1. Introduction

In the past few decades, many countries have started to open up their cultural heritage to a wider audience, including visually impaired people, who are at risk of being excluded from many events and opportunities related to art and culture (Boys, 2007; Braun, 2008; Braun, 2011; Maszerowska et al., 2014; Oppegaard et al., 2015). Audio described city tours and architecture audio description (AD) aim to make the built environment accessible to people with sight loss and, in a less particularistic approach (Greco, 2019), to people with all kinds of (dis)abilities. AD of static art and architecture is therefore arousing increasing academic and professional interest as a way to achieve social inclusion and to enhance cultural tourism (Neves, 2016).

As opposed to other forms of AD (e.g., for film and theatre), in which the selection of what to include in the description is based on what is relevant to a given narrative, in architecture AD there is no narrative as such and the describer needs to create one around the chosen building (Neves, 2015: 69). The time constraints are also more fluid and mostly depend on the time available and on the listeners’ attention span. This forms both a challenge and an opportunity in what constitutes a very complex form of AD.

2. Current research

To this day, various recommendations and principles of good practice for describing architecture have been developed (see Boys, 2007; Neves, 2015; Snyder, 2010, 2014). Most of these underline the need for the description to be as “unobtrusive” as possible in the experience, as “people visit places to engage with what the place has to offer and not with the mediators/mediation technology” (Neves, 2015: 68). The AD should also help patrons actively negotiate with space, for instance, when they need to find their way and/or understand what their position is in relation to the building or inside the space being described. Useful directional methods include, for instance, counting the number of steps, referring to the position of numbers in a clock (Snyder, 2010, 2014), using the location of the describer’s voice to help listeners understand the size and shape of spaces (Boys, 2007: 20).
Architecture describers are advised to start from an overview of the building, providing a series of factual data about its age, size, style, volumetric and spatial relationships and so on before moving on to say what makes it remarkable and unique. They should then clarify how the building interacts with its surroundings and specify how the place is going to be described and/or explored. As Boys (2007: 19) underlines, most buildings are extremely complex and it might not be possible or safe to explore them in their entirety. Therefore, it is essential to divide the exploration into a series of stopping locations, to be dealt with separately but in a cohesive sequence that helps visually impaired people appreciate the quality of the building. Way-finding information should be integrated naturally in the description as it unfolds, but care should be taken not to let the description compete with navigational cues.

When selecting and organising the most relevant details to include in the description, describers are also recommended to provide the information in a coherent sequence (Snyder, 2010, 2014) – for example, from general to specific, from left to right – in order to help their audience piece together the broad picture as effortlessly as possible (Neves, 2015; Snyder, 2010, 2014). Aside from these general indications, when it comes to the criteria that should inform content selection, Neves (2015: 70) admits that “[t]he diversity of contexts and possibilities makes it difficult to arrive at a set of guidelines which will cover all the possibilities”. Such a wide variety of contexts and the challenges it poses cannot be denied. However, it is also possible to identify sub-sets of buildings that show recurring features and a high enough level of predictability to allow the creation of tailor-made guidelines specifically suited to them. Places of worship are among these (Pacinotti, 2017). Taking advantage of the indications that apply to architecture AD in general, the present contribution will thus focus on the opportunity to open up churches as a specific category of places of worship to a wider audience, outlining a set of strategies that can be used as a reproducible framework to organise and standardise their description.

3. Churches

In every culture of every age, places of worship have been delimited, marked and singled out (Raveri, 2006): wherever “the sacred” is to have its abode, religious architecture has developed its own language to set religious buildings apart from non-religious ones. To put it in an overly simplistic way, a building is never “born” a place of worship, rather it is made one by means of visual symbols and architectural elements that identify it as such. In the case of churches, such elements can be seen in bell towers, crosses, the façade, the transept and so on. The architectural language and the structural, ornamental and/or symbolic elements employed are designed to be immediately recognised by the target community, which gives the building a meaning and a function of its own, different from those of other buildings in the same city or cultural environment at large.

Because places of worship are primarily defined by their function and created to fulfill a very specific communication purpose, they are a highly standardised building type. Regardless of architectural style, it is possible to identify their most recurring features and use them to create a template for the audio description process (cf. Boys, 2007: 7).

The present chapter focuses on Christian churches as an example of places of worship that can be the object of such standardization. Apart from the educational background of the author, which would not allow for an insightful analysis of other building types, one of the reasons behind this choice is that churches are very common in many countries and therefore their characteristics are familiar to many people. If a tool was devised to make them accessible1 to a wider audience, this tool could be applied in a wide variety of contexts. Furthermore, churches
are often buildings of great historical and artistic value. This is hardly surprising, considering that in times when the houses of common people were made of thatch and wood, churches were the only buildings in town that were made of stone, if not marble. Whenever a church was built, the brightest minds and the best resources available at the time – often summoned from abroad – were poured into the project, which has allowed very ancient buildings to survive to this day in perfect condition.

