the same time became a tool for even more effective invitation of new guests to visit our new permanent exhibition *The City. Technosensitivity*.

The project itself did not complete the plan to create a Museum available at MIT. Thanks to the acquired knowledge and experience, it will be possible to prepare further facilities for people with various needs. The plan for 2024 is to prepare a pre-guide and other materials, including: pictograms to facilitate navigation around the exhibition. The Museum will want to expand accessibility activities in its branches, i.e. in the Stanisław Lem Experimental Garden and the Czyżyny Hangar. These activities will involve maintaining contact with met experts, continuous training and acquiring new skills related to, for example, knowledge of PJM or the ability to write simple texts in ETR (easy to read). There will be many more changes.

## Summary

More than a year has passed since the opening of the permanent exhibition *The City. Technosensitivity* and we see how Visitors approach to the Museum has changed. It has become a place where we spend more than an hour, stop, look at the past, but also take a step into the future. As we guide the Visitor through the available spaces, we see that a number of introduced amenities have allowed us to expand our offer to new groups of Visitors. Wide spaces, typhlographic plans and leaflets, models and headphones are just some of the amenities that have been introduced. Just a few months after the opening of the exhibition, we saw an increased number of Visitors with special needs. This is a sign for us that the institution's activities have gone in the right direction and our path towards accessibility has gone in the right direction.

I strongly believe that in the coming years further proposals regarding accessibility will be prepared and we will continue to open ourselves to various groups of recipients, eliminating the stereotype of this type of Visitor - according to the slogan, culture is to be for everyone.

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