

Access with Elegance - Museums and Art Galleries

Adrian Cave

Synopsis

The book on 'Museums and Art Galleries', published by the RIBA in 2007 in the series 'Making Existing Buildings Accessible', reviews fourteen museums and art galleries, all of which are in historic buildings where alterations have been made to improve accessibility for disabled people. Six of the schemes are described by members of the project team and the remaining eight are described with a short project summary.

The main conclusions from this study include the following:

- use as a museum or art gallery can often be an effective way of ensuring the future viability of a historic building
- providing step-free entry into a historic building may be less intrusive than the installation of an external ramp or wheelchair lift up to the front door
- providing the reception area, shop, café and sanitary accommodation in an annex or basement can help to protect the more vulnerable spaces and features of the building, including the original entrance hall, from the pressure of visitor numbers
- variety and choice for visitors, particularly in access to information and exhibits, can be greatly assisted by systematic consultation with user groups
- fully accessible and clearly marked routes, defined as the primary circulation routes, may make other access issues easier to resolve and reduce the need for extensive alterations in other parts of the premises.

Introduction

Museums and art galleries are particularly relevant to studies about designing for accessibility for three main reasons.

First, they are buildings which large numbers of people may wish to visit in order to enjoy or to benefit from the exhibits or information which are available. These visitors will be diverse and include people with a wide range of disabilities. For some of these a successful visit may be an especially important experience because of the many limitations which they experience in the built environment generally.

Second, many visitors may only come to a particular museum or gallery once in their lifetime, or be there on their first visit. Therefore, they need to be able to find their way into and through the building with the minimum of difficulty and to be able to obtain access to the exhibits or information in ways which are appropriate to their particular needs.

Third, because many museums and art galleries are in historic buildings, it is important that the qualities of the building are not compromised by intrusive measures taken to improve accessibility. Further, because a visit to an art gallery is for most people a visual and aesthetic experience, the quality of this experience should be enhanced in every way, both in the historic parts of the building and in any new spaces or extensions.

The study therefore examined selected museums and art galleries in which access improvements have been designed with care and attention to detail in order to enquire whether some of the innovative or unorthodox design solutions may

contribute to the concept of 'inclusive design'. If a design can be seen, in scientific terms, as a hypothesis for a solution to the design brief it can be sensible to test the hypothesis, not by examining whether the design conforms to the published guidance in the BS or in Approved Document Part M but whether it works reasonably well in practice for the majority of people and, particularly, of people who are disabled.

The principles of inclusive design are:

- to place people at the heart of the design process
- to acknowledge human diversity and difference
- to offer choice where a single design solution cannot accommodate all users
- to provide for flexibility in use
- to provide buildings and environments which are safe, convenient, equitable and enjoyable for use by everyone, regardless of ability, age or gender.

It is a premise of the concept of inclusive design that a design achieves its purpose unobtrusively and with the minimum of additional features or gadgets. In other words, that it meets the needs of almost everyone without proclaiming itself to be designed for disabled people. There are many examples in the projects examined in this study where most people would not realise that the ease with which they entered the building, made enquiries at the reception desk and then enjoyed the shop, exhibitions and cafe was due largely to the fact that the premises had been adapted to meet the needs of disabled people.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) appointed the author and the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) in 2003 to undertake a study of 'Access with Elegance' at six museums and art galleries in England. This study, which was completed in 2004, demonstrated that a great deal of useful experience had been accumulated about the process of making these sensitive buildings accessible, that every project had examples of good practice and of innovative solutions and that much of this experience could be useful or informative for future projects if described and published systematically. This was the genesis of the present publication.

Methodology

The methodology for the 'Access with Elegance' study was based on that commonly used for an access audit, using the sequence of a journey into and through the building and its site. A full access audit normally involves the measurement of such features as door widths, steps, gradients, the heights of desks, door handles, switches, vision panels etc, the force required to open doors and the levels of illumination in key areas. Because the purpose of this study was to try to identify examples of good or innovative practice in improving accessibility, the visits followed the same journey sequence as for an access audit. Notes and photographs were taken mainly of those features which were particularly significant from an access point of view, including, of course, the needs of people with sensory impairments. It has to be said at the outset that every one of the visits was an enjoyable and stimulating experience and it is hoped that this will be conveyed by the following descriptions and illustrations.