However, it is implied that the same methodology could be applied to all places of worship as such. The specific architectural, visual and ritual elements will of course vary and, as a consequence, the language of the AD might change as well. It is reasonable to expect that it would present a varying percentage of language that can be used across a wide range of contexts (e.g., words that refer to very basic architectural elements, like “pillars” and adjectives describing colour and texture) and a varying percentage of vocabulary and strategies developed to deal with features that are specific to only one or few building types. An interesting example of the latter would be the calligraphy that typically embellishes some common architectural components of mosques, like the niche or chamber (mihrab) that indicates the direction of Mecca. This inclusion of written verbal language in the place of worship has both ornamental and liturgical functions and it would be interesting to develop descriptive strategies to render it visually for people with sight loss who might not know what Arabic writing looks like. Depending on the target audience, translation might also come into play to make these passages from the Quran accessible to all. Regardless of these specificities, however, the underlying logic remains the same. It is hoped that this suggestion will stimulate the creation of guidelines for the description of places of worship of any faith, past and present, promoting a kind of intercultural tourism with the potential to break down prejudice and foster that mutual understanding and acceptance (Scott, 2002) that would prove very beneficial in this day and age.

In spite of being a fairly standardised and predictable building type, churches can look very different from one another and this is not only because of the different architectural styles (e.g., Gothic as opposed to Baroque architecture) that were developed over the centuries. The structure and ornamentation of a church can also depend on the core beliefs and style of worship of the branch of the Christian faith to which it belongs. Methodist, Baptist and Quaker churches, for instance, were always very austere, nondescript buildings as opposed to Catholic churches. This aspect further complicates an already complicated task, because the describer would also need to decide how and to what extent it could be interesting and/or useful to delve into the nuances of different incarnations of Christianity. In order to try and provide a solution to this issue, it is suggested here that the visual component remain the focus of the descriptive experience: starting from what can objectively be seen, the describer could then briefly link the characteristics s/he is highlighting to the requirements of the particular congregation that attends the church in question. This way, listeners would be able to understand why churches can look so different from one another on multiple levels.

Bearing this complexity in mind, the following guidelines are proposed as a flexible and customisable tool that allows the describer room to manoeuvre while at the same time providing him/her with a pre-established structure that could be useful to save time and ensure consistent, quality descriptions (cf. Part six in this chapter).

4. Suggested guidelines for church description

Because buildings only make sense as a coherent whole if they are viewed in a sequence (Boys, 2007: 19), the proposed guidelines follow a logical progression through three interrelated sections.
4.1 Section one: introduction

A short introduction is necessary to lay a grid in which to locate details as the description gains critical mass. The introduction can be compared to the label that accompanies artefacts and exhibits in a museum, indicating, for example, the author’s name, the date of creation, the medium used and so on (Neves, 2015; Snyder, 2010, 2014; Wendorf, 2017). The aim of the introduction is thus to present general standard information about the church being examined. Besides the name of the church – which can be expected to be the first thing that visitors learn upon planning their visit – the most important information that should be included in this section can be summarised as follows:

- **time**: when was the church built? This has obvious implications as regards architectural style and the possible mingling of different styles if the church was built over multiple centuries or in a multicultural environment;
- **place**: where was the church built? Why? Whenever a church was built, the place where it would stand held some kind of significance, for example, for the cult of a particular saint (churches and shrines where often built on the burial site of saints and martyrs) or to serve a political purpose. Mexico City’s Metropolitan Cathedral (16th–19th century) was built where the main temple of the Aztec capital city used to stand, this way making it unmistakably clear that the European invaders were now the absolute rulers in all matters;
- **commissioning authority**: who wanted the church to exist? Why? The decision to build a new church was sometimes taken by Church hierarchies, political rulers (see example), or the people of a given community. The reasons that motivated the construction of the church are very important to gain an insight into the real historical/cultural relevance of the building.

The information presented in the introduction is not descriptive, so it does not require visitors to stand in front of the actual building to fully understand and/or appreciate it (see also Boys, 2007). In order to dilute the information load and help visually impaired patrons focus on the description later, it would be advisable to keep this section separate from the following two. In the case of a pre-organised tour, one option would be to provide this information before getting to the church. The time spent on the chosen mode of transport to get to the church, or a class that precedes the visit (Snyder, 2010, 2014), could be the right moment for this. Listeners would thus have more time to take the information in before the description proper, with the cognitive load it entails. This audio introduction (cf. Neves, 2015) could also be a way to build interest in what is about to come, providing enough information to arouse curiosity but not so much as to give away elements that are best appreciated on site, in context (see also Boys, 2007). If the description is meant to be experienced in digital format, this information could be made available online on specific websites, included in a pre-tour pack or accessed through a QR code placed on a panel on site (cf. Part five in this chapter).

