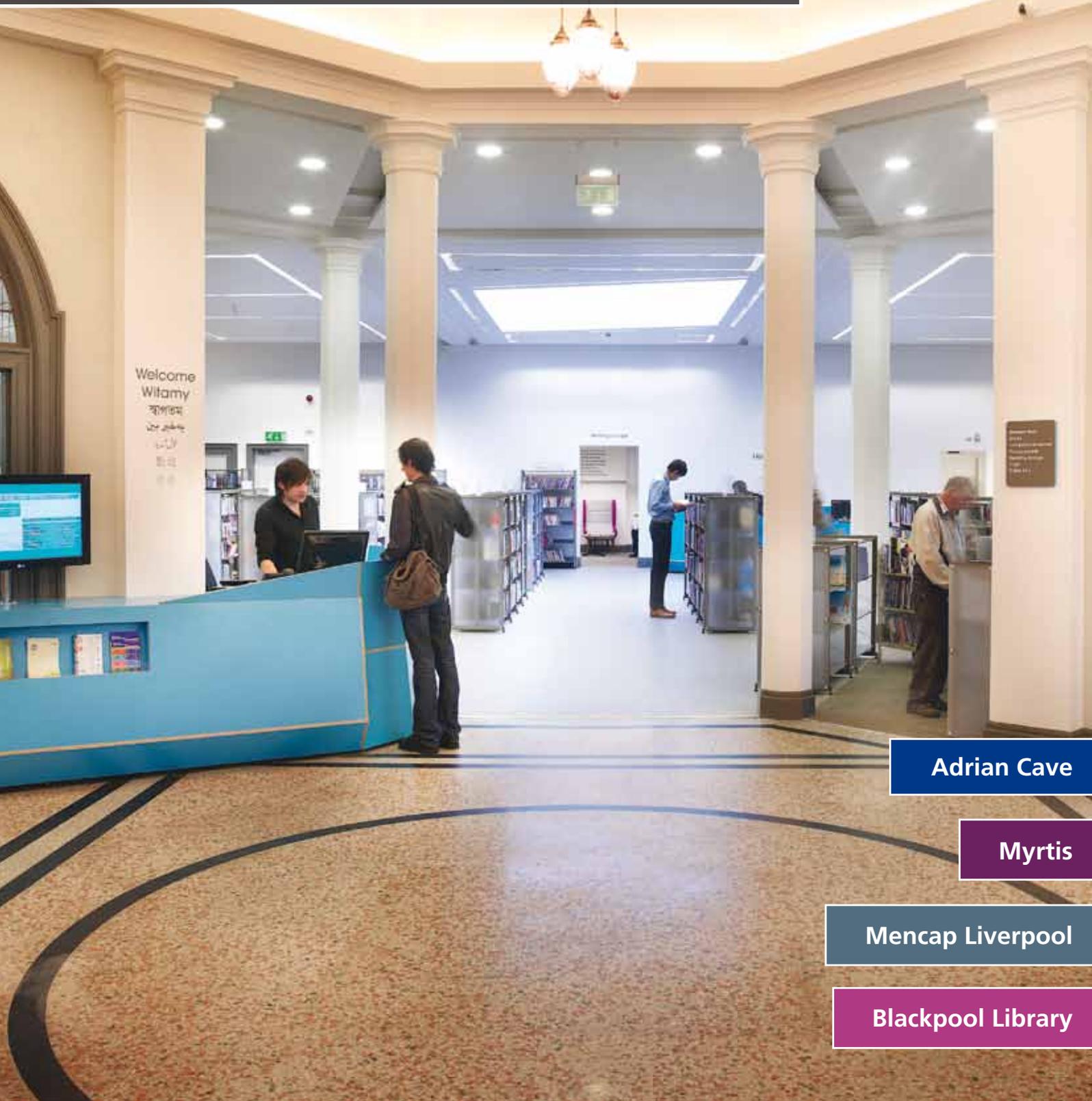


Spring 2012 • Issue 130



access by design



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Adrian Cave

Myrtis

Mencap Liverpool

Blackpool Library

Welcome to *Access by Design* issue 130

In this issue we highlight the importance of access to knowledge and how an array of approaches are being applied to ensure access and inclusive design is integral to sharing heritage.

We feature Blackpool's Central Library whose 12-month refurbishment has greatly improved access to its collections. Scientists, museologists and access professionals in Greece work closely together to enhance access to heritage by exploring innovative interventions and Mencap Liverpool support young learning disabled people to engage with natural heritage through artistic sensory exploration. We also get a glimpse of Vienna's accessible underground system.

One of the access world's most respected individuals, Adrian Cave is remembered and tributes to Adrian reveal how his invaluable contribution is greatly admired.

We hope you enjoy our latest issue and as always, we would welcome your comments.

