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## INSTIGATORS OF CHANGE

### Museums as inclusive, accessible, equitable, participatory hubs

*Dr Alison F. Eardley and Vanessa E. Jones*

In the opening chapters of this book, we challenged the validity of the assumed split between ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’ audiences within museum practice. This split is based on the belief that there is a majority museum audience who can automatically access museums, with only the support of written labels or wall text, by virtue of their ‘able-bodiedness’, their neurotypicality, and their inherited or acquired cultural capital. The majority of museums around the world are designed based on this ‘abled’ group as a starting point. For the disabled, museums seek to provide additional ‘accommodations’ for access to the building and/or the collections. The ableist bias has informed our collective cultural psyches for centuries and is systemic within our structures across society.

Drawing on evidence from museum studies, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and critical disability studies, we demonstrated why this ableist assumption about the ‘majority’ museum audience is false, and therefore why museum visitors should not be simplified in these reductive ways. By considering the historical roots of both museum practice and societal understandings of disability, we are confronted by the fact that the origin of the ‘in’ group in museum visitors is in fact underpinned by the eugenics notion of the ‘ideal’. The ideal of the eugenics model was based on ability, class, race, gender identity, sexual identity, nationality, and productivity. Anyone who was not ‘able-bodied’, neurotypical, wealthy, white, cis-gender, heterosexual, and productive in ‘Western’ society was outside that ideal (see Withers, 2012). The eugenics model, and the suggestion of a ‘superior’ race or subsection of society, was explicitly rejected after the Second World War. However, the prejudices that underpinned eugenics are older than the theory itself, and these remain embedded within societies across the globe.

What, then, is the impact of this highly problematic central assumption about ‘normativity’, on the one hand, and ‘others’, on the other hand? Within the museum and

heritage sectors, we argue that not only does the assumption of this binary distinction negatively impact the provision made available to audiences with recognised access requirements, but it also leads to the failure to provide suitable access for the majority of audiences who are not targeted by these provisions. It is also important to recognise that there are many museum professionals who are working to make change.

The aim of this edited volume is to voice the systemic biases within the museum sector (and society more broadly), and to draw on work that is being carried out across the globe that re-imagines access and inclusion in a way that recognises and seeks to challenge the binary distinction between ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’. Once we accept that there is no ‘core’ visitor, we can re-imagine museum audiences. In challenging who museums exist for, we also need to challenge how a museum is experienced, and then what is the museums role. These challenges are uncomfortable. To do this, we have drawn on expertise, ideas, and actions of museum professionals, academics, and artists from around the world. Lived experience, collaboration, and co-creation are central to all of these chapters. They acknowledge that everyone has a differing array of access needs. Redefining mindsets and putting those refreshed perspectives into practice will require work. For each chapter, the authors have provided examples of some of the exciting work that is being done, to stimulate ideas and scaffold future actions. In this final chapter, we will discuss how the work described in this book helps to illustrate some core principles of the Museum Accessibility Spectrum (MAS). In doing so, we will consider the way forward for museum professionals and the museum sector more broadly.

### **Intersectionality**

If we reject the dichotomous thinking around access, it becomes crucial to consider our multiple identities and the ways in which these identities interact to make us who we are. As humans, we are considered to have race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, and other forms of identity and characteristics. In many countries around the world, some of these identities or characteristics are protected by law. However, the way in which we consider and address these characteristics has traditionally been as isolated identities. Intersectionality, on the other hand, describes the ways in which systems of inequality ‘intersect’, and emphasises the importance of recognising the negative impact of these interplays (Crenshaw, 1989; see also Cooper, 2016). It is only through acknowledging these intersections that we can really begin to understand someone’s lived experience. The multiplicities of identity, and the interactions or intersections of these identities, are central to the MAS (see also Eardley et al., 2022). The MAS describes an infinite number of strands of characteristic and identities, each of which represents a spectrum of its own. Each of these strands intersects and interacts together in a unique way for each individual.

