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GÍGUR VISITOR CENTRE, ICELAND

Nissen Richards Studio voyages to a remote part of Iceland for a joint venture design that embraces its surroundings

BUILDING PROJECTS

A visit to a volcano

GÍGUR VISITOR CENTRE, ICELAND

A redesigned visitor centre in a remote part of Iceland saw a collaboration between British and Icelandic practices to immerse visitors in the landscape, provide an engaging exhibition, and protect users from a harsh climate. Roseanne Field reports.

NORTHERN LIGHT
The new visitor centre is located in a remote part of the huge Vatnajökull national park, in the 'Northern Lights capital of Iceland,' which created a host of challenges
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The volcanic Vatnajökull National Park is the largest national park in Iceland, located on the south of the island and covering 1.4 million hectares – nearly 14% of Iceland's territory. The park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is centred around the Vatnajökull glacier, with a landscape defined by everything Iceland is famed for – glaciers, ice caves, snowy mountain peaks, and active geothermal areas.

At the northern end of the national park is the Mývatn nature reserve, formed by Lake Mývatn and its surrounding wetlands. The self-proclaimed 'Northern Lights capital of Iceland,' the area is also known for its volcanic and geothermal activity and an ecosystem critically supported by the lake, which maintains the lifecycle of the region's birds and aquatic life.

The area already had a 400 m^2 visitor centre, though it had chiefly served as more of an information office, staffed by park rangers who could provide guidance on local trails, accommodation and natural attractions.

In a joint venture, the Vatnajökull National Park and Environment Agency of Iceland decided the area needed an overhaul, to create a permanent exhibition that would house educational displays and galleries relating to the surrounding volcanic landscape and ecosystem, Icelandic folklore and the landscape's cultural connections, and environmental pressures including climate change. The centre would also comprise a cafe and shop, and an overall design that connects visitors to the

surrounding protected landscape.

Meanwhile, UK-based architectural practice Nissen Richards Studio had been approached by Karl Kvaran of Sp(r)int Studio in Iceland with an idea that the two could work together on joint pitches in the Nordic region, based on their "similar practice ethos and sensibility," explains Pippa Nissen, director and co-founder of Nissen Richards Studio. "We got on very well, and agreed to the idea of finding work we could do together."

Based in Iceland, it was Kvaran who came across the opportunity to bid for the project; and suggested they jointly pursue it.

Going remote

While the national parks of Iceland are undeniably popular with visitors, numbers are considerably lower in the winter months, with the country often experiencing sub zero temperatures and extreme weather events – particularly in remote areas such as Mývatn. Even in the summer months, temperatures only average between 10 and 15 degrees, making a comfortable indoor environment an essential part of the experience.

The key overall element of the brief, therefore, was to "create a place that could offer shelter, especially in more challenging weather," explains Nissen. "A place that would provide a focus at the centre of the landscape and also a place that would unpack the fascinating geography, geology and ecology of the immediate landscape." It was also important to all involved in the project that this be accessible to visitors of all ages, "with a special focus on family groups," adds Nissen.

While the remote location formed the key design cues, it concurrently presented a unique set of challenges to Nissen Richards Studio. "This was one of the most challenging locations we have ever dealt with in that it was so difficult to access, not only for us but for the wider team," Nissen explains.

For the UK team, getting to site meant a flight to Reykjavik, followed by an internal flight and a long car journey. The project had a deadline in that it needed to be finished in time for the busy summer seasons, meaning construction had to take

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Pippa Nissen, Nissen Richards Studio

place during cold and dark winter months. "Winters are long and very hard in the region, with a lot of snow as well as long nights, so the environmental factors were challenging for all the team," says Nissen.

The remote location also meant a lack of specialist constructors, both for the exhibition and the associated graphic design elements, which were significant and included display boards, infographics, maps, illustrations and descriptions. The team opted to work with a Danish contractor whom Nissen Richards Studio had worked with previously on a number of Nordic projects and who they knew to be reliable. Also, this contractor had an Icelandic employee; they functioned as a "key link person to build and liaise," explains Nissen. Much of the exhibition itself was built remotely, both in Denmark and elsewhere in Iceland, and then assembled onsite.

