

experimental: Vietato non toccare  
not touching prohibited

**a new way of looking at accessibility**  
**an non-stop workshop**  
**a new way of designing**

The “not touching prohibited” tactile and olfactory route is a museum-cum-workshop aimed at exemplifying good practices to be adopted in the design of spaces dedicated to art and culture.

The aim of the “not touching prohibited” project is to remove barriers of various types, starting with the removal of architectural barriers to create spaces that are completely accessible to people with motor disabilities. Sensory barriers that alter visual perception and emotional barriers, or the perception under certain psycho-physical conditions of dangerous, unsafe or tiring environments, are also to be removed.

“Not touching prohibited” is an innovative, universal way of thinking about design for all, whose reference model is not a particular type of visitor, but MAN and the changes he faces during his lifetime.

Visitors are invited to be blindfolded at the entrance to the exhibition and are then entrusted to a guide who will lead them around in groups of two or three.

We use the term “entrust” because suddenly not being able to see and entering an unknown environment provokes a strong emotional reaction, which the guides are trained to help the visitor overcome.

This is how the visitor begins the route in the dark: exploring by touch and perceiving by smelling and hearing, using senses that we believe we employ all the time, but immediately realizing how much they depend on sight. The first reaction is to try to understand by retracing the pathways of one’s memory, but not everything that the visitor “sees” with the hands is already known: only then are the senses that are always present but rarely used really put to work.

### **Accessible design for a wider range of visitors**

The “not touching prohibited” team can design and realize tourist and museum routes and exhibitions accessible to all sorts of visitors.

The design process includes not only the creation of a route without physical and architectural barriers in the strict sense, but also without sensory barriers which often prevent people from using knowledge autonomously.

Accessible design comprises several steps:

- feasibility study;
- evaluation of historical, artistic and landscape constraints;

- analysis and identification of possible interventions;
- creation of a modular route based on scientific and didactic guidelines.

In the case of the “not touching prohibited” tactile and olfactory museum-route, Design for all has taken the form of a series of examples of good practice that include “posts” with original archaeological finds or reproductions and casts to be explored using one’s hands: by creating a “walking-touching route” and providing a handrail to help orientate blind and visually impaired people inside the museum; by positioning panels with contrasting colours and large print for visually impaired people; by providing tactile maps for the visually impaired, blind and those with normal vision; by creating a lighting system that complies with the real needs of visually impaired people; and by creating smelling posts, background sounds and a natural setting (e.g. woods, inside a cave etc.), capable of involving all the visitor’s senses.

The last of these good examples will take the form of the production of exhibition guides and catalogues in Braille for the blind and in large print for visually impaired people.

## **Consultancy on accessible design of museums and exhibition areas**

Advice on universal design can be offered to designers and professionals in the culture sector who want to make museums and cultural routes in general accessible. Our consultancy service includes an analytical and functional study of spaces and aims to

provide guidelines for design and renovation, adaptation and testing of the exhibition set-up.

### **Training in “not touching prohibited”**

Training is one of the key elements of this project and aims to provide a whole series of cognitive tools not only for specific roles such as museum guides or tourism professionals, but for anyone who works in close contact with the public.

The training can be divided into separate but interrelated modules. The first part involves experience-based educational workshops for the acquisition of the relating skills necessary in order to work successfully with people with both motor and sensory disabilities. The method used includes lessons, case analysis, role playing and team learning. The second part is dedicated to accessible design and can be seen as an open workshop that takes the form of feasibility studies, simulations of environments etc.

The topics dealt with can be outlined as follows:

- Language and the image of disability: relationship between individuals and disability, changes in terminology, the ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health).

- A look at various disabilities: motor, hearing, visual disabilities; approaches and awareness of the various methods of interaction.

- Aid relationships, interpersonal communication, verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening (from traditional

methods of helping to aid relationships), empathy and settlement of disputes.

- From accessibility rules to rule accessibility: a legislative excursion into the accessibility of information, communication and IT; reflection on the real accessibility of the legislation itself.

- The principles of universal design and a wider public: reflection on the design and planning of spaces and services that everyone can use, from architectural barriers to Design for All.

The lessons will last a total of 50 hours and will be held by a teacher assisted by two tutors.

### **Embracing communication**

An exhibition designed to be accessible to everyone must also have a communication strategy that caters for all types of visitor, including those who are less receptive to traditional methods of communication.

Accessible communication must always be simple, direct and multisensorial.

From a communicative point of view, the decision to call the exhibition “not touching prohibited” represents something unusual and a break away from the norm. The exhibition’s “not touching prohibited” theme is based on a cognitive surprise: by using a universally recognised form of veto and reversing the meaning, the phrase is rendered unusual – a break from the norm – especially in

the context of a strongly characterised environment such as a museum.