As we acknowledge and embrace our intersectional identities, so can we accept that barriers to access can be physical, sensory, cognitive, social, and cultural or a combination of all or any of these. In Chapter 8, Charlotte Slark considers the ways

in which museums have (or have not) considered the access needs for people in relation to class and race in the UK. She discusses the impact of external motivators on long-term organisational change. She argues that when these external motivators are not matched by institutional buy-in, the impact is limited. In his Chapter 9, Syrus Marcus Ware considers disability justice within an art practice that draws on his identity as a disabled, Mad artist. His work grows from intersectional identities and takes us on a journey into worlds reframed by the possibilities of Afrofuturism. As explored within Ware's chapter, intersectionality acknowledges the interactions of needs. Needs are no longer discrete. This leads to the question of what this might mean within a museum context. We argue that it is not possible to design for all needs at once. Instead, all design should be anti-exclusive.

### Anti-exclusive design

Anti-exclusive design is based on a similar conceptualisation to the MAS. In recent years, the concept of inclusion and inclusive design has been challenged by the disability rights movement. This is because it is often applied within an in-group/out-group context. In other words, inclusion is used to suggest that the out-group should be included in the in-group events and activities. A commonly used analogy is the party. Diversity is being invited to the party, and inclusion is being asked to dance. Underpinning this remains a problematic power balance, because there is no shift or relinquishing of power. It also does not challenge the appropriateness or relevance of the format in itself. Will the party take place online as well as in person, for those who may not be able to travel, for whatever reason? Will there be a silent disco? 'Belonging' is sometimes now invoked in addition to describe being able to help plan that party. However, it doesn't get away from the fact that the party was already decided. That party may be one person's ideal way of spending time, and for others, it will be an unpleasant experience. What about those who would rather go and hang out in the countryside? The core tenet of anti-exclusive design is that there should always be multiple starting points, with threads of experience that can run in parallel to each other. Those parallel pathways will have points of convergence and intersection. It is important to acknowledge that this is not universal design. Anti-exclusive design will never be perfect for all visitors. It is never possible to get all points of view at the table. However, the start point of the design process will no longer be the needs of an assumed 'majority' audience. It will no longer be possible to assume that broad swathes of the population can simply walk in and 'access'. As such, anti-exclusive design will acknowledge limitations without othering. Most importantly, the principle is that as long as design has as its starting point access for more than one group, there will be other needs which will intersect and therefore other benefits. Different from the dominant ableist design starting point, at the core of anti-exclusive design is disability gain.

Taking disability as the starting point of design means discarding our current ways of working, because we will require a new starting point for all future museum

design. In Chapter 3, William Renel, Jessica Thom, Solomon Szekir-Papasavva, and Chloe Trainor discuss the core structural aspects that should be a given within all museums and in all museum planning and budgeting: BSL interpretation, speech-to-text captioning, visual story design, and inclusive audio description (we would argue, ideally co-created, following something like the Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description, Eardley et al., 2024). Core experiences should include relaxed time, where visitors are encouraged to come and move as they wish and make noise as they wish within the space, these should be widely advertised. Likewise, ear defenders should be available. Renel et al advocate a chill-out space, with opportunities for horizontal lying. In Chapter 4, Alicia Teng provides a detailed exploration of the development and implementation of a calm room space in the National Gallery Singapore. Crucially, this isn't a space that is hidden away, or needs to be unlocked by a member of staff when needed. This is a space that sits within the centre of the museum. Each element was designed through co-creation with neurodivergent communities, and the result becomes a direct example of disability gain because it was always intended to be an inclusive space, available for anyone who needs it.

Over time, these things should become as central a provision as restrooms. However, the starting point should be beyond basic core provisions. A theme running through chapters five and six, which draw on blindness gain and Deaf gain respectively, is the negative impact of 'box-ticking' access provision, which occurs when access tools are not designed with consideration for the audiences they might benefit. In Chapter 5, Hannah Thompson discusses the differences between very poor audio description provisions created specifically for blind and partially blind people, in comparison to rich evocative language used in 19th-century descriptions, often written by authors and poets for the sighted readers of journals. She advocates for audio description as a poetic artform. In Chapter 6, Meredith Peruzzi similarly draws attention to the fact that description of sound is often neglected for D/deaf audiences, because the ableist bias is that vision is enough. She notes that it is important to describe the sounds where they are available. Similarly, she talks about the importance of recognising that sign languages are their own specific linguistic form, and in the same way, a direct word-for-word translation from English to French (as an example) would be inappropriate, so a direct translation from spoken or written word to sign language will not be helpful.