It became apparent very quickly that a thorough process of consultation with disabled people during the planning and design stages of a project to improve accessibility can make a major contribution to the success of the project. Such consultation can be particularly informative when the constraints of the existing building require innovative solutions which can be reviewed with users at the design stage.

Every one of the six projects included in the original study and in this publication have features which differ from the design guidance provided in BS 8300 and in the subsequent version of Approved Document Part M, 2004 edition. Many of these features could be described as innovative but not necessarily successful, and it is important that designs which vary from the guidelines should be carefully monitored in order to assess the extent to which they are, or are not, helpful in providing access for disabled people.

A hypothesis of this book is that there are many ways other than those recommended in publications, such as BS 8300 and Approved Document Part M, by which the access needs of disabled people can be met. Experience at several of the premises described in the case studies indicates that most disabled people develop considerable skills to compensate for the difficulties which they encounter in the built environment and that there may be valuable lessons to be learned from this experience. This applies above all to people who have lived with a specific disability for most of their lives. The issue is how to achieve a balance between the cultural and aesthetic qualities of, for example, a museum in an 18th century house and the access needs of disabled people who may wish to visit the museum in the 21st century.

Designing for disabled people

Designing for visually impaired people is one of the most delicate and difficult aspects of designing for improved accessibility and there are several reasons for this. For example, the needs of people who are blind are easier to define and relate to features such as touch, acoustics, air flow, smell etc. In general terms, people who are severely visually impaired people need to be able to feel their way around a building, either by using a cane, for which floor surfaces, kerbs, and obstacles in circulation routes are very significant, or, when using the hand, in which case the handrails and door handles are important. It is worth noting that for a blind person the quality of the door, the door handle and handrails may be among the main indicators of the quality of a building, because these are touched by the hand and fingers. A lightweight hollow core door with a flimsy door handle feels entirely different from a solid timber door which has generous door handles and is easy to open. Handrails can vary from flat, narrow sections of wrought iron via metal or nylon covered circular rails, with a diameter of about 50mm which are easy to hold, to Victorian timber handrails of monumental proportions which convey much about the character of the building but can be difficult to hold. People who have long experience of a disability are able to use other senses to obtain information about their environment in ways of which most people are unaware and, of these, hearing and acoustics are particularly important.

One of the many difficulties in designing for visually impaired people is that the conditions which cause impaired vision vary so greatly. For example, levels of lighting which may be helpful to some people can be too bright or too dark for others. However, there are general principles of inclusive design which include the elimination of glare, graded transitions between areas of high and low illumination and colour schemes with adequate visual contrasts for features such as steps, handrails, doors and doorways. All these measures meet the principles of inclusive design because they are useful for the majority of people. It is also worth noting that just as designing routes for wheelchair users helps people with walking difficulties, families with young children in buggies and people with wheeled suitcases, providing for the general needs of people with impaired vision can be of great assistance to

elderly people because, with age, the eye becomes slower to respond to changing conditions of illumination.

In this context, designing for deaf people is largely related to ensuring that visual features such as signs, floor finishes and routes are adequate and that those who need to can lip-read when talking to staff, particularly at the reception desk and in the shop. To achieve this, it is necessary for the faces of the staff to be illuminated without glare. The provision of induction loops is usually advisable or necessary in reception areas and in exhibition spaces where audio information is provided. Where induction loops are provided, it is essential that they are maintained in working order and the staff know how to use them. Audio guides can be particularly helpful for blind people and, when adapted for hearing aids, for those who are deaf. When they are available, audio guides are likely to be popular with many non-disabled visitors partly because, unlike with written information, they enable exhibits to be studied while receiving the recorded information – an example of how assistive technology can help to make information and interpretation inclusively accessible.

