

ART & MUSEUM



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Making art spaces accessible for all



Technology that expands narratives at the National Portrait Gallery

As designers of art spaces all over the world, we always think about accessibility at the beginning of the creative process. Otherwise, there often comes a point when the client panics and provides a tick box of late rules, which can be very challenging to incorporate. We accept too that we can never hope to reflect each individual visitor's own lived experience. Techniques that help some hinder others - for example, a lower showcase might suit children but exclude older people. What provides excitement for one person might overwhelm others. As Heather Pressman and Danielle Schulz say in their excellent book 'The Art of Access' - 'Disability is quite complex, and every person is unique; no two people who identify as having the same disability will have the completely same life experiences.'

In the process of designing accessibly many times over for art institutions such as The National Portrait Gallery,

National Trust and The Courtauld Institute in the UK and international art exhibitions in Norway, India, the USA and China, here are six key accessible principles we have devised:

1 - Sensory Spaces

At the beginning of a visitor journey, it's important to hook people in, so they're ready to learn; an emotional response really opens people up to engage and feel.

For the UK's Natural History Museum, in a show about the science of colour and mechanisms within the natural world, we worked with artist Liz West to help realise her artwork, in the form of an abstract dichroic installation, encouraging people to identify with the concept of colour in a sensory way before taking in the concept, playing with lights, and seeing colours mix and disappear as visitors move around the space.

2 - Intuitive Experiences

A key aspect of a good cultural experience is not being told what to do, but letting the space tell you, so that the visitor flow feels natural and you don't feel to be on a conveyor belt walking past a beautiful painting for a matter of seconds. We plan experiences carefully, via computer and physical models, to lead people through spaces using key works on vistas or using light to pin-point and highlight like on a theatre stage. These techniques are especially useful for large institutions with international visitors, where wording can generate not only comprehension issues but can also prove exclusive if those words are ill-considered. Careful juxtapositions, tactile lines on the ground, colours and light are all useful tools for creating a calm and considered space visitors feel in control of.

3 - Enabling Technology

There's a misconception that making something accessible means equalising the experience for everyone. The world we live in is not homogenous, but complex with rough edges and difficult at times. We need to believe in the idea that people will experience works in their own way - and that's ok - and that technology can be our friend in this.

I first came across access consultant Molly Watt, registered Deaf Blind and an advocate for assisted technology and design for those with sensory impairment, when working at Wordsworth Grasmere. We were considering how people would visit Dove Cottage, the great English Romantic poet's former home in the Lake District, and wanted to create a totally immersive, theatrical experience, as if Wordsworth himself might just be in the next room. The original spaces would have been candle-lit and noisy, full of people in cramped spaces.

Rather than diluting this, Molly helped show how technology could help visually or hearing-impaired visitors add layers interpretation without changing the fundamental idea or drenching everything in overbright light. Working with filmmaker Nick Street, we produced a film that captured the historic experience, for example, using actors to tell the story. Visitors would watch or listen to this before going through to more minimal spaces, where the power of imagination could connect the experiences, using sound to augment the narrative. Molly argued that using audio description technologies and iPads or people's own devices meant they could control their own experience and access all that we were trying to achieve.

4) Gesture to Detail

We plan our exhibitions and galleries like a musical score, building up ideas slowly, before adding detail and layers. What's vital is having the right people in the room and being part of the conversation, so we don't tackle issues without lived experience being represented.

Not everyone has to 'get' everything. We mitigate this by tracing out and planning different journeys. We think about pacing and stress - and how some spaces are more visually impactful and some more of an aural experience. We say the same things in different ways.

5) Simplify and Repeat

Sometimes I feel that our job as designers is about tidying up - creating spaces without noise.

However, repetition is also an important principle of accessibility - saying the same thing in different ways and with different emphasis. Consistency and repetition are helpful guides - people soon learn to seek out the panel on the left of the door, at the same height, displayed in the same way, and in the same colour.

6) Testing

The final key is to try things out and open out the discussion. This means accepting the limits of your own voice and experience. Invite people with different experiences to comment - and learn from where you get to. 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is a great principle for meaningful inclusion.

Good accessible design really is a state of mind. It's about believing in a process, keeping an open mind, and listening. Try, test, learn - and repeat.



Pippa Nissen
Director, Nissen Richards Studio