In the final chapter of this section (Chapter 7), Fayen D'Evie discusses the ways in which she has made access art. Her work not only speaks to the principles of anti-exclusive design and disability gain, but also centre on access and puts inclusive ways of experiencing at its core. In her chapter challenges traditional ways of thinking about access, and the potential of access provision. She shares insights and understandings about the ways in which access becomes art, so that museums can begin to draw from some of the creative examples within her inclusive practice.

## Co-creation as default practice

We need to centre disability gain and intersectionality as the starting point for anti-exclusive design. Into the future, museums must have a workforce that is representative of the societies that they serve. In that future, museums would have a broad representation of the different access needs within the multiplicity of stands within the MAS. Projects such as Curating for Change (CfC) (Esther Fox, Chapter 9) are seeking to start to make those changes to the demographics of the museum workforce. By providing paid fellowships to disabled, D/deaf, or neurodivergent curators within museums across England, CfC provides a model for how museums can diversify workforces into the future. These fellows then draw on co-creation, working with disabled communities local to the museums, to seek out disability histories and interpretation within the museum collections. This reinforces a central point, which is that even where the museum workforce, at all levels, is representative of society, co-creation with communities is vital.

Many museums have moved towards a more participatory practice (e.g. Simon, 2010). Co-creation and co-production involve collaborative engagement between external community groups and museums from the outset of the process. It differs from consultation. Consultation can take a variety of forms, such as front-end evaluation to test an exhibition concept; bringing in disabled visitors to test a specific design product or concept; or engaging with the community to find out what they want from a museum. Consultation can involve input from the outset of the design process, or it can involve evaluation and discussion further into the process. However, the main difference between co-creation (or co-production) and consultation is the balance of power. In consultation, it remains situated wholly with the museum, whereas with co-creation, communities are equal partners, or are leading the process. Museums have struggled to create a dialogic relationship with audiences, where all parties bring their own expertise and/or experience to create a common language and a new understanding (e.g. Witcomb, 2003; Iervolino & Sandell, 2016). Many museums find it hard to create an equal relationship between themselves and their community (e.g. Lynch, 2011, 2014). Audience collaborations are often driven by short-term goals or ill-fitting agendas, shoe-horning former museum activities into new aspirational objectives and initiatives, without the right resource, planning, expertise or buy-in (Lynch, 2011; Iervolino, 2019). Furthermore, attempts to use collections to broaden belonging – or to challenge dominant ideas about history, culture, and identities – are not always successful (e.g. Smith, 2010).

One of the biggest barriers to effective co-creation within museums is the challenge that it makes to the identity of a museum as knowledge bearers and knowledge givers. Nevertheless, as a society, as museum visitors, as individuals working with or in the museum sector, unless we reach outside of ourselves, our biases perpetuate what a museum is, and how it is experienced, and therefore who it is for. Co-creation is a central theme in many of the chapters in this volume discussed

above and below. In particular, Chapter 11 (Katie Cassels and Charlotte Paddock) provides a powerful description of the benefits of enabling community consultation to transform into co-creation. Cassels and Paddock discuss a project that aimed to create memory boxes that were meaningful for the elders of the Black Caribbean community, many of whom were part of the Windrush era of migration to the UK. Intersectionality was central to this project. A core feature of memory boxes for older adults with dementia is that they aim to draw on the personal memories from the teens to the 30s, as the memories of this life period tend to remain intact the longest. As the first part of their chapter, titled 'stepping back', acknowledges, the community groups within this process demanded that they were the active directors of this process. They were able to draw on the expertise and support of the museum, but the process was ultimately led by the communities. This was not the process that the museum had initially imagined, but the outcomes were arguably stronger for both the museum and the community groups as a result.