The process of improving accessibility

Nearly all the projects investigated have been through a long period of design and development, most of which has included feasibility studies for alternative options with evaluation of relative costs, advantages and disadvantages. It is now clear that decisions can be pre-planned in a sequence and there can be great benefits to the process if all parties can be aware of when will be the appropriate stage for certain types of design decision. For example, in the outline and scheme design stages (Stages C and D) the main emphasis is likely to be on circulation routes, taking account of public transport, car parking, entrances into the building and internal circulation with decisions about whether changes in level require ramps or lifts. Those issues which concern wheelchair access and its requirements at changes of level and for widths of circulation space is pre-eminent at these stages of a project. Later, the detailed design stages (Stage E onwards) is the time for decisions which affect features such as door handles, floor finishes, WC design, lighting and colours. If all goes well, decisions at and after completion of the works should not involve changes to decisions made earlier, but may include adjustments of furniture, fixtures, lighting and ancillary aids to meet the needs of an individual, usually a member of staff, who has specific needs. It is during these design stages that a user consultation group can be of great assistance to the design team, which may include representatives of the client, access consultant, architect, conservation specialists and other members of the project team.

At Hollytrees Museum, for example, the Consultation Group included wheelchair users and people with impairments of walking and of manual dexterity. Their input contributed greatly to the creativity and relevance of the design. An example of that influence was a decision to change the sloping footpath outside the Museum from loose gravel to a firm asphalt base with a surface of rolled gravel, providing a surface which was sympathetic in appearance for an 18th century house but much easier in use for disabled people and families with children in pushchairs. However, it was also agreed that although the slope of the land provided natural gradients of about 1 in 12 steeper than the preferred gradient of 1 in 15, this should be accepted and it would not be appropriate to provide handrails along this slope. As with all innovative design solutions it is prudent to monitor the use of this feature and if serious problems occur to make appropriate adjustments.

It is understood that no significant problems occurred at Hollytrees. A similar surface treatment has been provided on the flat footpath approaches at Dulwich Picture

Gallery, where the visual appearance of the gravel-surfaced path in the historic setting is of great importance.

Legislation and Codes of Practice

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 came into effect in stages, so that by October 2004 buildings in which services were provided were required to have 'reasonable adjustments' to the physical features of the premises to overcome physical barriers to access. This legislation prompted the publication of many guidelines to good practice.

The publication in 2001 of BS 8300, 'Design of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people – Code of Practice', was a significant moment in the development of good practice because the recommendations are based on wide-ranging research and therefore have an authority not available to many earlier publications. For almost the first time, this was a document in which nearly all the criteria were measurable, providing an invaluable tool for the auditing of accessibility in existing buildings. It was not new to have guidelines for the gradients and lengths of ramps (although even these guidelines were changed by the BS), but the BS also provided measurable criteria based on research for such features as the width of doors in various situations, heights and sizes for door handles and handrails, the spaces required for a wheelchair user to turn from corridors, to open doors and to pass through the doorway, the force required to open the door, the size of lettering for various functions and the contrasts of tone and colour between various surfaces. This was a genuine breakthrough because at last people seeking to improve the quality of the environment for disabled people were able to say, not merely that a door was too narrow or too heavy or too difficult to open, but to point out the ways in which the door did not meet the recommended criteria. However, two problems resulted from the wealth of information provided in BS 8300.

The first of these is that many access auditors and consultants have tended to apply the criteria in the BS without adequate understanding of the needs of people or of the context. In some cases this has resulted in property owners and managers being advised that, in order to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, they needed to make such extensive and expensive changes that this tended to make the idea of improving access for disabled people appear unrealistic. In many cases, a significant contribution to making services accessible to disabled people can be achieved by staff training and improved information, at relatively limited cost, with modifications to the built environment being carried out as resources become available.