4.2 Section two: outside the church

This is where the description proper begins. It is crucial that visitors are now gathered in front of the building in order to make the most of their (residual) sight and let their other senses (mostly hearing and space perception) contribute to the creation of a general impression of the building and its surroundings. Let us think, for example, of the difference, in terms of acoustic
images, between standing in a crowded square or in a secluded valley. Because many visually impaired people are actually able to see things if they are told where to look, as details are built into the description, directional information should always be provided as well (Snyder, 2010, 2014; Giansante, 2015). If budget and mode of delivery allow, it would be beneficial to provide tactile aids to use in conjunction with the AD (cf. Part five in this chapter). Now the description will centre on:

- **location of the church**: where is the church in its wider context? Why? How does it interact with its surroundings? In this respect, it is worth noting that the (built) environment surrounding the church is not stable and can in fact change dramatically. Churches that were originally built in peaceful natural surroundings are likely to be now surrounded by urban development. Cities and towns are also far from immune to change. An example would be the wide Via della Conciliazione leading up to Saint Peter’s square in Rome, which was created in the 1930s. Before then, the square and the imposing basilica were half hidden by houses, making the build-up to their sudden revelation much more dramatic (Venditti, 2005);

- **façade**: this is the first impression visitors get from the church. Is the façade welcoming or imposing? Is it plain or richly decorated? This kind of information can be seen as subjective, but it is not necessarily so if it is based on the specific communication purpose underlying the building of the church in question. If we maintain with Hernández (2017) and Pietropoli (2018) that architecture is a language, abiding by specific rules to fulfil a communication purpose, it follows that buildings are a discourse where words are replaced by architectural elements (Pietropoli, 2018). In places of worship we can recognise at least three main functions of language: referential, expressive and conative.

As was just noted, architectural language employs a wide array of strategies to make sure that the relationship between the message and the external references is immediately established.

Also, if we take expression to be “the act and the way of communicating what one feels, thinks or wants” (Bertocci et al., 2020: 727), the expressive function in architecture is used to represent the feelings of the builder/owner of a building (Hernández, 2017: 2). In places of worship, the more “obvious” feelings of devotion or humbleness could go hand in hand with or be entirely replaced by other feelings and attitudes, like a display of power and wealth or the fulfilment of an aesthetic/intellectual agenda (as happened e.g., during the Renaissance). Let us consider the big square designed by Bernini in the example: it is confirmed that the elliptic shape of the square was meant to symbolise the embrace of the Church (Morello, 2008; Pinton, 2009).

And finally, the conative function is meant to elicit a response from the receiver and influence his/her behaviour. This function is particularly relevant in places of worship, where people are expected to behave in specific, ritualised ways. To achieve this goal, the “sender” relies heavily on the language of art – nowhere like in a place of worship do different arts interact and intermingle with one another to create a meaningful whole, with the aim of drawing the visitor in and usher him/her to a dimension that is antithetical to earthly life. Every single component predisposes to experience, to aesthetic participation, and all the senses are stimulated simultaneously. These features prompt the visitor to feel involved in the place. Such involvement, Socrati claims (2013), has been purposefully sought in multiple spiritual experiences in human history, and multisensorial beauty has always been the privileged way to gain access to “the sacred”. This
visual language is so powerful that it influences individual behaviour not only inside but sometimes also outside the place of worship.

Depending on the building in question, other functions of language can also be identified. Phatic features can be seen in door design (Hernández, 2017), whereas the metalinguistic function comes into play when a reference is made to other buildings and architectural styles, both past and present. Therefore, it emerges that appraisal would not be about personal interpretation but about shedding light on the sender’s choices and intentions. As the result of the characteristics that identify an art product “as being by a particular artist or school, or of a movement, period, or geographical region” (Snyder, 2010: 56), style in architecture can be considered as the way in which the sender chooses to use architectural language to communicate with the intended receiver in order to fulfil a given purpose. These choices are conveyed to viewers not only by the presence but also by the function and distribution of certain elements. Because every expressive element is inescapably related to a specific cultural tradition (Bertocci et al., 2020), for the description to be effective it is necessary not only to name the style, but also to relate it to the time of construction, to summarise its distinguishing features and highlight the ones that can be seen in the church being examined. When describing the façade, it would be particularly helpful to give patrons a tactile map reproducing the most important details and giving a sense of the volumetric and spatial relationships that can be observed. One important aspect is that the façade can be very different from the inside of the church, because, for example, it was altered over the centuries following its construction. If the contrast is particularly striking or historically relevant, it could be worth pointing out in this section of the description;

- **materials**: sometimes more than one material was used to create visual patterns with different colours (e.g., white marble and red bricks). This adds flavour to the façade and gives it a distinctive identity. Sometimes the materials used were typical of a geographical region, sometimes they were ordered from afar for a particular reason. In other cases, materials were chosen because they tied into a specific tradition and consequently worked as intertextual references;

- **surface, height, levels**: what is the church’s height? Are there any underground rooms, such as crypts? When describing the height of the church and its surface, it is always advisable to use descriptive metaphors, similes and analogies with objects that the intended audience is familiar with from everyday life. For example, instead of saying that a church is one hundred square metres, the describer might say that ten bedrooms could easily fit in it: these strategies enable listeners to build up a sharper mental image of what is being described (Snyder, 2010: 18, 2014);

- **entrance** (if relevant): where is the entrance? Is it plain or richly decorated? The entrance is the link between the outside and the inside of the building, so it can be seen as the perfect point to conclude the second section of the description and usher patrons to the next one. This could also be a good time to remind the audience of how the church is going to be described and to give useful information regarding mobility.