Geraldine McNamara

Email: geraldine.mcnamara@cae.org.uk

The burning issue

Reportedly the unavoidable issue for our increasing ageing population, debate attempts to examine how society is set to respond, or not, to the reality of caring for and housing people with dementia.

The Prime Minister wants the UK to become a world leader on dementia. Champions from social care, charities, health and local government, have been tasked with improving services, research and increasing awareness. But, how will expectant results inform the design of future homes to include people with dementia?

These champions will also seek improvements to housing and support innovative solutions. Will this see an increased adoption of inclusive design?

Cover photo:
Blackpool
Central Library
reception area
Photo: © Bisset
Adams



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New products in the access field

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Facing the past, experiencing the present

Designing and adapting exhibitions for inclusion and international audiences

All photos: © Anna Pereira



Access to knowledge is a precious necessity in the development of people, their attitudes and cultures and their understanding of each other. Museums act as recognised bastions of such knowledge and strive to ensure its preservation for future generations. They also admirably pursue channels that support information sharing and interpretation. Here, one such example is presented to us by Anastasia Kalou who writes about an international touring exhibition and the team behind it working to combine access, innovation and science.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as:

A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public and which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

In serving society, museums should be inclusive and accessible to all, that is, not excluding anyone. The general public that visit museums are undoubtedly diverse and this includes people with a wide range of impairments. It should therefore be ensured that information, as well as access, is appropriate to their range of requirements.

The article that follows outlines the practical implications of ensuring an existing international touring exhibition is welcoming to all visitors including those with visual and / or hearing impairments.

Photographs, research findings and examples illustrate the methodology used, the adjustments made, as well as the additions to the existing exhibition and how user involvement played a crucial role in this work. The article also elaborates on how a holistic person-centred approach yielded the desired results, and finally, how the concept of inclusive design meets the requirements of almost everyone without proclaiming itself to be designed specifically for disabled people.

Myrtis from the 5th century

Myrtis: Face to Face with the Past is a touring exhibition that includes a reconstruction of a face, that of an 11-year old Athenian girl from the 5th century BC with the given name of Myrtis. The exhibition highlights the key interdisciplinary contributions from the excavation of the remains to the facial reconstruction. The exhibition is organised by the University of Athens' Centre of Museum Research.

Myrtis' skull was found in a mass grave in Kerameikos, the ancient cemetery of Athens. Its discovery revealed the cause of the sudden death of thousands of citizens from an epidemic, including that of Pericles, the creator of the Athenian Golden Age.

Setting up a touring exhibition that could travel throughout Greece and abroad was a challenging yet interesting concept. The project team, which included museologists and museographers among others, had to answer the following fundamental questions:

- how would this specialist subject appeal to a wider public?
- how would the specialist processes featured be presented in a comprehensible manner?
- what kind of exhibition spatial design would allow the exhibition to be adapted to various spaces without obstructing the information flow?

These questions were answered through continuous reformulation and experimentation with the message itself and its dissemination methods. Scrutinising the information led to the establishment of three thematic units:

- the excavation
- the skeletal and dental study
- the facial reconstruction

These three units formed the basis both of the museological and the museographic research.

The museologists team chose to follow innovative approaches and presentation methods. They followed the prevalent trends in museologic and museographic practice that stipulate the visitor requirements to be actively present and that this should be reflected in the way information is structured and conveyed.

As a result;

- researchers discuss their work – this information is shared on video
- the exhibition texts form a comprehensive and easy to understand framework
- the exhibition includes active experiential exhibits accentuated by suitable lighting
- the audio accompaniment aids the visitor's emotions to build in expectation

All of this is experienced before the visitor is presented with Myrtis, the 11 year old contemporary of Pericles.



The four stages of the facial reconstruction on display

The museographers main concerns were the exhibition's adaptability and responsiveness to different spaces and their individual particularities, which would likely require some adjustments. It was also crucial to ensure the flow of information remained intact regardless of where it was exhibited.

The museographers team experimented and chose a flexible and adjustable articulated

component system which allowed the same construction to be adapted to different architectural spaces and to accommodate different spaces with minimum intervention. This simple construction method accelerated set-up and dismantling procedures and significantly lowered costs – a crucial factor for any touring exhibition.



The construction of the exhibition was based on a flexible and adjustable modular system

Innovation through learning and linking heritage

The regular set up of the exhibition allowed for additional innovation. In the numerous displays of Myrtis' journey to date, the host museums have actively participated by surrounding it with contemporary artefacts from their own collections.

At the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the exhibition was supported by grave steles or tablets depicting meeting scenes located within the same exhibition space. This is where the educational programmes took place.

At the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, the complimentary artefacts were that of a golden myrtle wreath, a girl's grave tablet as well as toys from the era. Hence, the visitor, through their visit, uniquely experiences the coalescence of past, present and future through the bringing together of history and science.