The second problem resulting from the BS is that it can be interpreted as a set of 'rules' and applied too rigidly as though the recommendations were the only way to comply with current good practice, although this was explicitly not the intention of the committee which produced the document. The Foreword to BS 8300 states that the design recommendations "are, where relevant, based on user trials and validated desk studies which formed part of a research project commissioned in 1997 and 2001" whereas previously "the guidance with respect to the access needs of disabled people was incomplete, in some instances contradictory and, on the whole, not based on validated research. During the course of development of this British Standard, however, it has become clear that further research will be necessary into risks and inconvenience in buildings to people with sensory impairments." The Foreword goes on to emphasise although "In some instances, recommendations are quite specific; in others, they include dimensional ranges. Where dimensions and /or

measurements are stated, they are subject to tolerances. Dimensional ranges are intended to provide designers with some flexibility of design solution.”

Building Regulations

Many of the recommendations in BS 8300 were incorporated into the revised edition of Approved Document Part M (ADM) which came into effect in May 2004. Interestingly and after extensive consultation following the publication of the British Standard in 2001, some of the recommendations were not included in ADM because the understanding of good practice in designing for disabled people had developed during the intervening period. An example is the question of whether there should be tactile warning surfaces at the top and bottom of stairs: although this can be helpful for people who are blind or partially sighted, tactile paving can be uncomfortable and even hazardous for some people with impaired walking who prefer a smooth and predictable surface. The generally accepted recommendation at the time of writing is that tactile paving should not be applied as a matter of course but only in situations where there are not other and adequate indications of the hazard for people who are blind or partially sighted. The principle that ‘improvements’ to meet the needs of one group of disabled people should not be disadvantageous to others is fundamental to the concept of inclusive design.

Since the completion of some of the projects covered in this publication, access statements have become a significant feature of the process of improving physical access in existing buildings. Access statements are referred to in the current version of Approved Document Part M and, since May 2004, have been required by many local authorities as part of Building Regulations applications. There are many ways in which Access Statements can be presented but, to be effective, they should explain in a systematic way the reasons for the decisions taken about accessibility, any constraints of the existing buildings and the relationship between the physical fabric and the management of the building, particularly for entry and for emergency escape. Decisions about the design, or omission, of tactile paving or other features recommended in BS 8300 could be recorded in an Access Statement for future reference.

Access into buildings

Step-free access externally

Portable ramps should normally be seen as a temporary solution only to achieving step-free access into buildings because they are always a visually intrusive, they do not normally meet the design criteria for independent use and they usually require staff to place, supervise and remove the ramp.

Portable ramps may be useful in the following situations:

- as a temporary solution while other options are being considered
- where funding is not yet available for the construction of an alternative
- in very sensitive locations where any alterations would be undesirable (Norton)

An external ramp without steps may provide access for wheelchair users but, when the slope is steeper than about 1:15 this can be uncomfortable and sometimes slippery for ambulant disabled people, particularly if there is not a handrail of both sides. (Cook)

External ramps with adjacent steps provide choice and greater safety for visitors than either steps or a ramp on its own,

New entrances

If the cill of an existing doorway can be lowered to eliminate the steps, it may be possible to provide step free entry into the building. This may appear to be a radical alteration to a historic building but the benefits are the elimination of any external ramp or lift if the change of level can be accommodated by an internal lift.

A similar arrangement can be adopted by reducing the cill height of an existing window in order to form a new doorway with step-free entry but no examples were noted in the buildings covered by this study.

When space and resources allow, new step-free entry into a building can be provided by

- a) the formation of a new entrance in an existing annex to the existing building (Holly, Cook)
- b) a new entrance in the basement or lower ground floor (Queen's Ho, Camden)
- c) construction of a new extension (Towneley, S'land, Dulwich, Horniman, Norton, Lighthouse)

Access within buildings

Primary access routes

In a large and complicated building, the concept of primary access routes can greatly assist in the planning, design and indeed in the use of the building. If the main access routes can be defined and identified easily, the benefits include the following:

- Horizontal circulation: in entrance halls, circulation spaces and exhibition rooms, the features can include clear signage, non-slip and hazard-free flooring, doors held open with magnetic catches, handrails where appropriate for ramps, glare-free lighting and reception desk designed for all visitors.
- Vertical circulation: with lifts and possibly selected ramps which have been designed or adapted for ease of use by disabled people.
- Other routes, particularly historic stairs which may be difficult to adapt can be left unchanged because the use of these is entirely optional when lift access is available.