### 4.3 Section three: inside the church

Here comes the third and last section of the description. Visitors have now entered the church and the describer should help them experience the atmosphere of the place (cf. Part five in this chapter). As was said previously, like all places of worship, churches communicate with
visitors in order to arouse various feelings in them and have them behave in specific, ritualised ways. Apart from the language of art, the organisation of space in relation to the established collective participation in the ceremony also plays an important role. The description should highlight all this by focusing on:

- **plan**: what is the main axis of the church? Is it longitudinal or central? The distinction can be related to the different conventions developed in Western and Eastern Christian religious architecture and/or to a particular age (e.g., in the Renaissance many architects preferred the central axis). The plan has implications for the perception of space by visitors;
- **ceiling**: are there any relevant features like frescoes, vaults or domes?
- **aisles and columns**: these elements are used to characterise the inside of the church and the way it communicates with visitors. Aisles and columns can be fully appreciated through proprioception, touch and verbal analogies;
- **floor**: are precious materials used? Is it possible to recognise a visual pattern?
- **walls and decorations**: decorations – or the lack thereof – are a powerful communicative device in a church and impact heavily on the atmosphere and characterisation of the place, oftentimes creating a sharp contrast between the inside and the outside of the building. Another aspect that should not be overlooked is that pictures, frescoes, bas-reliefs and sculptures have been used for centuries to tell stories to people who could not read, so their function is not only or mainly ornamental. In this respect, iconography is another example of art description that can be standardised. After all, saints and characters from the Bible are made recognisable through a set of pre-established visual symbols and attributes (e.g., Gabriel is the archangel associated with lilies, whereas Michael is the one wielding a sword) that are always the same. Another important aspect to consider is that decorations are often combined to create a coherent narrative and are meant to be read in a sequence with the beginning, development and ending often corresponding to specific parts of the church. An example is Monreale Cathedral (12th century, Sicily) with its mosaics: starting from the aisle walls, decorated with episodes from the Old Testament, the narrative extends to the transept and choir with episodes from the lives of the saints, of the apostles and of Jesus himself, whose figure dominates the apse. This progression mirrors the path that leads from the entrance to the altar, symbolising a redemption process that culminates in eternal salvation (Ciagà, 2006: 48). Churches can be particularly rich in decorations and contain lots of artworks. It goes without saying that description is more time consuming than mere listing, but it is not necessary, nor advisable, to describe all the works contained in a church – only the most important, representative or meaningful should be included in the tour, in order not to overload the memory and processing skills of the audience;
- **materials**: it could be interesting for visitors to have a first-hand experience of what marble, bronze or stone feel like by touching the materials or samples of them (cf. Part five in this chapter);
- **light and colours**: the light versus darkness contrast is at the very core of much symbolism in the Christian faith and in Western collective visual imagery as a whole. The describer should pay attention to how light and darkness, as well as any colours, are used to characterise the inside of the church and how they affect visitors. Hagia Sophia in Instanbul – a byzantine basilica turned into a mosque and then into a museum – is a jubilation of light, as the golden mosaics reverberate the light coming in from above the matronea and from the twenty-four windows at the base of the huge dome, which consequently appears weightless (Ciagà, 2006; Cesaretti & Fobelli, 2012). Most guidelines related to AD for the
visual arts agree that it is important to include colour in the description of artworks and architecture. This is because, as Snyder (2010) points out, people who have developed sight loss later in life have visual memory of colour (p. 57), whereas people who are blind from birth do understand the (cultural) significance of a particular colour (p. 12; see also Giansante, 2015; Giovagnoli, 2010; Wendorf, 2017);

- function of specific places/structures in the church: this point is especially relevant for those buildings where traces of now forgotten habits and rituals are still visible today (e.g., architectural elements that were meant to physically separate men and women during the mass). In other cases, the describer might want to briefly hint at the function of (relevant) items, places or architectural elements (like a pulpit) when it is not widely known. It is advisable not to assume that all the people in the audience are Christian and/or familiar with the liturgy.

### 4.4 Contemporary churches: a limit?

The guidelines presented so far are best suited to churches built between the first centuries AD and the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Part three in this chapter). But what about contemporary churches?

Just like verbal language, architectural language underwent dramatic transformations at the beginning of the 20th century. In a general atmosphere of doubt and experimentation, new styles were developed to voice new concerns, achievements and notions of beauty and functionality, which were no longer attached to the purpose of a building (Pietropoli, 2018). Following this trend, most contemporary churches have no façade, aisles, choir or transept, and the only visual element that unequivocally qualifies them as churches is usually a huge cross on top of the building. Without it, many contemporary churches would be undistinguishable from town halls or corporate buildings.

