

# Design for All

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#### **4. “People and Things”**

**A temporary exhibition fully accessible to sighted and non sighted people**

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##### **Summary**

*Over the last years, museums worldwide attempt to appeal to a wider audience. Through this philosophical point of view that a museum is accessible to everyone, the accessibility of people with special needs is required. This paper presents as an example of equal accessibility the exhibition titled “People and things”, which is open to sighted, non-sighted and partially sighted visitors.*

##### **Museums and Accessibility**

Most definitions of the institutions related to museums define the role of the museum as a non-profit organization aiming to research, to educate and to entertain the general public<sup>3</sup>. Search studies in Greece<sup>4</sup> and abroad<sup>5</sup> have shown that museum visitors are most likely to be highly educated, of a younger age and of high income, while people with special needs do not visit museums since access is impossible to them.

Over the last years museums are trying to re-establish a new identity as an organization of

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<sup>4</sup> *Metron Analysis. Highlights,19/2005*

<sup>5</sup> *Merriman, N. 1991*

entertainment, fun and informal education. Nowadays, museums face the challenge of successfully combining the traditional values of a museum as an institution, focusing at the interactive relation between itself and its visitors. The latest aim of museums is to make clear to the general public its high standard services which are accessible to all visitors.

According to the above statement, it is deemed necessary to define and study accessibility issues, in order for the museum to reach to a wider audience. More specifically accessibility issues as are registered by Dodd & Sandell<sup>6</sup> as follows:

Physical Access, Sensory access, Intellectual access, Financial access, Emotional / attitudinal access, Access to decision-making, Access to information and Cultural access. All kinds of accessibility can be analyzed in the following components<sup>7</sup>:

(a) A number of museum buildings don't allow physical access to its visitors, due to the lack of elevators and ramps.

(b) Cultural events, exhibitions, and other cultural venues don't offer facilities which cannot be used by deaf or blind visitors.

(c) A number of people have learning difficulties. Museums should use alternative methods to convey knowledge derived from its events.

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<sup>6</sup> *Dodd, J., Sandell, R. 1998: 13-15*

<sup>7</sup> *Chaitas Ch., Ioannidi V., 2006: 6*

**(d) Although most museums offer free entrance, they overcharge other services, (coffee shop, and museum shop).**

**(e) Museum staff should be trained to deal with and cater for the diversity.**

**(f) Most museums do not involve the public in decision-making regarding aspects that have to do with the general public. To involve the public in the decision making process, cultivates a climate of trust and cooperation with the community.**

**(g) A number of museums use a single language, not only in their museum texts but also in their publications and their websites, thus restricting information accessibility.**

**The subject of this paper is sensory accessibility and how it is related to information accessibility. In other words how it is possible for the visitor to equally perceive and receive all information available within an exhibition area.**

### **The experience of the "People and Things" exhibition**



Side face of the Aggelikis Hatzimihali's house in the historic center of Athens

**The exhibition titled "PEOPLE AND THINGS" was organized by the Cultural Organization of the Municipality of Athens on the occasion of the donation, by Dimitris Mitsis of his personal collection of folk art objects. The exhibition is housed at the Center**

of folk art and Tradition in Aggelikis Hatzimihali<sup>8</sup> house in Plaka, the historic center of Athens. The house itself is a monument of the Greek modern architecture, built in early 20's by Aristotelis Zaxos a significant architect and scholar of the Hellenic Tradition.<sup>9</sup>



Every object is presented in open showcases and every visitor can touch the objects during the visiting experience.

The exhibition is situated on the first level of the house and lies on a surface of 300 square meters. It focuses in some views of human life as a "human oriented"<sup>10</sup> exhibition, and emphasizes not on the objects on display, but on the stories of the

people that actually owned these objects. So the objects become the medium through which the visitor will experience other peoples' lives of the recent past. On top of that, it was a prerequisite that the exhibition could be equally accessible to sighted, non-sighted and partially sighted visitors.