The Myrtis exhibition was first presented to the public in April 2010 in Athens at the Gaia Centre of the Goulandris Museum while the facial reconstruction was first shown to the

public at the New Acropolis Museum earlier that month. The exhibition travelled to four different museums in Greece and to the Museum and Gallery of Podgorica in Montenegro for a year and a half, each time generating great interest from the public.

The visitors' comments and suggestions coupled

with the organising team's desire for the exhibition to become accessible for people with visual and / or hearing impairments led to the creation of a ten member team to audit arrangements. Team members were selected with diverse characteristics such as gender, age, disability, social, economic and educational backgrounds. This team played a deciding role in the adaptations and enrichments of the exhibition.

Our close cooperation spanned a year of structured three-hour weekly meetings underpinned by the principles of inclusive design (Design for All). We started by visiting the exhibition in its original format and all participants had the opportunity to discuss the barriers they faced at the exhibition, both in terms of movement and orientation as well as the accessibility of the information available.

We approached the exhibition holistically, using visual materials workshops, employing 3D models and mock-ups as well as audio material, with each person's feedback based on their own requirements and preferences. All the suggestions were exhaustively discussed to agree the optimum display.

Some compromises were made in the lay-out implementation stage. Firstly, because of budget restrictions. Secondly, because designing a touring exhibition not only has additional size and volume restrictions but also because of the adaptability considerations of individual exhibition venues. An example of the limitations is tactile corridors which could not be installed both because of their cost and the impossibility of adapting them to each exhibition space. Instead, we dyed different textured carpets bright yellow and installed them in front of all the tactile exhibits which we enriched the exhibition with.



Dyed yellow textured carpets were placed in front of all tactile exhibits

All members of the team considered the creation of tactile exhibits to be of major importance since many pieces of information were only conveyed in one medium and that's why their creation was realised as a matter of priority.

For example, in the first thematic unit, the excavation, there was frequent mention of the communal grave where Myrtis had been found. However, apart from a photo of the pit during the excavation process, an element that had been considered sufficient for sighted visitors, this was not being conveyed in any other medium. The team called for a tactile re-production of the grave, so that visually impaired people could understand the nature of the pit. This led to the construction of a scaled-down miniature of the pit in which Myrtis was found alongside many other victims of the Athenian plague. Now, all visitors, irrespective of age or ability can get a good understanding of the pit through touching the 3D model.



Close-up of the 3-D reproduction of the grave

Initially, all mention of Pericles who also perished during the same plague that killed Myrtis, was through a photographic format and the accompanying text. This was also true of the grave offerings found near the bodies. The addition of 3D copies now gives visitors the opportunity to touch these as well.



Tactile exhibits are appreciated by all audiences

Moving to the second unit, the skeletal and dental study, visitors can now use a microscope and see through it the *Salmonella typhi* bacterium that killed Myrtis. For visitors with visual impairment, tactile representations of the microbes have been made available as well as the 3D representation of a magnified tooth.



The microscope has proven popular amongst different age groups

In the last unit Myrtis' facial reconstruction, which was only shown by video for the first year. The later addition of the four basic stages in life-size moulds, now gives everyone the opportunity to get the feeling of the prosthetic muscles and the technique used for the reconstruction.



Learning about the techniques of the facial reconstruction through touch

Other interventions include the audio description of all tactile exhibits, to better articulate the young Athenian's journey, as well as screens with Greek and international sign language that have been added at pivotal points. Material is also available in Braille and large print, as are feedback questionnaires providing opportunities

to gather suggestions for any ongoing improvements.

Moreover, host museums are obliged to organise seminars for their own museum staff, providing them with training on how to guide people with visual and / or hearing impairments. Many of the participating museums are now organising tours for people with visual and hearing impairments, of their permanent collections as a result.

The team meetings reinforced the notion that nothing should be taken for granted when designing an exhibition as well as the fact that user participation in the design stage is of utmost importance to achieve a successful outcome.

In conclusion, feedback so far indicates that the tactile exhibits are considered a success by all, upholding the flow of information. The exhibition is now even more appealing to younger visitors for whom touch is extremely important as well as older visitors. Giving visitors the choice of absorbing information by different means and senses has led to the increase of visitor numbers as well as the demand for the exhibition to travel elsewhere.

Finally, enhancing the exhibition as we have done, has given every visitor the chance to engage with a multi-sensory exhibition – an invaluable, essential experience in terms of imparting messages and information through creative and interactive communication. ●

Anastasia Kalou is an inclusive designer and access consultant. Her work aims to increase inclusion of disabled people in the cultural sector. She is the founder of Access Greece, a not-for-profit organisation that encourages people with visual impairments worldwide to visit Greece and explore Greek culture.

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For further information about the exhibition, visit the Myrtis website

 www.myrtis.gr