

ACCOMPANIMENT

I am frequently asked whether we encounter problems when engaging in interdisciplinary teams or in collaborations between sighted and visually impaired people. I answer succinctly: our association, the Nova Gorica Inter-Municipal Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired, does not experience any problems. The challenges do not stem from the differences between disciplines, nor from the varying visual abilities of the participants, but rather from the breadth of their inner perspectives. If we possess a sufficiently broad perspective, synergies become a given. As with each passing year our collaborations are more frequent and our experiences grow, the results are progressively improving. When both sides clarify their aspirations and explain the importance of their goals, communication begins to flow, leading to the proposal of solutions from both groups. In my experience, sighted individuals suggest very good solutions.

The biggest obstacle we face is fear, which often manifests itself in a clash of egos, trying to prove who is right; therefore, I find that the most important way to encourage any kind of dialogue is to listen to each other and empathize with our conversational partner. For example, the tactile gallery project with its exhibition *The Art Beyond the Visible*¹ presents a dialogue between Slovenian and Italian users and artists, including sculptors and painters. Although in this case we are referring to big and well-known names, all project collaborators make an indispensable contribution, as they provide Braille printing, create audio descriptions, prepare spaces using appropriate contrasts and arrange presentations in various media. Another similar example is the exhibition *Up Close*,² which is the result of our excellent collaboration with students from the Academy

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1 More on the project: <https://www.go2025.eu/en/projects/the-art-beyond-the-visible>.

2 More on the project: <https://www.mg-lj.si/en/exhibitions/3622/exhibition-up-close-preservation-protection-and-conservation-restoration-of-modern-and-contemporary-works-of-art>.

of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Ljubljana and the Museum of Modern Art. A further instance is *Tolmin Peasant Uprising*, a three-dimensional, tactile illustration of Tone Kralj's painting *Count Coronini's Meeting with the Tolmin Rebels*, realised by Kristina Naglost as part of her master's thesis.

In accordance with the legislation, all projects must be accessible. This requirement is given greater consideration when organizations of people with disabilities are involved in a project; however, it tends to be less prioritized in other contexts, because in Slovenia, general awareness and information on the topic of accessibility still have a long way to go. The reason for *ad hoc* solutions, which despite being well-intentioned, prove to be non-beneficial, cannot be attributed to funding constraints. It is essential to incorporate these topics into the regular curriculum of institutions such as the Academy of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Ljubljana, and in educational programmes in general, as well as to explore them as subjects of research projects.

This necessarily raises the question of how to encourage empathy in designers. As Samo Turel, the Mayor of Nova Gorica, said in our Association's podcast: "It's about a shift in mentality; not because we are bound by the law, but because it's the right thing to do." What is crucial to this end is dialogue serving as an exchange of views; listening carefully is the first condition for enriching our awareness. I recognize great value in the productive challenge designers face in expressing their innovative ideas by drawing on users' needs. Returning to the tactile gallery mentioned earlier, it offers a remarkable experience for the blind and partially sighted, allowing them to realize that even the field of visual expression can open the door to all the other senses: they can smell wood and metal, touch different surfaces, and listen to the sounds generated by contact with various materials. This is how they explore not only statues but also paintings.

Designers can contribute by considering the accessibility needs of all vulnerable groups: the blind and partially sighted, the deaf and hard of hearing, the deaf-blind, wheelchair users, children, the elderly and mothers with young children. Some exhibitions are

held in spaces that have a special appeal and significance, yet present physical challenges or inaccessibility issues. This poses the question of which audiences the exhibition aims to reach and who might be excluded. A common issue in adapting environments and materials is the tendency to focus on a single aspect, assuming that this sufficiently addresses the accessibility of the entire experience. However, solutions for people with visual impairments should always be comprehensively conceptualized and implemented. In this regard, our international connections serve as a valuable resource. As a result, during the tactile gallery project, we visited the Francesco Cavazza Institute for the Blind in Bologna, the Museo Tattile Statale Omero in Ancona, and the Monza City Museum, gathering knowledge and insights on the possible adaptations and different strategies aimed at enhancing accessibility for people with visual impairments, particularly the blind.

In relation to learning materials, it should be noted that they increasingly incorporate visual or design elements, which can have a negative effect for individuals with visual impairments, potentially causing them to work at a slower pace or with reduced efficiency. In an inclusion-oriented environment, all materials should be adapted for all vulnerable groups, including those with visual impairments.

As all designers are well-aware, sometimes the best solutions emerge when we turn the problem on its head. In the context where there is a constant emphasis on what a sighted society can and should do for people with visual impairments, it is important to emphasise that by working in this area, sighted individuals can build on their abilities and knowledge in ways they might not previously have imagined.

— Igor Miljavec,
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of the Blind and Visually Impaired*