Although the remoteness added challenges, the practice benefitted from experience of exhibition design. "We're specialists, so we were able to pull on aspects from many previous different exhibitions," says Nissen. Having worked internationally for a number of years including multiple Nordic projects, "undoubtedly helped in our approach here," she adds, "especially in terms of working with international teams and suppliers."

Responsive design

From the outset the design of the exhibition was "entirely responsive to the surrounding landscape," Nissen says. Initial ideas in terms of design, materials and colour were all driven by the volcanic nature reserve the centre sits within which is "renowned for its birdlife and unique volcanic and geothermal activity," she explains.

Specifically, the lake and surrounding wetlands proved a direct source of inspiration for the exhibition's colour palette – blues and greens. It also inspired the use of stained timber furniture in the space; this was "in keeping with the stunning landscape all around," Nissen says.

However, also important – arguably more so – was to not compete with the panoramic views that surround the centre, "but to design the exhibition in harmony with them," explains Nissen. "This meant that the exhibition design is arranged at quite a low level to frame the views, so that individual exhibits act like elements of the landscape, rising up from the table level."

The team were working with the existing building, which had been primarily functioning as more of an information

centre. It already featured glazing to all four sides, with an existing rooflight and external terrace. While changes made weren't particularly substantial or significant, they were intentional, done so to bring the overall building "into harmony with the exhibition," Nissen says, "in terms of changing the colour of the timber and peeling back some existing layers to simplify the building and ensure the exhibition design became the main focus."

There were also some more practical changes and additions – namely upgraded lighting and the introduction of translucent screens to help with the low summertime sun. The existing roof was also "very visually noisy and spacious" which conflicted with the team's desire to focus visitors' attention on the landscape outside, and the exhibits and window level. To negate this, "we diminished ceiling details to bring people's eyes down, and also incorporated some suspended elements to close the gap," she explains.

With timber already present within the existing structure, plus its "obvious natural connotations," it was used extensively for finishes in the exhibition, "stained to match the wonderful blues and greens of the external landscape," says Nissen. Timber also features at the welcome desk and within the shop and cafe, which follow the same "timber design language" as the exhibition space itself. "Timber is warm, tactile and comfortable and we looked at lots of samples to get the feel just right."

This attention to detail is a key factor in the project. The team wanted to focus on everything from the bigger elements, right down to smaller details. It was important the exhibition and its data visualisations and interactives would clearly represent not only the science but, continuing the overall theme, the "beauty of nature," Nissen explains. This saw them "prioritise the use of circles, curves and organic shapes whenever appropriate."

As well as colour and material choices, the topography of the landscape inspired the placement of furniture within the exhibition. It was intentionally placed at the level of the bases of the windows, "so that

EXTERNAL ENVELOPE
The 400 m^2 exhibition space is glazed on all four sides, enveloping users in the surroundings

To appeal to children in particular, the team decided to put the emphasis on play and sensory elements, steering clear of the classic 'look but don't touch' rule

the interior landscape of shapes and the dramatic external landscape are reflections of each other at different scales, but don't compete," Nissen explains.

To draw visitors to the external surroundings, interactive displays and listening devices have been placed along the outer edge of the exhibition against the windows. This allows them to look out as they're reading or listening, or in many cases touching the various displays, with "tangibility" being a major goal of the exhibition design, says Nissen.

Building-in flexibility was also a core requirement. For example, there is an 'active' space within the exhibition that houses different examples of the local flora and fauna which will be switched out over the years. It was therefore important that this exhibit be designed in a way that would allow it to be updated regularly.

Prioritising people

Visitor flow is "paramount," when it comes to any exhibition design, says Nissen. The team therefore predicted how visitors would prefer to move around the exhibition space, choosing the layout carefully based on this. It has been designed to be deliberately open, allowing visitors to weave in and out of the "exhibition landscape" and view the various models, drawings and specimens

from different perspectives, explains Nissen. "Additional content specifically relates to the perspective from which the visitor is looking – whether research, conservation or community, for example – and enriches the experience," she continues. "We designed clusters of objects and elements that relate to each other so that there is unity and integrity from every angle."