It follows that the guidelines suggested here need to be adapted in order to be applied to these buildings, each of which is the unique brainchild of the architect. This aspect could be a limit to the use of standardised guidelines like the ones proposed in this chapter. However, there are two considerations to make.

First of all, contemporary churches are a minority among all existing churches. Secondly, given that they are still meant to serve the same functions as historical churches, there are many points in common between the two categories, which can give the describer a head start. The guidelines suggested previously could then be applied to contemporary churches by selecting the points that they share with historical churches and adding others that are more specific to the case in point.

#### 4.4.1 Section one: introduction

A brief context will still be necessary to introduce visitors to the church. Again, the information will revolve around date of construction, location of the church and commissioning authority. As opposed to historical churches, however, the author of the project should be given more attention here. As Pietropoli (2018) points out, in contemporary architecture there is no pre-established language that an architect needs to learn in order to communicate effectively with the target community: he/she can now choose the language that suits him/her better, or make up a new one altogether. In contemporary churches, the ensemble of features that in historical churches was indicative of a given architectural style or religious movement can be put down to the expressive choices of the architect, to the architectural language s/he adopted and the
functions of language attributed to it. Whenever possible, it would be interesting to start the
description with a foreword by the architect him/herself (cf. Boys, 2007), explaining what she/
he wanted to achieve with the project and giving patrons a better insight into the idea behind
the project. By conveying an emotional connection to the building, the description would also
be more engaging, avoiding the “dry as dust potential” of mere facts.

4.4.2 Section two: outside the church

As with historical churches, once the destination has been reached the describer will give the
audience information about the form of the description and indicate how the church is going
to be explored. The most important changes/additions to the template outlined previously can
be summarised as follows:

- **roof and shape of the building**: because contemporary churches are very likely to have
  unusual shapes that set them apart from their historical counterparts, this point can be
  especially relevant. The Metropolitan Cathedral of Brazilia (Niemeyer, 1959–1970), for
  instance, has the distinctive shape of a “flattened” cone, surmounted by radial spikes (an
  interesting comparison can be made with the Metropolitan Cathedral of Liverpool). Con-
  sequently, visual analogies can be particularly helpful to provide a deeper understanding
  of what a contemporary church looks like;

- **entrance and mobility**: because of their “irregular” structure, shape and plan, contempo-
  rary churches can be even more complex to explore than historical ones, so the aspect of
  mobility is of essence. Sometimes the entrance of a contemporary church is not easy to
  locate and there can be more than one entrance corresponding to different levels. This is
  the case with the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (Muzio, 1959–1969), Israel,
  where the upper church and the lower one can be accessed through two different entrances
  but are joined inside.

4.4.3 Section three: inside the church

As was seen earlier, each contemporary church has its own conception of space, which visi-
tors should be encouraged to explore for maximum understanding and appreciation. The main
addition to this section would be:

- **comparisons and influences**: whereas in traditional churches comparisons with other
  buildings that are similar to or different from the one being examined can be considered
  as optional, in the case of contemporary churches it would be advisable to include them
  as a permanent feature of the AD. Considering that the personal language of the author
determines the appearance and structure of the building, it could be interesting and
useful to examine how the architect drew inspiration from or breached with tradition,
not only of his/her country but also of other cultures and countries. When working on
Evry Cathedral (France, 1988–1995), architect Botta’s choices where influenced by the
Gothic tradition – with its distinctive stained-glass windows – that is so pervasive in
the country (Servadio, 2018). Comparisons can also involve other buildings designed
by the same architect, in order to highlight recurring elements that characterise his/her
personal style. The preference for curved forms over rectilinearity, for instance, can be
considered as constitutive of Niemeyer’s architectural language (Grippiolo, 2019; Nie-
meyer, 2002).
5. Practice

Audio description for cultural heritage and architecture weaves factual (historical and contextual) information with description to create a clear, accurate verbal picture that is also enjoyable to listen to (Neves, 2015: 70; see also Neves, 2016; Perego, 2018; Wendorf, 2017).

Drawing upon what people with sight loss already experience through their senses (Boys, 2007: 27), architecture description aims to evoke the atmosphere of a place through language. Starting from the premise that the language used in AD in general should be succinct, precise, direct and objective, with short and simple sentences (Giansante, 2015; Neves, 2015; Wendorf, 2017; Snyder, 2014), the issue of what constitutes appropriate language for art and architecture description is a thorny one (see Boys, 2007; Perego, 2018). The main challenge for describers is to strike the right balance between precision (that involves jargon and technical terms) and accessible language that really opens up art and culture to all. In order to convey the visual intensity of the source material and stimulate the imagination of the listener, the role of descriptive adjectives is especially emphasised, whereas emotive adjectives are generally used with caution, since they can be related to appraisal, subjectivity and ultimately bias (Perego, 2018; Snyder, 2010, 2014). In this respect, however, there seems to be a range of different approaches, from more “academic” and technical descriptions to the use of poetic and suggestive language (Boys, 2007; Neves, 2016). As Bertocci et al. (2020) point out, because of the reactions it provokes, the power of art is expressive rather than representative (p. 727): it follows that whenever art is at the core of an experience, the language used in the description should aim to stir the same emotional involvement as the source material does in sighted viewers. Religion itself being a narration, aiming to foster a sense of group membership through storytelling (ibid.), a narrative approach could be more suited to church description than an expository one.

