

The Deaf Museum – refurbishment 2019

Making a good museum better for all

The Norwegian Museum of Deaf Culture and History went through a refurbishment in the spring 2019. The exhibitions are 10 years old and was in dire need of a proper renewal. The Deaf museum is unique, one of a few museums dedicated to deaf culture and history. It is a museum for the deaf community, as a place for memorial work and identity strengthening. But the museum is also a meeting place for a diverse audience; Through exhibitions and educational programming we facilitate communication and reflection on differences and inclusion, with the aim to create acceptance and understanding between groups.

Sign language was integrated in the museum exhibition from the start. With 10 years of practice with a diverse audience, we had revised both strengths and weaknesses in our work. The new exhibition are even more accessible for people, in particular we have included more tactile elements in all parts of the museum. We believe in equal access to learning and experiences and are always working to optimize both our exhibitions and programming. Some of the changes we have made to the exhibition are inspired by our partners in the TANDEM-project. We are constantly looking for good solutions that can give our visitors the best possible experience, often the best solutions are the ones that everybody can enjoy, regardless of functional variation.



The reception area

The museum design.

Contrasting colours are used throughout the museum to make it easier to navigate for people with visual impairments. The same colour scheme is used in the exhibition texts, in publications and online.

Wheelchair access is improved in the new exhibition and in the auditorium, (Room X) we have made a dedicated space available for wheelchair users.

Welcoming the visitors

In the entrance to the museum we have placed a tactile model of the building. Also, we have made tactile maps of the exhibition rooms. In that way, people who are visual impaired can get an impression of the layout of the exhibition and find where things are related to each other before they enter the exhibition rooms.



Tactile model of the exterior of the building and the tactile maps to the left of the model.

This introduction to the museum space makes it easier to explain the layout so that people with visual impairments can orient themselves in the exhibition rooms. Many people that are blind have some remaining vision, and for them we provide magnifying glasses that can be borrowed from the reception. This gives them a possible to enjoy the museum by themselves, instead of being dependent on a guide or other assistance.

In the exhibition

The exhibition is built around three main topics: Sign Language, Education, and Everyday life. The refurbishing allowed us to add some new stories, take away what seems unnecessary, and to enhance details where needed. 10 years of experience with groups of children and students, and many visitors from near and far, have taught us what works and what must be handled differently. We did not have a large budget for the project, so there were a lot of compromising going on, often choosing to make things ourselves instead of buying readymade solutions. Not everything we did cost money: By moving some objects to new places we were able to build a more coherent storyline and fitting the exhibition to school programming in an educational way. A close cooperation between educator, curator and designer was necessary to give the best result. Given our long experience with cooperation with this group, it was not difficult to get a good dialogue with, and a lot of help from, the deaf community. We also established test groups with blind and deaf and blind people, and both groups gave us information that made us change designs, content and interpretation.

Opening up

Most people don't like closed display cases in the museum. Glass cases provide physical barriers between museum exhibits and visitors, and when we are talking accessibility for all, glass are a big obstacle. Many blind or visual impaired people would never venture into a museum because "there is nothing there for me". Yet, we all agree that some museum objects must be protected both from touch. In the deaf museum there were three historical tableaus that was behind glass. As an experiment, in lieu of expensive replicas and readymade solutions, in two of the tableaus we moved the glass halfway into the case, cutting the glass so that an educator or guide easily can get to the objects. Even though we don't want our objects to be handled all the time, most objects can be handled by blind visitors

using gloves. This is an affordable compromise that allows people to come closer to the exhibition by taking a step or two into the tableau. Feedback from the visitors is that even the little step inside, gives a totally different experience to just looking from behind a glass.



Deaf and blind – a new part of the exhibition

Space is scarce in our small museum, so we must be imaginative. In just a few square meters we wanted to show historical objects and narratives, as well as educate about deaf and blindness in general. For this part of the exhibition we made a 'curio case'-inspired shelving system. We made a curio case shelving system with some museum objects behind glass, and for each object or story that we tell we have handling objects in open shelves.

On one side we placed information cards with text in Norwegian, English on one side, and Braille on the other side. The cards are printed on sturdy Forex (foam PVC), so that they do not bend when braille readers uses them.

A historical film in loop on the screen have audio description for the visual impaired.



