

The Room of Experiences within the Textile Museum of Busto Arsizio

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Abstract

One of the aspects most neglected in Italy is access to exhibitions, museums and performances for people with disabilities who, more often than not, are excluded from the possibilities of direct cultural fulfilment.

Although many aspects regarding accessibility in Italy have improved, there is still a clear tendency to consider the problem from three different points of view, distinguished through both their assumptions and their results:

- *projects thought out intentionally for disabled people*
- *projects thought out for disabled people as well, and*
- *projects thought out for an inclusive design.*

Inclusive design refers to a theoretical, methodological and practical approach that emphasizes human centred design that is creative solutions that work for the widest possible spectrum of potential users. This approach makes two assumptions: the first is that design is a powerful tool of social equality and influences each person's sense of independence, confidence, and control; the second is that variation in human ability is not exceptional but ordinary, and affects most of us at some stage in our lives.

Introduction

Touching with your eyes, seeing with your hands: towards the making of a system of objectives.

Last February the Room of Experiences was opened within the Textile and Industrial Tradition Museum of Busto Arsizio.

The project, conceived within the logic of Inclusive Design, was born thanks to the sensitivity and will of Vincenzo Zucchi S.p.A, which wanted to offer a didactic experience into the world of

textiles and to present to as many people as possible, the Zucchi collection of Antique Handblocks¹ – the largest existing collection of hand-blocks for textile printing.

The management of the Textile and Industrial Tradition Museum of Busto Arsizio, who had intended on removing the physical barriers present back in 1997, showed great interest in Vincenzo Zucchi S.p.A.'s proposal to create a permanent space linked to the history of cotton, designed according to an inclusive logic.

The philosophical, pedagogical and psychological element of the project's theme has worked out to be enormously stimulating under various aspects:

- The technical aspect, because it allowed the possibility to experiment, in an integrated way, multi-sensory design techniques linked to the perception of space and objects by people who express different multiple needs which, at times, are incompatible.
- The cultural aspect, because it allowed (and allows) the possibility to recapture historical, theoretical and practical memories, to create an awareness among the population connected to the problems of accessibility and to provide the basis for a useful and valuable exchange of experiences gained from an intellectual maturity linked to various kinds of (dis)ability.

Presentation

The Room of Experiences: a place of comparison between memory and future.

The Room of Experiences has been thought out as a place open to everyone, without any age limits. The project was conceived in order to be independently accessible and fulfilling for all visitors. From this point of view, particular attention has been taken regarding the creation of suitable instruments to favour and stimulate the processes of knowledge gain for those who are blind², colour-blind or have visual acuteness problems³.

The visitors are given the concrete opportunity to discover (through sight, touch, hearing, sense of smell) raw, semi-worked and spun materials, fabrics and hand-blocks. The message to get across is the idea of 'learning whilst playing' using ones senses and relying on the fact that the experience

¹ Because of the extremely high cultural value of the Collection, in 1997 Vincenzo Zucchi S.p.A. received the Guggenheim Prize. The Collection which has 56,000 pieces is open to the public in the exhibition spaces of Milano and Casorezzo. To find out more about the collection please visit their website <www.zucchicollection.org>

² For a person with serious visual problems, approaching an image implicates the delicate theme of *educating the conscience*, a problem regarding *cognition* and *interpretation of forms* that pass through the substituting senses. The mental representation connected to perception is a subjective detail which must be respected in its individuality: it must be stimulated with regards to multiple characteristics/abilities of the people allowing the possibility of gaining different, subjective forms of the experience.

³ The design choices made by myself were discussed and examined through the precious consulting of Blindness Specialist Luca Bergamaschi. This undertaking obtained the patronage of the Italian Union for the Blind - Provincial Section of Varese and has been endorsed by the Councillor of Relations of Busto Arsizio Council who took care of the adaptation of the museum's spaces adjacent to the Room, creating a functional pathway for the blind and drafting an audio guide of the contents of the museum, the transcript of which is also available in Braille.

can be an opportunity for meeting people, for comparison and reflection among people with different abilities.