Although co-creation (more or less successfully) is not uncommon within programming, where it is less common is within interpretation. In Chapter 13, Isabelle Lawrence describes the ways in which co-creation has been used in the UK to address the systemic biases that underpin traditional interpretation. She discusses the co-creation of interpretation of objects related to disability, with groups of disabled artists and activists. This type of co-creation does not dismiss the importance of previous scholarship in relation to an artefact or object, rather it recognises the importance of lived experience as a way of better understanding both the historical context and contemporary meaning of a collection item. It also reinforces the need to recognise the importance of the expertise of lived experience (see also Fox, Chapter 9).

### **Power shifts**

A shift in the balance of power between museums and audiences is central to the work of co-creation. However, the shift of power that is required to make museums accessible and inclusive for all goes beyond co-creation and content creation in the traditional sense. The question of power also reaches into the heart of museum identity. For many museums, education or learning is at the core of their identity and purpose. Education describes the process of giving knowledge to, or receiving it from, someone else. Learning is gaining knowledge or skills through study, experience or being taught. Museums have attempted to move away from the traditional conception of them as authoritative givers of meaning (Adams, Falk, & Dierking, 2003). In many parts of the world, museums play an important role in school-based learning, and within that unique context, museums are most certainly part of a traditional education system (which also seeks to move away from authoritative learning, but which nevertheless is built on an assumption of providing active learners with an opportunity to learn) (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). However, most museum visitors are not children on a school visit, who are there

to actively learn. There remains a huge contradiction between the explicit outward recognition that museums are not teaching institutions, and the continued focus on learning objectives or key messages that audiences are expected to learn. We are not arguing that museums are not sites of incidental learning. They most certainly are. It is clearly a reason why most people will choose to go to a museum. They are interested. However, while museum can draw on their expertise to consider what stories they might like to tell, and how they might like to tell them, what those museums cannot do is to assume or attempt to know what audiences will or should 'learn' from the experiences that they provide. Ultimately, the core issue is that the concept of museums as educators is underpinned by the deficit model, which assumes that audiences must be educated or edified. As long as museums assume that audiences are in deficit, truly inclusive museums are not possible.

The problematic nature of this deficit model is discussed in Chapter 10, where Amparo Leyman Pino advocates for a shift in core museum identity. Her chapter considers the social context of communities. Many museums seek to broadening participation by trying to attract to the museum those sections of society who do not attend. It is not generally considered to be part of the mandate of 'access', but it is widely acknowledged that sections of society struggle to access museum content on a conceptual level. These communities tend to sit on the outskirts of the 'normative' audience, alongside disabled communities (and invariably intersecting with them). These communities may struggle to access museums due to social, cultural, or economic differences (to the 'normative' core audience). Leyman Pino states that our implicit biases and prejudices tend to assume that these communities and cultures are in deficit on one or multiple levels. As such, museums do not seek to understand what the assets of these communities are, and how the museum might serve their needs and requirements, but rather they assume that these communities are in deficit. Furthermore, interaction is often based on an assumption about what is needed.

Reflecting on the ways in which museums can and do engage with their communities is not new (e.g. Watson, 2007). However, a growing number of practitioners are proposing that museums should be taking this further, by considering how to work FOR, rather than with, communities (e.g. Chamchumrus, 2019). In this approach, museums become a resource that communities can use as they would like. There is no assumption about what communities need, but rather a joint conversation to better understand how the expertise in museums might support communities towards the goals and ambitions they have already identified for themselves. Chapter 12 provides an example of this shift in dynamic. Thiago Jesus describes a collaborative project that was re-imagined in response to an act of vandalism to an important heritage site for the Wauja people, an indigenous community in the Upper Xingu region of the Amazon. This act of vandalism led to a cross-cultural collaboration, in which scholars, artists, and technologists were led by the Wauja people in the creation of a 3D restoration of their mythological engravings. The result was a preservation of the community's collective memory



through a life-size facsimile of the restored cave. This virtual reality environment has opened up a new heritage resource for the Wauja people. It has also been on tour, sharing the histories and experiences of the Wauja people internationally.