The pièce de résistance

Together with a master student, Sigve Lien from the Faculty of Industrial Design at NTNU (the university in Trondheim) we succeeded in making a tactile representation of an iconic image connected to deaf and blind history. We combined Sigve's knowledge of design and technology with our knowledge of tactile representations in museum. In cooperation with test groups from the blind and deaf and blind communities Sigve produced a beautiful and functional tactile version of the deaf and blind girl learning from her teacher. It is made through a combination of sculpturing and 3Dprinting. The installation draws attention to this part of the exhibition, and everybody, blind or seeing, loves to touch it.



so, we have noticed that people ask more questions about deaf and blindness, and of the two people in the photo.



Penny Talks – connecting with the objects.



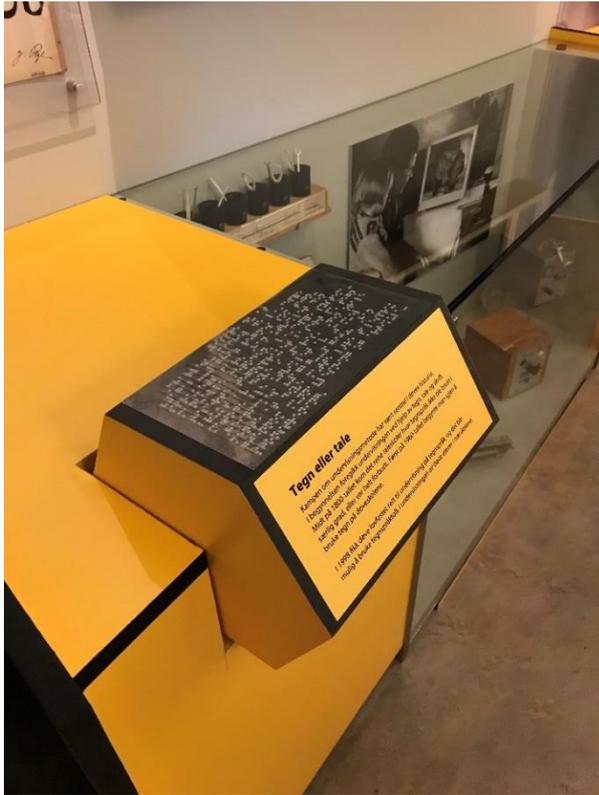
We use the talking pen – Penny Talks – together with a book with stories about some of the objects in the exhibition. This is a simple way of creating interactivity in the museum. The pen is useful for people with visual impairment, since tactile labels are attached to some objects, labels that the pen can read.

Children love to search through the museum for the labels that connects the objects and the book.

The book and the content in the pen were developed for the old exhibition. Because it is easy to change the content on the pen, we will be able to continue to use Penny Talks after the refurbishment.



The Tandem-reel



Another feature in the exhibition that we are particularly proud of, is “The Tandem Reel”. Called so because the idea is copied from what we saw during our Tandem partner meeting in Berlin in 2018. With a limited budget, we had to re-invent the more costly solutions used in the Deutsches Historisches Museum.

The hexagon shaped reel is ideal to show more text than is feasible in the small space we have and made the information far more accessible than if we have the text on the walls. We chose six sides on the reel to make room for one side with a narrative and one with factual info in Norwegian, English and Braille. The reel turns easily and gives Braille readers the opportunity to choose the angle that are most comfortable for reading. The reels are accessible also for wheelchair users.



We have Tandem Reels in connection to all exhibition cases and tableaus where possible.

Where there are no room for a Tandem Reel, we had to use labels on the walls. In addition to a short informative narrative in Norwegian and English, placed on the wall, we have made booklets with more information, and in Braille also. Having Braille labels on the wall is not a good solution since the angle of the hand will make it very uncomfortable to read for braille users. The booklets are made in sturdy cardboard and are easy to get to for everybody.



“Take-away”



Never underestimate the value of giving people something to bring home for further experience and learning! We have cards with Sign Language alphabets, Braille letters and numbers for free, everybody can take one – or three. Hopefully they will think about the museum when they see it at home and maybe they will come back and visit!

What is next

What we have done so far is only one part of the refurbishing project, there are still adjustments to do and details to refine. Then there is the digital part of the exhibition. A large part of our exhibition are connected to touch screens where additional information, context and historical material are provided in Norwegian Sign Language. The hardware are 10 years old and out of date, hard to maintain and prone to collapse at all time. Our next project will therefore be a digital refurbishment of the Deaf Museum.