



You've arrived: Building spaces and teams with care

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Abstract

Cultural institutions across the world are actively striving to create inclusive and fully accessible spaces for their visitors. This paper reflects on some of these strategies, exploring how a thoughtful and responsive approach to signage and promotional materials, as well as catering to different languages, can help museums and galleries connect more meaningfully and compassionately with their visitors.

Using case studies from the Whitworth Art Gallery and Manchester Museum, this paper demonstrates that accessibility is created not just by the building design and policies employed, but also the people behind these strategic plans.

These people are the reason cultural spaces go beyond simply being accessible, to become thoughtful and inclusive spaces. Visitor teams—defined as anyone working or volunteering directly with the public, or people who are often referred to as front of house staff—are responsible for executing the values of an organisation and developing direct responses

to the needs of the visitor. As such, by including and investing in the people who work in public spaces every day, institutions can successfully find the balance between design and care of people when they arrive.

At the heart of the city

Manchester is the first city in the UK to be recognised by the World Health Organisation as age-friendly. Situated right at the heart of the city, the Whitworth, and Manchester Museum, both directorates of the University of Manchester, are leading a cultural movement to become more open and inclusive than ever. Inclusion and care are no longer additions or afterthoughts; instead, they form the core values of the museums, and are reflected both in the institutional vision and in the actions of the people responding to the needs of the visitors. The positions of head of visitor teams, and access lead, across these two very different cultural venues provide a unique opportunity to bring a diverse range of skilled individuals into teams that are knowledgeable, proactive, and thoughtful in their approach.

Building with care

It was from the same foundation of civic pride that both the Whitworth, and Manchester Museum were built. The Whitworth, founded in 1889 as the first English gallery in a park, is located in the heart of one of Manchester's most diverse communities. In 2015, the gallery undertook a £15 million development project, doubling its size and creating physically accessible public areas that are designed to be both a home and a garden for the city. This mix of indoor and outdoor spaces allows the Whitworth to run art, health and wellbeing programmes, as well as exhibitions, all of which create a sanctuary away from the pressures of modern living.

Manchester Museum is likewise undergoing a transformation to become the country's most inclusive, caring and imaginative museum. This £13 million redevelopment plan will bring in new galleries devoted to South Asian and Chinese culture, helping the museum become the world's first Centre for Age Friendly Culture with enhanced visitor facilities designed to be inclusive and accessible.

To facilitate this transformation towards inclusiveness and accessibility, both institutions have forged partnerships with architects and disability groups. They have also established internal working groups championing access and worked with engineers specialised in designing dementia-friendly spaces by incorporating features like thoughtful signage with contrasting colours, consistent and simple floor designs, seats with arm rests, and monitored sensory levels.

Accessible public spaces should create an inclusive environment that “recognises and accommodates differences in the way people use the built environment. It facilitates dignified, equal and intuitive use by everyone” (Earnscliffe 2019, 3). Physical design, therefore, despite being a huge step in the right direction, is not sufficient and much more must be done to transform these spaces into places of care and kindness.

Beyond the bricks and mortar

Social inclusion has been part of the language of museums and galleries for nearly two decades (Sandell 2003, 45), making the sector very familiar with the theories, and strategies to design physically accessible spaces and to ensure exhibitions and programmes are inclusive (ICOM 2007). Nevertheless, the measure of success is often dependent on the confidence and preparation of the visitor teams working to provide a supportive environment.

As such, it is investment in the training of visitor teams that gives museums the confidence to execute ambitious and sometimes challenging exhibitions at both the Whitworth, and Manchester Museum. It also makes sense that the people facilitating the space or programme have a seat at the table where design decisions are made.

One example of the value of including visitor teams from the planning stages is seen in the exhibition *Beyond Dementia*. This was held from July 2017 to January 2018, at the Whitworth and co-curated with the Fabulous Forgetful Friends, a Manchester-based group of people living with dementia.

The exhibition sought to tackle the misunderstandings and stigma surrounding dementia. Targeted at those living with or affected by dementia, it also aimed to explore how viewing and making art could develop and build powerful connections with both the self and others.

The fact that the visitors felt welcome and supported at the museum was credit to the hard work and confidence of the visitor teams, who were unwavering throughout the process of executing this complex and sometimes challenging exhibition. They attended training with the Fabulous Forgetful Friends and attended sessions with the UK's leading dementia support and research charity, the Alzheimer's Society, to understand how to better interact with those affected by the condition.

This led to the Whitworth being certified as Dementia Friends, a status that recognises its intention to learn about dementia with the intention of helping the community. All visitor team management were also certified as Dementia Friends Champions, proving they are qualified to serve as volunteers, run information sessions and inspire others to help those living with dementia live well.

The positive impact of this went both ways. Members of the visitor teams were often emotional, citing the training as a crucial factor that increased their understanding and empathy, ultimately helping them confidently engage with visitors from all walks of life.

Visitor feedback was also overwhelmingly positive across all aspects of how the Whitworth approached the exhibition and programming.

This led to the exhibition being extended by three months to accommodate public demand.

Overall, it was clear that the model of co-curating exhibitions in tandem with the relevant training and development of the visitor teams was effective at both building unity within an organisation, as well as developing trust with the visitors.