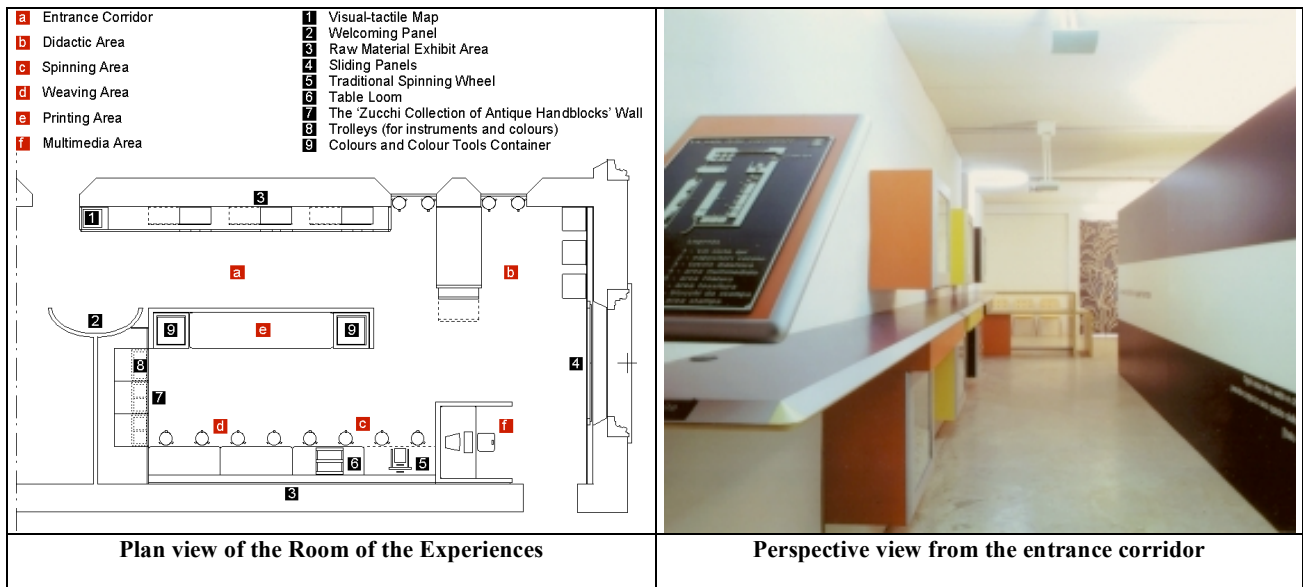
In order to operate correctly and coherently and to not generate any stigmatising consequences, some fundamental design principles have been taken into consideration: autonomy of use, compatibility of solutions on dimensional, sensory, cognitive and cultural levels, adaptability and flexibility, plain appearance, simplicity of use, a good balance between quality and price and last but not least safety and reliability.

The multi-sensory design has been based on messages and signage which are visual, auditory, tactile, thermal, kinaesthetic, sense of smell and sense of weight. The organisation and structuring of these elements within the space has been created using the 'additional signage' principle, keeping in mind the objective of 'compatibility and generalization of effects' for people with different abilities and needs.

