Inclusive communication strategies for accessible museums

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Resume
Modern museums and cultural venues are presently moving away from the old paradigm where museums were places for the past to be awed at, now to become spaces for experimentation and for sensory and emotional involvement. This new approach is mainly based on new communication techniques that see the whole museum as a unique multimodal text that needs coherent and cohesive strategies to get its messages across in every domain of its contact with the public.

This new communicative approach owes much to present concerns with accessibility – the effort to give people with a disability equal opportunities in environments that are hostile or disrespectful of their needs. In fact, museums are often “hostile” to a great number of visitors, who are forced into a passive stance while taking in, through sight alone, all that the museum has to offer. The effort to democratise the museum experience has led to a multitude of approaches that appeal to senses other than sight. The whole museum now seeks to express itself within and outside its physical boundaries through space and layout, through the exhibits themselves, the information made available in real and virtual environments and with practical activities.

Thisposter addresses integrated multisensory communication strategies in museums and cultural venues and offers some insight of an instance where the four tier inclusive communication model was put to trial. Its aim is to show how gratifying and entertaining museum experiences can be achieved through holistic communication strategies.

Museums for “all”
When addressing the issue of accessibility in the context of museums and cultural venues, the most common goal appears to be finding ways to make such places “accessible to all”. At a superficial level, access is understood to be environmental: the act of taking down barriers for people with disabilities.

Such an approach focuses on the profile of specific visitors and is, as such, inflexible and discriminating. In so doing, it contradicts the democratic understanding of “for all”, which is, in itself, a misleading notion. Nothing can ever be “for all” in that each person is an individual with needs that are “special” in some way. This said, accessibility should not be addressed as solutions for people with disabilities, but rather as those that will enhance each person’s interaction with the surrounding environment and social tissue. In other words, by transforming the notion of “for all” to one of “for the self”, one will be assuming that there are as many possibilities as there are profiles and no solution will be equally valid for all. This said, in this specific context, the underlying principle should be that everybody be provided with the means for a fulfilling and rewarding experience when visiting museums, regardless of individual profiles.

Dodd and Sandell (1988:14) offer us a list of eight access types: to which they add a check-list of another eight questions museums should consider when aiming to address: local and accessibility criteria; physical access. “Are there architectural barriers?”, sensory access. “Do exhibitions/actions facilitate the involvement of blind/visually impaired visitors?”, intellectual access. “Do exhibitions exclude visitors with poor background knowledge?” and “Are the exhibitions accessible to people with learning disorders?”, economic access. “Are entrance fees/prices too high for less privileged public?”; emotional access. “Is the museum welcoming to newcomers?” and “Are those working at the museum trained to deal with difference and disability?”, access to decision making. “Does the museum consult specialists and potential visitors when making decisions?”, access to information. “Does information/publicity reach new publics efficiently?”; and cultural access. “Are the collections/exhibitions relevant and of interest to specific publics?”.

This broad spectre, which is very much based on disability even though equally applicable to museums, at large, can be cut down to a new four tier set of criteria focusing on those elements that will promote the museum experience regardless of visitors’ profiles: 1. Dissemination and information 2. Access and mobility 3. Comfort and safety 4. Knowledge and experience.

This proposal fosters a holistic approach that might turn the museum “inclusive” rather than accessible. This means that the steps taken are directed to all potential visitors, that nothing is done exclusively for people with disabilities, and communication is based on multi-forming, i.e. making information available in every format possible so that everybody can find a mode that is truly suitable to their specific needs. This means paying special attention to the means used to advertise the museum – website, social media, conventional mass media and promotional materials; to the way the museum makes its space welcoming and easy to use; to the small details that make a difference: seating, adequate lighting, restrooms, among others; and all the means possible to place knowledge within easy reach and to make each visit an experience to remember and a reason to return.

Experimenting with the four tier model for inclusion
The opportunity to test this four tier model came about when, in 2009, the Batalha Municipality agreed to use it to set up a new museum – Museu da Comunidade Concelhia da Batalha (Batalha Community Museum) – within a postdoctoral research project on inclusive communication. The desire to take the challenge was based on political, social and economic reasons and, above all, on the belief that by using such an approach an otherwise small and local museum could gain visibility and recognition.

Furtherto the investment that must be put into the making of any new museum, the greatest assets were to be found in a highly motivated multidisciplinary group – architects, designers and technical staff, curators and specialists – who addressed every aspect of this museum within the underlying premises of inclusion. Once a derilict building, the premises were refurbished to guarantee total and easy mobility, comfort and security at all times. Doors were widened, steps were removed, lifts were placed, lighting was carefully chosen, furniture was made to measure, seating was placed in strategic places, toilets were made fully accessible and every detail was carefully tested to make sure that when catering for the needs of some, others weren’t being neglected. The effort to make the environment user-friendly and effective was one of the most challenging aspects of this holistic approach to communication.

Making every aspect of the design inclusive meant tampering with the language of space and exhibiting, making sure every object, every label and piece of information made available in cabinets, on walls, tables and subtitles were simultaneously scientifically valid and easy to understand. These concerns made highly accomplished professionals rethink their practices in ways they had seldom done before. In so doing, many “barriers” had to be broken and much had to be discussed and bargained.

An equally challenging task was finding effective mediums to convey information through all the senses. Sight is obviously the most used in museum communication, but catering for blindness allowed for highly effective solutions “for all”. Sound and touch based communication took the guise of tactile maps, touchable objects, replicas, Braille plaques to be used in conjunction with electronic guides with audioscription, sign language, commentaries and the possibility to be directed within the venue.

The MCBM is now open to all who wish to visit it and stands tall in its simplicity and social bearing. In its first year (2011), over 8 600 people visited this small 362m² space holding 468 exhibits that belong to the people of Batalha. Its activity is made known to all through an updated accessible website (www.museubatalha.com).

Quoted Bibliography