As far as vocabulary, style and register are concerned, some scholars do claim that simplifying language would lead to trivialising art itself (cf. Perego, 2018), but the consensus on this issue is far from broad. On the one hand, when dealing with architecture, it is only natural that description should involve the use of a number of specific terms. Some of these terms (e.g., “aisle”, “crypt”, “transept”) can be expected to be familiar to a wide demographic and consequently pose no major challenge. Other terms (e.g., “apse”, “flying buttress”, “coffered ceiling”) are less widely known and more dependent on the individual user’s education and exposure to art theory. Although their inclusion in the AD can have positive implications for the users from a didactic point of view (Perego, 2018), it is advisable to keep the quantity of such terms to the bare minimum and to always explain their meaning. As Snyder (2010, 2014) and Giansante (2015) recommend, the describer should use everyday words, and technical terms should be described first, then named. Since the guidelines proposed in this chapter are meant to be a standardisable tool, the ideal solution would be to use recurring vocabulary in every description, so that users grow increasingly familiar with art-related terms and concepts that are frequently used in church architecture. If all church descriptions were based on the same template, they would also present a predictable structure as far as information order is concerned. With exposure to such descriptions, visually impaired users would consequently develop a general mental model of the description, which they would fill in with specific information and details, thus avoiding overloading their processing skills and facilitating comparisons between different churches. Users would gradually develop what Hutchinson and Eardley (2019) call “biographical memories” of the experience and the visit would not be an isolated, ephemeral moment, but it would become a part of the cultural and personal journey of the user long-term: something to remember and a reason to repeat the experience (Neves et al., 2016; Neves, 2015; Perego, 2018; Wendorf, 2017).
2012). As a final thought on this issue, it is worth underlining that technical terms are not the only potential challenge in art and architecture AD. Some descriptions use very sophisticated language that may sound more technical, but which is no more precise than everyday language and can ultimately be very confusing to the audience, especially when the audience cannot rely on their sight to integrate the information conveyed through verbal language. Whereas, as was seen earlier, the inclusion of technical terms may have positive implications, there is no real gain in saying that, for example, a column is embellished “by anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and phytomorphic elements” instead of “by human figures, animals and plants”. As Snyder points out (2010), however tempting it might be to use polished language and elegant turns of phrases, the aim of AD is to add to the effectiveness, accessibility and enjoyment of a multisensory experience, not to show how learned and knowledgeable the describer is (see also the aims of the ongoing EASIT project, http://galmaobservatory.eu/projects/easit/). Against this backdrop, as Perego (2018) points out, no empirically grounded answer as to what the best linguistic approach would be is possible until comprehensive audience reception research is conducted.

The description of the visual elements of a church is a daunting task. There are so many things to see and they are usually very difficult to recreate effectively using words. This is further complicated by the possible coexistence of different architectural styles. As Boys (2007) points out, some buildings are made up of “parts accumulated over a long period” while others were “built as a coherent whole” (p. 12). This is the main reason why a careful but thorough content selection needs to take place. As Snyder (2010) suggests, the describer should fight the urge to say – or, worse still, list – everything. This is also supported by studies insisting on the importance of brevity in AD (Deibel, 2008; Giansante, 2015; Perego, 2018; Pitt & Edwards, 2003). Not only is the description subjected to time and space constraints – longer descriptions also make information retention harder for the listeners. The ideal duration of an audio described tour of a church is another issue that needs to be empirically demonstrated through reception research.

The language used and the interaction with AD users also depend on mode of delivery. Art and architecture AD can be delivered live by human guides or recorded and presented in digital format (Neves, 2015; Perego, 2018; Wendorf, 2017).

When the AD is delivered live, it is usually based on a script, but the performative aspects of storytelling (Boys, 2007) to engage the audience, guide them throughout the exploration and foster a conversational relationship with them are key to the success of the experience. This is where the use of more informal language – including the use of the pronoun “we” and asking rhetorical questions (ivi, p. 31) – comes into play. Describers are not only speaking to a script, but need to be able to improvise and create as many opportunities for dialogue as possible. When working with mixed groups, for example, the describer could ask (partially) sighted patrons to describe what they see, allowing them to contribute to the description and meaning-making processes (Snyder, 2010, 2014; Lachi, museum docent, personal communication, 2016, October 24th). This form of “guided looking” (Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019) helps people of all ages and conditions develop their observation skills (Snyder, 2014), engage creatively with architectural language and gain a better understanding of their built environment (Boys, 2007). Empathy and collaboration between all the parties involved is one of the main assets of live audio described tours and this is especially apparent when tactile exploration is used in conjunction with the AD. Touching opportunities are very important because sensory experience brings words to life. As Snyder (2010) claims, the opportunity to explore an object through touch is very important for visually impaired people (p. 60). Tactile aids – including 3D diagrams and dioramas, tactile maps and images, scale models of a building – are a very
Valuable support to help visually impaired people make sense of a building or architectural detail (cf. Boys, 2007; Secchi, 2003; Snyder, 2010, 2014; Wendorf, 2017). By referring back to a hand-sized model or a relief image of a room/building, AD users are able to gain a better understanding of the volumetric, functional and/or compositional characteristics of spaces (Boys, 2007: 30) and elements that cannot be touched because of their location or sheer size.