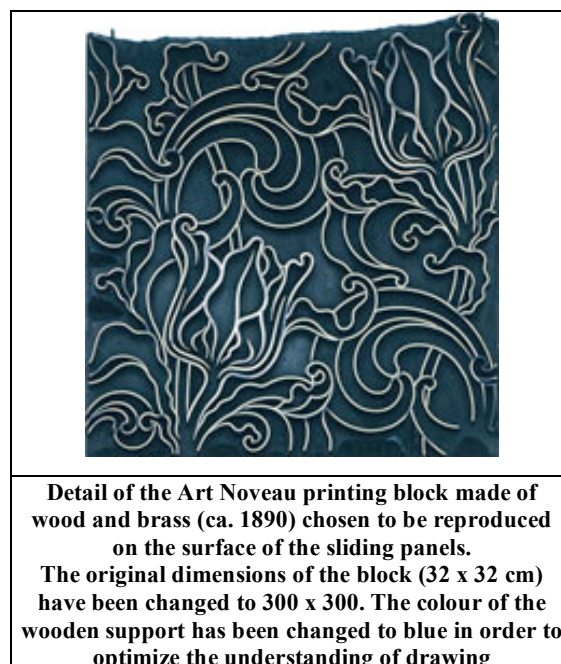
The three dimensionality of the project has been based on a story written by Cristina Bertè (the Collection's curator) and Matteo Zucchi. The words heard in the audio guide – which illustrate the history of cotton from the seed to the spinning process to the fabric to the printing – is read by the Italian actress Lella Costa who very kindly supported the project.

On entering the room you are welcomed by a visual-tactile map (with diversified risen parts suitably colour contrasted), which depicts the lay-out of the room and a double legend in large raised lettering and in Braille. Following, both visually and tactically, the shelf-handrail positioned underneath the map you come across three groups of exhibits which contain the seed, the flower and the dense cotton. These materials can be observed inside their cases but they can also be touched and smelled by opening the corresponding drawers.

When the shelf comes to an end, by continuing in your path you come across the didactic table whose contrasting blue surface (just like the shelf) facilitates the examination of the materials which can be brought here from any part of the room.



The large floor to ceiling window has been screened by two sliding panels which have a giant hand block pictures printed onto them. These elements were designed in order to avoid glare effects on the floor at various stages of day.



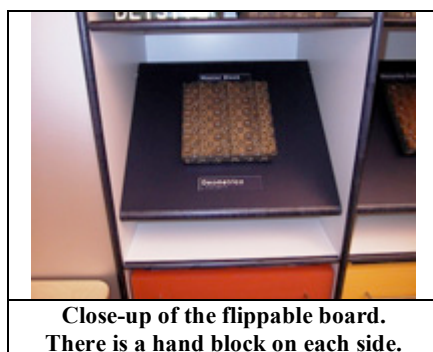
Leaving the shelf behind you, you enter into the part of the room dedicated to the activities of spinning, weaving and printing.

<p>View of the spinning area (from the Multimedia Area)</p>	<p>View of the spinning, weaving and printing area</p>

The principle senses involved in these experiences are sight and touch, but also the sense of smell, hearing and the sense of weight. This allows the possibility to distinguish the difference between the various thickness of the spun material, between natural and coloured fabrics and between simple and ornate fabrics. It is also possible to identify the smell of wax, the colours, the quality and the characteristics of the decorative detail of the hand blocks. The fascination evoked by the noise of the instruments being used amplifies the fascination of the end result, therefore giving the learning process an all the more profound and lengthy value.

<p>Girl's hands on the cotton-winder whilst spinning the cotton.</p>	<p>Rashid (blind) explaining to some children how to weave.</p>	<p>Rashid weaving.</p>
<p>The children's hands as they try out the weaving process.</p>	<p>Adults and children gathered around the loom.</p>	<p>The exhibitors gathering the fabric samples.</p>

The far wall of the room is dedicated to the *Zucchi Collection of Antique Handblocks*. The wall is divided into three parts and hosts various elements: low down you find three wheel based trolleys (which carry instruments and colours), they can be moved, when needed, underneath the printing table or to other parts of the room. The middle part of the wall contains three ‘flippable’ boards, each with a hand block fixed on either side. The hand blocks were chosen in order to allow both visual and tactile perception. For the moment the blue sides of the boards have a series of three geometrical blocks, whereas the white sides have a series of three floral blocks.