The content of the exhibits themselves is, in places, somewhat complex, and presenting this in a way that still engages visitors was another important topic of discussion. "Engaging people with difficult content and making it interesting and accessible is a vital consideration," Nissen says. "We worked with local illustrators to make content relatable and used 3D printing for maximum tangibility."

It was also crucial that exhibits could be enjoyed and understood by visitors of both different nationalities and different ages, particularly given its focus on appealing to family groups. All information in the exhibition is given in both Icelandic and English, with audio devices also providing information in other languages.

There was a balance to be found between making "complex geological and geographical concepts comprehensible for visitors of all ages" while not oversimplifying anything, explains Nissen.

While the original roof was "very visually noisy," the architects "diminished ceiling details to bring people's eyes down"

"It's fine to have layers of complexity, so that everyone understands something rather than everyone understanding everything," she says, "but it was absolutely one of the main goals of the exhibition design to make the content engaging for all ages."

To appeal to children in particular, the team decided to put the emphasis on play and sensory elements, steering clear of the classic 'look but don't touch' rule. "Play is a powerful tool for learning and it was important that this was a playful space where younger visitors can explore, touch, experiment and engage in a multi-sensory way," Nissen says. "Information includes plenty of sturdy physical interactives for children, with 'touch' very much encouraged throughout."

There are also child-specific elements and activities included at child height, such as drawing and other interactive activities, and 'troll tunnels' that only children can access. All of these features have proved to be an "immediate success," says Nissen.

While educational content and displays on the formation of the surrounding nature reserve and its vital ecosystem is at the core of the exhibition, so too is the way people and nature coexist and the impact that humans are having on the area. The team wanted visitors to consider how our interaction with and inhabitation of landscapes affects them, encouraging younger visitors in particular to "imagine their role in preserving fragile ecosystems over time."

Each themed area of the exhibition includes stories that relate to both the geology and biology, as well as "the coexistence of man and nature," says Nissen. "Stories relating to research and nature conservation also run as threads through the exhibition." In particular, the threats and adaptations forced by climate change are key themes.

The exhibition also details the cultural significance of the landscape and its associated folklore. This is where Nissen Richards' collaboration with Sp(r)int Studio really paid off. "They are very rooted in the local culture and were very involved in the concept," explains Nissen.

NATURALLY TACTILE
The exhibition itself invites users of all ages to touch the exhibits and features copious use of wood

"This really added to the richness of the project's resolution."

This collaboration was key at every stage of the project, from the early design stages through to the graphic design elements and delivery and construction onsite. "Everyone was very collaboratively-minded," says Nissen. "We managed the process like a relay race, with Sp(r)int Studio managing the client relationship and contractor onsite, where we were more biased towards the front end in the design and detailing. The whole project was an example of good collaboration."

The emphasis on locale and people was woven through the project, with a "clear approach to sustainability that favoured the natural and the local at all times and on every level," Nissen says. This included many locally-made elements, such as films, interactives, using a local illustrator, local installation labour and construction done within the Nordic region.

Sustainability was reinforced by reusing existing elements where possible, and building "for the long term" through the use of high quality materials.

Nissen describes the construction process itself as being more like a "theatrical production" in that so much was produced offsite and brought together "in a very fast end process – including, in typical theatrical fashion, some last minute tweaks!"

Once all final amends were achieved, the centre opened to great acclaim. Nissen cites TripAdvisor reviews as testament to this; the overwhelming majority rank the centre as 'Excellent' or 'Good.' Though not without its particular challenges, she says the whole team thoroughly enjoyed working on the project, thanks in particular to the uniqueness of the location and the resultant content of the exhibition. She concludes: "The brief was incredibly interesting, and it was a great voyage of discovery for all our team." ■