As this example illustrates, reframing the relationship between museum professionals and audiences is by no means the death of the expert. Rather, as a trained academic and an experienced museum professional, we acknowledge that these traditional brands of expertise result in both strengths and weaknesses in our thinking and decision-making. Each community is the expert on their social and cultural contexts and heritage. By serving communities, we reframe access and inclusion by redefining who is making the choice about what the core event or experience is or could be.

### Systemic change

Museum collections, and the narratives within them, have the potential to link us to the past, present, and future of our planet, societies, communities, and ourselves. With that potential also comes the power to challenge problematic narratives within society, or to perpetuate them. The MAS is advocating for systemic change within cultural heritage organisations to challenge not only ableism, but also the broader legacy of ‘normativity’. Systemic change can only be achieved if it is supported by managers, trustees, policymakers, and funders. Museums need to be provided with the tools and resources to implement sustainable change that can outlast time-limited funding.

In Chapter 15, Corey Timpson advocates for a top-to-bottom re-imagining of the principles of design in museums. He considers the importance of an integrated approach. His chapter includes examples and discussion from own work, including at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which is one of the few examples of a museum that has sought to maintain a focused on access and inclusion from the build through to the opening. One of the central tenets of his work is that a design tool creating access for one audience member will enhance the experience for another. This echoes the philosophy of the Sensational Museum (TSM) project (UK), which aims to draw on what we know about disability to enhance the museum experience for everyone.

In some parts of the world, the mandate for change is coming at a societal level. Nevine Nizar Zakaria (Chapter 17) describes work carried out in Egypt, which has in part been stimulated by a government-level desire to increase access and inclusion to cultural heritage. Her chapter discusses the ways in which changing the mindset within a museum can challenge the perceptions and expectations of ‘abled’ museum visitors. These themes are echoed by Evgeniya Kiseleva-Afflerback in Chapter 16. However, in her chapter, the drivers for change are coming from artists, filmmakers, and activists. She discusses the ways in which the museum can be an agent for social change when it becomes a microcosm of inclusivity not seen within the larger society. Museums can also create a space within which difficult conversations can occur, at times finding themselves and their actions at the centre



of that discussion. These types of issues are explored in Chapter 18, where Bongani Ndhlovu and Rooksana Omar discuss this in the context of exhibitions discussing gender roles and women, and their representation and treatment. They provide a consider discussion of the ways in which a museum exhibition can provide a catalyst for discussion, debate, and in some instances collaborative and creative responses to controversy.

### Next steps

There is a drive for museums to become inclusive. There is a drive for museums to become more accessible. Conversation and debate are no longer enough. As a sector, we need to change our approach to both access and inclusion so we are no longer othering pockets of humanity that are thought to sit outside our fictional ‘core’ museum audience. This edited volume has highlighted the ableist biases that are systemic within society and the way in which we think about museums and museum audiences. It has rejected the false binary split between ‘disabled’ and ‘abled’ and proposes we re-imagine access and inclusion as a MAS, where each individual will sit at a different point on a multitude of access spectrums. These different strands of identities will intersect and interweave, to shape our unique lived experiences and access needs.

Radical, far-reaching change is needed. Within this volume, we have drawn together a sample of some of the work that is going on around the world, in order to provide ideas and inspirations for work that can be done. This is a starting point from which we will build.

There are many other pockets of great work going on. We need to continue link and explore the ways in which we intersect. The best solutions will only come from truly collective knowledge-sharing across the Global North and the Global South. This paradigm shift also requires museums to cede their role as singular authorities bestowing knowledge. We must also reconsider our roles to become resources, by making collections, expertise, and spaces available as public assets. Rather than operating from a deficit model, we must reframe audiences and communities as partners, as co-creators. Communities and co-creation need to be put at the heart of museum practice, drawing on anti-exclusive design, and centred on intersectional understanding. Mistakes will be made, but growth will still happen. In order for museums to become truly anti-ableist, we need to push for that systemic and seismic change, that will reach every corner of museums and museum practice. Truly inclusive, anti-ableist museums are our future.

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