Furthermore, investing in continual training designed specifically for the visitor teams roles has only strengthened the museum and gallery's connections with visitors. This training, which covers areas including British Sign Language, LGBTQ+, audio describing, live captioning technology¹, mental health first aid, and disability awareness, guarantees a high level of support to everyone who visits. It has also helped build meaningful relationships with external health and wellbeing organisations. Most importantly, the investment of time and care in the staff has given life and confidence to some of the most ambitious and diverse programmes and exhibitions.

Reading between the lines

It is also important to understand how digital and printed materials are a method of connecting with audiences. To do this, as the Manchester Museum recently found, it is crucial to be responsive to how an audience uses public materials. To tell the story of its Hello Future transformation project, the museum printed two versions of a brochure: One was designed in a format using a large font size, in contrasting colours against yellow, and included the label "large print" on the cover, while the other version was half the size, using a smaller font, and printed against a less contrasting dark blue.

In an informal visitor survey, the overall majority of visitors indicated a preference for the larger version, however, most resisted taking it because of the label “large print”. They thought that it had been produced specifically for people with a visual impairment. Instead of giving visitors a choice, which is what the museum had intended, they inadvertently removed it instead. This experience reinforced the need to consider that in the process of providing materials that are disability-aware and socially inclusive, museums should also avoid creating unintentional psychological barriers.

A multilingual city

Manchester is both culturally and linguistically diverse, with over 200 languages spoken (University of Manchester 2013). Providing a cultural experience appropriate for multiple audiences is often challenging and the lack of provision for different languages has been a barrier to access for many visitors (Leslie and Russell 2006). The idea of diversifying the languages for public tours came from the visitor teams, but the process was delayed by debates on the demographics to target and languages to cater to. The visitor teams eventually settled on an approach of starting with the languages spoken within the teams, like Italian, Spanish, Mandarin, Korean and Japanese.

Doing this has enabled both the Whitworth, and Manchester Museum, to create tours for all ages, interests and abilities. Despite this benefit, it is worth noting that initiatives like this come with a steep learning curve. Producing an offer based solely around the visitor teams’ capabilities is also risky as it means that the team’s capacity to deliver is dependent on the team composition—allocating research and

preparation time may become problematic.

However, the collective approach of both organisations was to give staff the capacity to plan, deliver and where necessary, re-design tours. This has led to a high quality, multilingual offering today, the process of which exemplifies perfectly what all cultural institutions have in common: The need to accept that change is inevitable and imaginative thinking is crucial.

In addition to the language tours led by the visitor teams, Manchester Museum is currently working in partnership with Multilingual Manchester, a cluster of research activities based in the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures at the University of Manchester, to enhance the language offerings through tours, translated materials and multilingual design. The Hello Future transformation campaign has been translated into 50 of the city’s languages, and Manchester Museum is preparing new and creative solutions for multilingual exhibition signage. By embedding the multilingual aspect into the heart of exhibition design and museum practice, Manchester Museum will become the UK’s first major cultural institution to embrace language diversity on this scale, and in doing so, also making the museum’s unique collections accessible to a global audience.

Concluding thoughts

Working across two very different cultural venues at different points across their journeys of transformation has shown there are universal factors for institutions to consider, regardless of the objects or experiences available to the visitor. Physical accessibility is a given. However, to understand the psychological accessibility of a place, exhibition, publication or activity

requires more than a thoughtful approach; it demands attention, evaluation, active listening, learning, and importantly, being prepared to take action.

A truly inclusive place does not simply remove barriers. It also does not marginalise people by the support that they need. Rather, it creates open honest spaces where kindness is shown and connections can flourish. To find the right balance between design and care requires that cultural institutions take an empathetic approach. Although museums and galleries have a duty to be socially inclusive, they must remember that with this visibility comes vulnerability. Any mistakes or perceived failures can become amplified based on an emotional response to inaccessibility or exclusion. The strength of an institution, therefore, is seen not just in its resilience, but also its ability to actively listen, learn and take action. For this reason, a collaborative approach right from the design stage can ensure that each decision is a true reflection of the organisation.

Ultimately, cultural organisations are more than their collections, exhibitions, or beautifully built spaces. Rather “some museums are like

old friends, museums to which you return years later feeling that you have never left...” (Bradburne 2001, 4).

At the Whitworth, and Manchester Museum, openness, honesty and visibility have been keys to success, and achievements have been made possible because of new approaches like co-designing and co-producing. This, together with the commitment of time and care has imbued even the most ambitious and diverse programmes and exhibitions with the confidence needed.

The people in these spaces—like the visitor teams—are essential for cultural venues to go beyond the brick, mortar and inclusive design, to truly show care for people when they arrive. Visitor teams open up conversations and bring to life the organisation’s values and visions. In other words, they are not just the eyes, ears, but also the beating heart of the organisations they serve. They transform spaces filled with “things” into places for meaningful discussions and lively debates, areas that inspire awe and wonder, and ultimately, create experiences that can last a lifetime.

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¹ This is in association with Stagertext, a registered charity, providing captioning and live subtitling services to arts venues. <http://www.stagertext.org/>