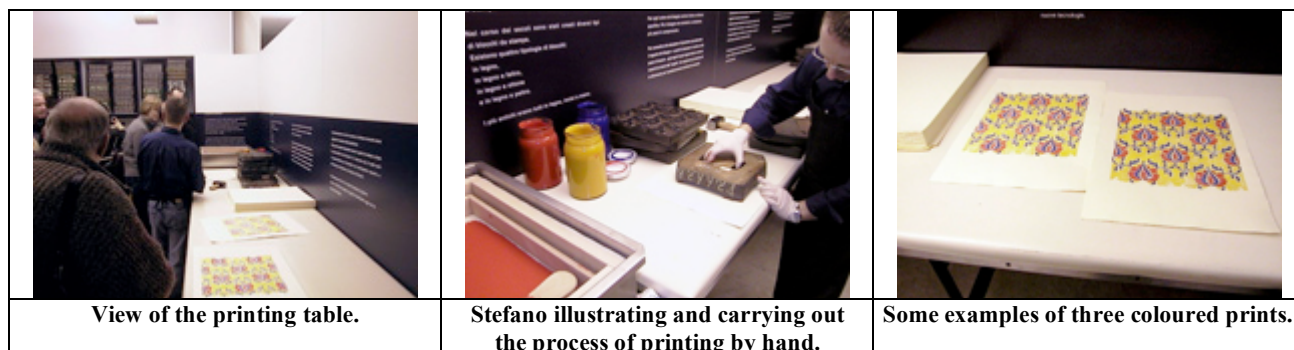


**Close-up of the flippable board.
There is a hand block on each side.**

Once the trolleys have been moved from their positions, the hand blocks are exploitable either standing up or sitting down. The higher part of the wall has various hand blocks exhibited which are shown to the visitors by the museum staff.

By using the hand blocks, the visitors are invited to experience the printing procedure using the instruments and running through the old stages, gestures and techniques of the process.

The experience is propositioned also for the blind, even though the final printed result cannot be seen, as it is precisely the integrity of its multi-sensory character that involves the actions linked to the sense of touch, weight, smell and hearing. In order to bring those who cannot see closer to the results of the printing procedure, two visual-tactile books have been recently made to illustrate the path between the initial action and the printed result.



View of the printing table.

**Stefano illustrating and carrying out
the process of printing by hand.**

Some examples of three coloured prints.

There are also some books positioned on the didactic table, to be used by people with various abilities, which integrate and portray the materials present in the room.

Along with the designing process was a form of museum staff training, focussing on the theme of welcoming just one person or a group of people with disabilities, giving particular attention to the ways of communicating, welcoming and orientating those with sensory or cognitive disabilities.

Conclusions

The process of creating an accessible and inclusive environment cannot become a reality without the conscious and persistent effort of all citizens with their different personal, social and professional roles.

Right now the principle effort is to make absolutely sure that the design and training scheme proposed for the Room of Experiences continues. Since February there have been various guided tours, including some for children with multiple disabilities. Vincenzo Zucchi and HBgroup are promoting information exchanges between visitors and professionals from the world of textiles forming a cultural group for programmed guided tours for schools.

In addition to continued networking and information exchange, there will be outcomes that will require regional, national and international collaboration. It is therefore necessary to open a serious and constructive confrontation to overcome the *existing* barriers, before the physical or sensory, communicative, psychological and cultural ones.

References and Resources

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The Room of Experiences

c/o Museo del Tessile e della Tradizione Industriale di Busto Arsizio/Museum of Textile and Industrial Tradition of Busto Arsizio

Via Volta 6/8 – Busto Arsizio (VA) Italy

Tel. 0039 0331-390.220 or 0039 0331-627.983

Opening Times: Free of charge, Thursday-Sunday, from 4pm to 7pm (closed on Mondays)

Client: Vincenzo Zucchi S.p.A.

Designer:

Paola Bucciarelli, architect

HBgroup – Project and Research on Disability and Inclusive Design

Blindness Specialist Consultant:

Luca Bergamaschi

Cultural Working Group:

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