A typical example of a feature not changed would be a main staircase which is one of the most important architectural features of a 17th or 18th century house, with marble or timber treads and with very limited contrasts of colour and tone. In historic terms, any attempt to add visible nosing strips would be very undesirable and, for disabled people, the discreet installation of a lift can provide easier and safer access between floor levels. Queen's House and Hollytrees Museum are relevant examples.

Step-free access internally

Changes of level within the buildings were dealt with as follows:

1. Queen's House - by removing a relatively recent stair to provide space for a new lift and staircase
2. National Portrait Gallery – by extending into an under-used space between the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, with a new lift and escalator.
3. Hollytrees - by forming a lift shaft in a later annex, with entry doors concealed in panelling to provide access to the upper floors of the original building
4. Towneley Hall - by providing a platform lift to accommodate a change of level at ground level plus a passenger lift between the ground and first floors
5. Sunderland - with major new lift and service core
6. Fisheries Museum – with a series of internal ramps designed to provide a sequential visit to the exhibition
7. Dulwich Picture Gallery – with a new internal ramp to the level of the main gallery
8. Horniman Museum – with a major new extension, including a passenger lift and internal ramp
9. National Gallery - by inserting an enclosed platform lift inside the new entrance to the original building and with a new lift in a former courtyard
10. Camden - by the formation of a lift and staircase in the new extension, with access to the upper floors of the original building
11. Norton Priory – with temporary ramps at the main entrance and to the medieval undercroft
12. Cook Museum - by inserting a new lift adjacent to the chimney breast of the old domestic building and concealing this within panelling
13. Lighthouse – with a major new extension, including a passenger lift
14. Queen's Gallery – by a new lift and staircase within the shell of the reconstructed interior

Access to information and exhibits

Where entry for physically disabled people into the museum or art gallery and to the main internal floor levels has been achieved, access to the exhibits and information will not be complete until the needs of people with sensory impairments have been addressed. Attention to the following features can bring benefits to the majority of visitors including those do not have disabilities.

Impaired vision

Within the premises, glare-free illumination is important in order to reduce the problems for people with impaired vision. These may include elderly people who, while not considering themselves to be disabled, can be very sensitive to glare and to abrupt transitions between brightness and darkness.

All the premises included in this study have reasonable transitional illumination to cover the visual change from external conditions, whether from bright sunshine or from twilight on dark winter evenings. In all cases the entrance lobby, reception hall and foyer provide space and time for the eye to adapt when entering or leaving the premises (e.g. Queen's House, Hollytrees, Towneley Hall, Dulwich).

Within historic buildings traditional illumination with a combination of natural lighting and a variety of small light sources including chandeliers and "candle" lamps, uses techniques which have been refined over centuries. In some circumstances the traditional lighting may not achieve levels of illumination which are sufficient for modern display requirements, but this can be supplemented by display case lighting or by spotlights concealed behind cornices or other architectural features or located discreetly in chandeliers and other hanging lamps. New lighting techniques, including fibre-optic installations, give exciting opportunities for improving displays of

exhibits and, when necessary, for the conservation of vulnerable materials. (Towneley Hall, Cook, Sunderland)

Internal courtyards can be very effective for transitional illumination and for providing visitors with awareness of their location and of external weather conditions.

Occasionally conservation requirements necessitate very low levels of illumination at about 50 lux and in these situations the transitional lighting needs particular care if people are to be able to see at all on entering the displays of fragile exhibits e.g. fabrics, books, watercolours etc. In some situations, such as at Towneley Hall in 2004, a display of church vestments was not very successful because the exhibits were very difficult to see until the eye had adjusted to the low levels of illumination, only to be followed by the glare from a window directly in front as one entered the chapel.