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<sup>8</sup> *Angeliki Hatzimichali was a well-known ethnographer who lived in that house from the 20's until her die in the mid 60's. The house was then bought by the Municipality of Athens and serves the public by organizing various cultural events and seminars*

<sup>9</sup> *Cholevas N. 25/1977: 63 and Filipidis D. 1984: 175-176*

<sup>10</sup> *The new theory about museum refers that all actions must contribute for the people and community evolution, trying to support their identity and to improve every day life. Economou M. 2003:26-27*

**So given the above-mentioned characteristics, the museographical and the museological concept was based on two main axes:**



The shadows of the artifacts give an interactive filling in sighted visitors especially when somebody touches the objects.

**1. The inside decoration of the building comprises of impressive woodwork, both ornamental as well as functional, (staircase, wall mounted displays, windows and doors casings). Therefore, following the principles of a moving exhibition, it was decided that the entire exhibition should not be in contact with the inner shell of the building.**

**2. The aesthetic result from the multisensory experience derived by the visitors, ought to be equally appealing to both sighted and non-sighted.**

### **A multisensory experience for sighted and non-sighted visitors**

**Within the exhibition area the visitor can walk through the objects and the stories they convey. He can touch them and feel what they are made of, listen to the noise they make, and perceive their everyday use. The visitor can also read stories relative to the objects through concise and easily understandable information panels.**



**Regarding the non-sighted and partially sighted visitor, the main aim was to be**



A blind visitor reads the brail text in a showcase of the first room.

**able to experience the exhibition without the need of either an escort or any further assistance. So special paths were laid down, in order for them to move around simply by the use of their walking stick. The paths comprise of two different materials. A soft one for the parts where the visitor should walk forward, and a hard one for the places where the non or partially sighted visitor should stop, and look for an object or an information panel to read.**

**So a grid of paths is laid down to allow the visitor to experience the**

**entire exhibition, in a certain order. This grid has to follow some simple rules. The path should always approach the object in a 90° degree angle, even when paths cross each other, or change direction, that should be in a 90° degree angle. It was derived by the cooperation we had with a non-sighted group of people that any approach greater or smaller of**

**90o degrees, not only disorientates them but it also frustrates them.**



A non sighted person should be able to find a solid object by reaching his hands 70 to 80 cm above the walking level.



The introductory panels are vertically to the floor, having the Braille text at the bottom (75 cm from the floor), and the Greek and English text further up at the top of the panel.

**Once on a stationery position (hard surface), a non or partially sighted person should be able to find a solid object by reaching his hands 70 to 80 cm above the walking level. So visitors by handling the relevant point will either find an exhibit, or an information panel.**

**There are two levels of verbal information. First there is the introductory text for each section, which comprise of two or three small paragraphs. Second there are single paragraph texts relating to a number of the exhibits. All text is written in the Greek, and English language, as well as in the Braille system. The aim was that all information derived from any written text of the exhibition ought to be at the same time easily available to all visitors. That was extremely difficult to achieve if you take into consideration the fact that the non-sighted visitor should touch the information panel, while the partially sighted should read enlarged type from a short distance, and the sighted visitor should stand back from the panel and read the text.**



Taking into account all the above considerations, we decided to place the introductory panels vertically to the floor, having the Braille text at the bottom (75 cm from the floor), and the Greek and English text further up at the top of the panel. Regarding the text relating to the exhibits, specially designed panels were constructed upon which the text was placed. The ergonomic design of these constructions facilitates the non-sighted in order to approach and read the text while at the same time he perceives the floor limits.

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**In conclusion we have to note that in order for exhibitions to be accessible to people with special needs, we have to pull all our efforts and cooperate with their communities. The “People and Things” exhibition is a good example that a small budget should not be a drawback for creating**

the necessary special circumstances for an exhibition to be accessible to people with some kind of disability. On the contrary any museum or cultural organization should provide for equal access to its premises and cultural events

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