Tactile exploration is usually difficult to combine with a self-directed tour. Even though technological progress has led to the creation of devices that successfully bridge this gap, they are yet to take off on a large scale. However, some visitors still prefer recorded AD in order to be able to explore a building/collection independently (Snyder, 2010, 2014), supported by an audio guide or a podcast (Boys, 2007). The navigational aspect (see Neves et al., 2012; Perego, 2018) is even more crucial in self-directed tours because the directional cues need to be comprehensive but also not to interfere with the description, so it is generally advised to keep them on a separate track, allowing sighted users to skip the information (Snyder, 2010).

One advantage of recorded ADs is that they create the opportunity to include soundpainting techniques, thus adding another layer to the aesthetic experience (see definition of “enriched descriptive guides” in Neves, 2016). AD can incorporate sound in a creative way to serve as an analogue for vision in support of the verbal description (Giansante, 2015; Snyder, 2010, 2014) and/or to convey information with the implicitness and ambiguity that is typical of visual as opposed to verbal language (Neves, 2012; Wendorf, 2017). In the case of church ADs, soundpainting techniques could use recorded samples of sacred music or of the interaction between clergy and attendees during the mass.

Depending on the resources allocated to each project, the guidelines presented in this chapter can be used to inform both live and recorded descriptions. Since ADs are usually based on a script, the opportunity also arises to translate them into other languages to cater to foreign visitors; a possibility that should be taken into consideration, as many visually impaired tourists that are used to having a wider offer of audio described products in their home countries (e.g., United States and United Kingdom) expect to find the same service abroad and are often disappointed (Pericoli, museum docent, personal communication 2016, September 30th). Studies show that translating AD scripts is a cost-efficient way to increase the offer of audio described products (see e.g., Jankowska, 2015; Jankowska et al., 2017; López Vera, 2006). As translators are trained to address intercultural issues (López Vera, 2006) and act as mediators between two or more cultures, translating church descriptions, where culture-bound elements are likely to abound, could be a perfect solution to produce good quality descriptions that are tailored to the target audience (Jankowska et al., 2017).

6. Future directions

While in museums artworks are gathered from all over the world and exhibited out of their original context, in churches visitors have the unique opportunity to experience art in its original and current context (Socrati, 2013). The visit to a church is also a multisensory experience that does not stimulate sight alone: a quiet place with perfect acoustics, a church often has a very distinctive smell and some of its architectural/ornamental elements can be touched. Additionally, churches can be explored entirely (with the exception of areas that only the clergy can access and that are also restricted to sighted viewers) and safely (churches are normally devoid of obstacles and barriers). Thanks to these characteristics, they are perfectly accessible to visually impaired people.

As Wendorf (2017) notes, one of the main challenges of modern societies is “promoting equal access to culture for everyone and this means including the disabled in social and cultural life.”
cultural life by creating conditions in which they can access cultural heritage” (p. 85). Regardless of personal beliefs, churches are part of the cultural heritage of many countries and as such it would be an act of social justice to make them accessible to people with sight loss wanting to experience their historical and artistic value. Furthermore, as Orero and Matamala (2013) underline, the technique of AD is not only for visually impaired users, but also for the general population, who can benefit from vivid, effective descriptions (Snyder, 2010: 62; see also Neves et al., 2012).

AD has been subjected to standardisation since its origins (Orero & Matamala, 2013), but before the European projects ADLAB (2011–2014, www.adlabproject.eu/home/) and ADLAB PRO (2016–2019, www.adlabpro.eu/), AD guidelines (if used at all) were rather generic and driven by commonsense and experience, ultimately proving unable to explain why some descriptions were more effective than others (Braun, 2008). In order to bridge this gap, research-based AD guidelines have been developed, marking a significant step forward. Intended to be mainly over-arching (Snyder, 2010: 4), these guidelines are usually subdivided into different categories to explore the differences between audio describing media, theatre, visual arts and so forth. When sections on architecture AD are included, they are not tailored to one building type in particular. In the comprehensive report that was written following the pilot “Sense of place” it is stated that “it would be valuable to investigate scaling up the process . . . testing the guidelines across a wider range of buildings” in order to fine-tune them (Boys, 2007: 5). It is suggested in this chapter that narrowing down the scope of guidelines for architecture AD, i.e., devising ad hoc strategies for specific building types, is not only possible, but perhaps more beneficial than finding one-size-fits-all solutions. Specific guidelines can be expected to lead to a more efficient descriptive process, easier fruition and more accurate quality assessment, as will be explored in the following paragraphs.