Impaired hearing

- illumination for lip-reading at the reception desk and elsewhere if appropriate
- induction loop at reception desk and in meeting or conference rooms
- avoiding noisy spaces with reverberation specially in cafes, where the noise levels can be confusing or make conversation difficult

Learning difficulties

- signage with clearly identifiable symbols and colour coding
- clear circulation and orientation e.g. central spaces, views out to recognisable features
- central vertical space
- varied visual and tactile information
- active role for disabled people as in the gardens at Norton Priory

Information

For many people a visit to a museum or art gallery begins with an inspection of the website. During the course of this study all the projects featured have improved their websites in order to provide information about access routes, car parking, opening hours, facilities, special exhibitions etc. This information can be invaluable in helping disabled people to plan their visits, while at the same time providing information with a choice of formats which are accessible to disabled people. These adaptations of format may range from enlarged typefaces or images to audio descriptions and commentaries.

Within the premises, choices about the format and content of the information may include:

- large print, using a font without serifs, e.g Helvetica or Ariel, both on fixed information panels and on boards or sheets which visitors can take to the exhibits
- audio descriptions and commentaries available on the internet, CDs or DVDs and with audio guides. Recent technical developments are making audio guides increasingly easy to use, providing visitors with a choice of exhibits, summaries or detailed information as selected, plus volume control and choice of language. The handsets vary in ease of use, some of the easiest to use being based on the keypad of mobile phones. In contrast some older systems, with large numbers of buttons on a hand-held wand, can be very confusing, especially for people with impaired vision. Some sophisticated systems are triggered by proximity to features of the building or to displays and can help to guide visitors through the premises.

- on the principle of inclusive design the use of Braille is rarely justified. Few people use Braille and if located close to a display, there is always the problem of how to find it. In contrast tactile displays, such as raised maps, models and sculpture, especially when supplemented by audio information, can be very informative and enjoyable for people with impaired vision.
- tactile information, with objects to touch, the feel and scent of plants and foliage and the sounds of water can be informative and enjoyable for many people, whether disabled or not.
- language choices for visitors from abroad become practical when audio information is available (although it may not be cost-effective to do so in Latin !)
- door handles and locks to WCs, taps, hand-driers etc. to be easy to use, generally suitable for operation with a closed fist and not requiring finger strength
- controls to operate information systems, commentaries, displays and lift to be easy to use and predictable, without making undue demands on manual skills and dexterity.

Emergency escape

If disabled people are to be able to make full use of museums and art galleries they need to be informed about the arrangements and routes for emergency escape. In addition to escape routes being clearly signed and step-free where possible, policies and procedures should be well co-ordinated and communicated for the evacuation of disabled people, for safe refuges and for the protection of people who are blind or deaf.

Traditionally, fire protection and escape for disabled people were based on independent methods of escape but more recently, with the recognition that there may be more disabled people at the upper floors of buildings, there is increasing advocacy for systems and procedures for managed escape, including horizontal evacuation and lifts which operate in separate fire zones. Nevertheless, because most people find it natural to leave a building by the way that they came in, the legibility of the layout can be as important for people to leave the premises safely as it is for them when they arrive.

Historic buildings

The use of a historic building as a museum or art gallery can be one of the most appropriate ways of ensuring the future viability of the building. The examples of Queen's House, Hollytrees Museum and Towneley Hall all show how display and exhibition spaces can be formed without compromising the character of architecturally sensitive spaces.

Accurate historic analysis is essential if access improvements to historic buildings are to be achieved sensitively and successfully. This is important both aesthetically and socially: aesthetically because important buildings which have been protected and conserved by previous generations are very vulnerable to alterations made for short-term or apparently urgent considerations which may, in some views, include meeting the requirements of the DDA. It is also important socially because ill-judged alterations to premises and buildings which people value may provoke the perception that making buildings accessible is more about 'political correctness' than about wider social benefits. A more successful approach is to try to carry out discrete and unobtrusive changes so that the historic environment becomes 'inclusively' easier for people to use and enjoy.

