European case-study of the accessibility of protected built heritage

Versailles Castle, France:
access for all at the heart of the Grand Versailles project
Type of site: Castle and museum

Country: France

Main access works:
1. The immediate surroundings and the inside of the castle
2. The access challenges presented by the parc and the Trianon castles
3. The organisation of seamless access journeys, in partnership with local authorities

Players:
- Client: the public institution of the castle, museum and national estate of Versailles
- Project manager: Frédéric Didier, chief architect of the Historic Monuments

Find out more: www.chateauversailles.fr
Context

Location:
Ile de France region, 16 km (10 miles) West of Paris

Description:
This public institution with castle, museum and the national estate of Versailles occupies a 2000 acres (800 hectares) wide space. It comprises the castle, which is classed a UNESCO World Heritage site, the parc adjacent to the castle, a managed forest and the estate surrounding the Grand and Petit Trianon castles.

Tourist value:
- castle of the Kings of France Louis XIV to Louis, a symbol of the Grand Siècle (17th Century, known as «Grand Century») and of French art
- several million visitors per year: 5.9 million in 2010

Access challenges:
A vast programme of restoration and of upgrading of facilities was started in 2003. Accessibility for all publics is a major objective of this project called Grand Versailles (2003-2020). Important restoration and renovation works have been undertaken which provide access for people with disabilities, in particular for people with mobility difficulties: accessibility is not seen as separate or additional, but as part and parcel of the development plan for the Grand Versailles and access for all publics. The access improvements included heritage interpretation programmes and access aids for several groups of disabled people.

Aerial view of the 2000 acres (800 hectares) big Versailles estate.
1. The immediate vicinity and inside of the castle

A. The immediate vicinity of the castle

Entry to Versailles castle is via the Cour d’Honneur, a courtyard. This is paved with the famous Versailles pavement stones, which are an integral part of the valorisation of the monument. An alley has been created with new pavement stones made of the same material, but with less than 0.39 inches (1cm) variation in surface height. This new alley way is used by the majority of visitors today. It has also enabled the creation of an axis which underlines the classical and symmetrical architecture of the castle.

Some access challenges have been resolved by coming back to some historical features. The upper part of the Cour d’Honneur, for example, was restored to its original level. A gain in height of 23.6 inches (60 cm) was achieved and, as a result, the porches of the Dufour and Gabriel pavilions could be removed. There is thus level access to the castle, as was the case at the time of its construction.

These access improvements are not designed for one visitor group only: they benefit families with push chairs, people wearing shoes with high heels and older people. They improve access for the public.
1. THE IMMEDIATE VICINITY AND INSIDE OF THE CASTLE

B. The inside of the castle

The Ministers Wings is where reception starts: individual visitors use the South aisle, while the North aisle is for school groups and guided tours. As visitors with mobility difficulties come in free of charge, there is no need to use these entries. However, visitors may need to enter these dedicated spaces and they too have to be accessible.

After having walked through these points of initial reception, visitors move towards the main entry: Pavillon Gabriel for groups and a temporary reception building for individuals. Most visitors with mobility difficulties use the Pavillon Gabriel which has been the subject of many works. The internal lay-out has been entirely altered and a change in height of 25.6 inches (70 cm) became manageable through the installation of a platform lift. This has been specially designed to harmonise optimally with the interior spaces. The temporary reception building has been fitted with a ramp that provides level access to the Royal Court.

Inside, the two main levels are accessible: the ground floor (which leads to the gardens) and the first floor. The existing lifts leading to these two floors are not always positioned along the visitors’ journey. The installation of new lifts in the immediate vicinity of staircases is an objective of the development plan for the Grand Versailles and will allow a more fluid visit. Works are planned in the North and South wings.
2. Challenges presented by the parc and the trianon castles

A. The parc

The parc of Versailles castle presents very real access challenges. It is currently not possible to make the entire parc accessible: there are numerous stairs and important differences of height. It has therefore been considered preferable to focus instead on the creation of accessible walking trails starting at sign-posted accessible parking spaces.

Yet, there is one exception. Thanks to a sponsor, a platform lift has been put in place from which to reach the flowerbeds to the North. It has a unique design which blends perfectly with the park and its heritage surroundings.

In the remainder of the parc, accessible pathways designed for access and comfortable discovery have been created, with the objective of making all its copses accessible. Four accessible walks are on offer to date. A system of signage has been created which indicates the level of difficulty presented by the walks.

Motorised transport is also available. A small and accessible train takes visitors up to Marie-Antoinette's estate. Electrical cars are available for rent.

(map of one of the walks recommended to visitors with mobility difficulties.

The flowerbeds of the North can be reached via a platform lift (left). An accessible small train takes you on a visitor trail up to the estate of Marie-Antoinette.

Source: Frédéric Didier
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Accesibilité Patrimoine
B. The Trianon castle

This vast estate comprises two castles, a parc, an English style garden and the Queen’s hamlet. As for the outdoor spaces, the project consists in the creation of several accessible walking trails. These are clearly indicated and visitors with mobility difficulties are sign-posted to easy to use and safe paths.

The Petit and Grand Trianon can be reached via simple, reversible low cost ramps. The apartments of the Grand Trianon are accessible to visitors with mobility difficulties. Owing to conservation requirements only the ground floor of the Petit Trianon is accessible for wheelchair users. With the help of a sponsor, a multi-media space was installed on the ground floor. There visitors can enjoy a virtual tour of the first floor and general information.

Most access works undertaken at the public institution of the castle, the museum and the estate of Versailles have reversibility as a main underlying principle, as a response to the requirements of heritage preservation. The fitting of lifts where this proves necessary is rare exception.
3. The organisation of seamless access journeys, in partnership with local authorities

The Place d'Armes situated downhill from the castle has seen significant restoration works. It has become entirely accessible and affords improved visitor comfort. The pedestrian walkways have been transformed: the gravelled surface has been replaced by a smooth and more comfortable concrete surface. Lateral signage, as well as luminous signage has been installed for visually impaired visitors to compensate for the absence of low level lighting. Information panels have been strategically placed along the visitors’ route.

To avoid journeys that are too long, visitors with disabilities can go by car straight to the Cour d’Honneur, close to the entry for individual visitors. As long as places are available, parking is allowed after obtaining permission from the office of specific publics of the institution of the castle of Versailles.

To make sure the visitors’ access journeys are seamless, access works are undertaken in collaboration with the town of Versailles, notably from the Versailles Rive Gauche station, which is the most used by castle’s audiences.

“A accessible user journey presents many challenges. If one obstacle remains, the challenge is not entirely met. It is vital that all players are involved when addressing transportation, in particular the local authority.” Daniel Sancho, Director of heritage and gardens of the castle of Versailles.

Rockefeller Avenue and the Place d’Armes with the equestrian statue of Louis XIV and the castle in the background before restoration (above) and after restoration (below)
Conclusion

Accessibility is an integral part of the restoration programme for the Grand Versailles (2003-2020). Important works have been undertaken both inside and in the surroundings of Versailles, in partnership with local authorities. These changes to the environment are now of benefit to all visitors.

Read more
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Tips for teachers
- What are the advantages and limitations of the reversibility principle in access planning?
- What access solutions are there for historic gardens?

Photo credits: courtesy of the public institution of the castle, museum and national estate of Versailles and Christian Milet

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