First of all, a tool that groups the distinctive features of inherently modular buildings can be a useful aid to describers, as it can be used as a conceptual framework to follow when writing their descriptions and dealing with the difficult task of content selection. Once the guidelines are established, it would be possible to export the template to any building that fits into that category and tailor it to the specificities of the building in question.

If the guidelines are to be standardised, they need to be essential, including only those elements that are distinctive of any church as such. At the same time, every church (worth describing) has something that makes it special and unique. This “something” is what is going to flesh out the description or multisensory aesthetic and intellectual experience. This means that not all the points presented in this chapter would be necessarily included in every AD based upon these guidelines. Among them, special emphasis would be placed on the architectural, ornamental, historical elements that make the church special and unique, so that the description of those elements stays with visitors at the end of the experience. The length and complexity of the other points should be decided and adjusted accordingly.

Secondly, when an external guide is not used, the final product is likely to present deficiencies that make its fruition more difficult for the target audience (cf. Orero, 2012). This holds particularly true in the case of very complex multisensory ensembles like buildings. To the best of the author’s knowledge, there are to this day no examples of guidelines devised specifically for the AD of churches, but there have been examples of projects aimed at making churches accessible to visually impaired people. However valuable, these well-meaning projects often do not meet the requirements even in existing general AD guidelines as regards content selection, language used, descriptive quality and duration.11
Finally, the development of shared guidelines could be beneficial to the assessment of quality, a crucial topic in Translation Studies (cf. Scarpa, 2008) that is hard to gauge when no benchmark has been established to measure it against. The issue of quality is now at the centre of many investigations in Media Accessibility (MA) and Audio Visual Translation (AVT) studies, as demonstrated by UMAQ (http://pagines.uab.cat/umaq/), the first European project specifically focusing on quality in MA and AVT. In keeping with the philosophy of this project, standardisation is proposed here as a step forward towards overcoming the current fragmented landscape at policy and research levels. If all church descriptions were based on the same template and conformed to the standards and conventions established by the academic and professional communities, with the feedback of end-users, their quality would be easier to assess objectively. At the present stage, it is impossible to claim whether the proposed guidelines would contribute to achieving this goal and the issue needs to be addressed through empirical research.

This suggestion is offered in the hope of sparking a debate that would involve not only AD scholars and practitioners, but also architects, artists and visually impaired users in order to agree on a final version to be used in real projects and open up churches to a wider audience. Audio describing cultural heritage requires a wide range of expertise (history and art theory, linguistics, psychology and technology, to name but a few) and it would be very beneficial for scholars and practitioners alike if – as Di Giovanni et al. (2012) claim – this branch of AD studies was investigated in a multidisciplinary perspective (cf. also Holšánová, 2016; Wendorf, 2017). This would also allow us to address the controversial issue of interpretation (Snyder, 2010, 2014). Starting from the premise that personal opinions should never get in the way of a good description, any attempt at making sense of complex multimodal texts like churches would be bound to involve teamwork between different experts and visually impaired advisors. As Boys (2007: 27) points out, “different interpretations ... can add texture and richness to our understandings of material space”.

Notes
1 As cultural heritage sites, not (only) as places of worship.
2 Even though some architectural elements interestingly seem to be used with the same symbolic function in different religions, e.g., the dome that is used as an abstraction of the vault of heaven in both Islam and Christianity.
3 “Religious tourism” has become increasingly popular in the past few years, especially among young people in search for a sense of significance beyond a particular faith (Cugini, 2019).
4 The Encyclopaedia Britannica (www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity/Art-and-iconography#ref301261) interestingly notes that “[u]ntil the 17th century, the history of Western art was largely identical with the history of Western ecclesiastical and religious art”.
5 Restored as a mosque in July 2020 by decree of President Erdogan.
6 By “contemporary” I refer to churches built according to the latest developments of the architectural language, as opposed to present-day churches that conform to traditional styles and conventions.
7 In some countries, terms from the church field are also used in everyday language and can be found in common idioms (e.g., in English “to walk down the aisle”). This may vary according to the linguistic and cultural context, so it will be up to the describer to determine whether a term is likely to be well-known to his/her target audience or not.
8 For example, only including those terms that identify distinguishing features of a particular style (e.g., pointed and ogee arches in Gothic architecture). As Perego (2018) correctly argues, this is a nuanced issue, as there are many variables affecting the comprehensibility of a text. Some of them (e.g., cultural background and language proficiency) being user- rather than text-dependent, it can be difficult to measure the complexity of a text objectively.
9 This example was taken from the AD of Saint Ambrose basilica in Milan, Italy (my translation). The whole description is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=62EC48abocQ.
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11 See the project “Le chiese di Milano . . . in tutti i sensi”, sponsored by Milan City Council in collaboration with Lettura Agevolata and Tactile Vision (2015). A sample description is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMkHkpyHHnA.

7. Further reading


8. References


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