Several principles can provide the guidelines for successful access improvements to historic buildings:

Historic analysis can help to identify:

- stages in the development of the building and of later alterations
- significant and less-significant areas of the premises
- original concepts for the buildings if not fully achieved
- areas which offer opportunities for possible access improvements

The appraisal of options may include:

- temporary improvements, which are usually reversible
- external improvements, often reversible and usually intrusive (e.g. ramps, stair-lifts, platform lifts etc)
- internal improvements, which can often be integrated unobtrusively
- entry via an annex, basement or possibly a new extension
- entry via a reduced threshold level at an existing door or window
- internal vertical circulation, usually via a lift and especially where this can be unobtrusive
- ways to take pressure of visitor numbers off the most sensitive historic areas of the premises
- ways to develop under-used areas to create new commercial opportunities (e.g. shop, café, meeting rooms etc)

Many of the most successful access improvements have been achieved by providing step-free entry into the premises, with carefully located internal lifts to provide access to other levels. Even when this involves alterations to the external appearance of a historic building, as at Queen's House or the National Gallery, the changes can be justified by the clarity with which everyone can enter by the same route and reach the other floor levels by internal lifts, avoiding the need for external ramps or wheelchair lifts.

The case studies include examples of historic analysis and of access improvements which illustrate all the examples outlined above. The most successful examples involve bold interventions to achieve inclusive access, but always with a clear and sensitive response to the qualities of the historic fabric.

Conclusions

The main conclusions from this study of fourteen museums and art galleries are as follows:

1. Viable uses for historic buildings

When seeking a viable future for a historic building, one of the best options can be for the building to be used as a museum or art gallery, because the exhibitions and displays can be adapted in response to the history and qualities of the building. A thorough understanding of the history of the premises is required in order to ensure a satisfactory balance between conservation and innovation.

(Queen's House, Hollytrees, Towneley Hall, Norton Priory, Cook Museum)

2. Entrances to historic buildings

Many historic buildings have steps up to the main entrance. Elegant and step-free access can often be provided via a new entrance at ground level, enabling the character of the original entrance to be unchanged and the changes of level to be dealt with internally, with lifts or ramps.

(Queen's House, Dulwich, National Gallery, Camden, Hollytrees, Towneley Hall)

3. Ancillary spaces

The qualities of a historic building which is to be used as a museum or art gallery can be protected if the ancillary functions (e.g. reception, cloakrooms, WCs, shop, café, meeting and conference rooms etc.) are located in an annex or basement, taking the pressure of visitors and facilities away from the more vulnerable parts of the premises. Added benefits are that the ancillary spaces can be used independently, often for income generating activities.

(Dulwich, NPG, National Gallery, Camden, Hollytrees, Towneley Hall, Norton Priory, Cook Museum, Lighthouse, Queen's Gallery, Fisheries Museum)

4. Variety and choice for visitors

An inclusive approach to the design and management of the physical, sensory and intellectual features of the premises can provide variety, options and choices to the benefit of all visitors. This process is unlikely to be successful without thorough consultation with user groups.

(Queen's House, Hollytrees, Towneley Hall, Norton Priory, Cook Museum, Lighthouse, Fisheries Museum)

5. Principal access routes

A fully accessible and legible layout for the principal circulation routes can:

- make the premises easier and more enjoyable for people to visit
- reduce the need for signage
- reduce the need for alterations to secondary routes, such as external steps, internal staircases, doorways etc.,
- ensure that the routes and management arrangements for emergency escape are fully integrated into the layout of the premises.

(Queen's House, Dulwich, NPG, Camden, Hollytrees, Cook Museum, Queen's Gallery)

Note that 'disabled people' are not referred to in any of these five conclusions because an inclusive approach to design and management can bring benefits to visitors of all ages, abilities, interests, education and nationalities.

The text above is an extract from 'Making Existing Buildings Accessible: Museums and Art Galleries' edited by Adrian Cave, illustrated with drawings and photographs and published by the Centre for Accessible Environments and the RIBA in 2007. (ISBN-13 978 1 85946 175 4; ISBN-10 1 85946 175 1).