Every town that hosts “not touching prohibited” will have its own advertising campaign. The aim of this natural and necessary choice is to create a strong bond with the host area. The individual campaigns will however have in common the “not touching prohibited” mission: to make culture universally accessible.

“Not touching prohibited” is also a special invitation to let one of the senses rest in order to prompt the other four to work. The use of these senses instead of sight means rediscovering the playful side of learning and returning to childhood, where not just sight but the whole body is used in the learning process and we reach out to the external world.

The campaigns will also be characterised by strong graphics that lend themselves to immediate and unambiguous understanding. This is partly achieved through the colour scheme, which is dominated by black and white: a contrast that makes reading easier for the visually impaired.

### **Prehistoric archaeology in “not touching prohibited”**

The “not touching prohibited” tactile and olfactory museum-route is set in the cultural-scientific context of prehistoric archaeology and faces the dual challenge of the need to make the issues related to the subject matter as accessible and interesting as possible and the wish to give a comprehensive and useful picture of

the various research areas: this is done by experimenting with solutions and routes that are completely new even for those involved in creating them.

The first challenge concerned the choice of objects to be explored, which are all copies that experimenters have carefully reproduced according to original models using, when possible, the same materials and especially the same techniques as those employed in the different phases of pre-history. The problem was then to combine the necessity of presenting the finds in a way that they could be understood by touch, once an appropriate explanation had been supplied, with the wish to provide as complete and clear a picture as possible of the cultural context to which they belong. The exhibition is organised in a series of "posts" or tables that hold the objects that the guide will progressively bring to the visitors' attention. The visit begins with some background information on the context in which the exhibition is set, in order to overcome the sense of disorientation that visitors with "normal vision" in particular experience when blindfolded: this is accompanied by the consultation of a tactile map of the museum and a timescale to help represent the chronological period covered by pre-history, including the duration of the different phases that it was characterised by (the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Metal Ages), which are represented by sectors of varying lengths.

The first post is set up to present all the different types of both organic and inorganic raw materials used in prehistory to build tools, ornaments, clothes etc. Tactile familiarisation with these raw materials is essential considering that visitors will subsequently

encounter different kinds of objects made with the same raw materials, which will thus be more easily recognisable.

The visitor is then presented with the casts of five skulls, attributable to hominids who have marked the main stages of human evolution.

In this experience, the guide has the essential task of directing the visitor's hand to the parts of the skull that have undergone the most evident and significant changes.

Moving on to the Palaeolithic table (Old Stone Age), the visitor can handle a series of tools used by man in his everyday life for tasks such as hunting and various types of craftwork. These are mostly tools made of flint, bone and horn, but also include ornaments or pieces of art, such as the famous prehistorical *venerina* or mother goddess. The next post, dedicated to the Neolithic period (New Stone Age), has been designed to clearly render the idea of the radical changes in the economy and lifestyle brought about by this new period in time, when the increased use of clay led to the production of the first ceramic pottery.

Further on, at the Metal Ages station, visitors encounter a number of objects related to metal working, starting from the cast that the molten raw material was poured into.

There are also a few monolithic posts with important carvings that refer to key moments in European prehistory. In this case, visitors are encouraged to focus on the smell that the stelae (stones) emanate, which reproduce smells that are important to contextualize the representations: the *smell of moss and hides* for the Palaeolithic stelae, which are inscribed with the naturalistic representations of animals that are often found inside caves; the



*smell of hay* for the stelae referring to the latter phases of prehistory which portray scenes related to agriculture, such as ploughing.

## **Final remarks**

“Not touching prohibited” embodies the first task of research: to improve the environment that we live in.

2003 – European Year of the Disabled – saw a boom in museum routes and exhibitions accessible to disabled people. With a few exceptions, these were short routes, where a disabled individual could gain a “taste” of culture.

“Not touching prohibited”, on the other hand, is inspired by the idea that the enjoyment of art and culture cannot be transitory or limited to a single event, but should be continuous and immediate for everyone.

We could therefore begin to speak of a real “not touching prohibited *system*” that - through the creation of a network of institutions that promote the project, i.e. the University of Siena (specifically the Office of disabled students and SLD Services, the Department of history and cultural heritage, the Universal accessibility Lab LAU, the CRUI (Conference of Italian University Rectors), may become an important employment opportunity for young graduates of our university’s various degree courses.

The distinctive characteristic of “not touching prohibited” lies in having grouped together a series of actors with different professional profiles, who have almost always worked alone. The

“not touching prohibited” enterprise both designs and forms networks of communicators, engineers, architects, museologists, archaeologists and craftsmen, although its main mission is to train.

Its real challenge, in fact, is to train new professionals capable of working in the widest sector in our country, i.e. culture or tourism.