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Fiona Slater — Guest, Science Museum Group
Anat Talmor — Guest, De Matos Ryan Architects

Emily Yates *[00:00:01 - 00:02:29]*
Hello and welcome to the first episode in this new podcast series from Mima. We're a human-centred and inclusive design agency and for nearly 50 years we've worked with organisations to create environments and experiences that genuinely work for people across different bodies, identities and ways of engaging with the world. This series is about what human-centric, inclusive design really looks like in practice — not as a checklist, not as an afterthought, but as thinking that has the power to transform the spaces, systems and environments we interact with every day. In this first episode we're asking a simple but important question: what makes an exhibition truly inclusive, and why does it matter? You'll hear a practical, honest conversation about going beyond physical access — about choice, permission, representation, lived experience, and how designing inclusively often leads to better, richer experiences for everyone. This episode sets the tone for the series: real projects, real challenges and real learning. Let's get started. A visual description of myself: I'm a white woman with bright pink shoulder-length hair and yellow round glasses. I'm also a wheelchair user. I'm joined by my brilliant Mima colleague, Senior Inclusive Design Researcher Caitlin McMullan, and two wonderful guest speakers. It's my pleasure to introduce the brilliant Fiona Slater. Fiona joined the Science Museum Group in April 2021 in the newly developed role of Head of Access and Equity, to oversee the group's public commitment and core value of being open for all. For over 15 years, Fiona has worked within museum and third sector organisations to champion inclusive and accessible practice, and she's passionate about the creative potential of a more diverse cultural sector. Welcome, Fiona, and if you could please provide a short visual description of yourself, that would be great.

Fiona Slater *[00:02:30 - 00:02:46]*
Thanks, Emily. Hi everyone, I'm Fiona. I'm a white woman in my early 40s. I have curly, floofy shoulder-length hair and a purple top on today, and my pronouns are she/her. That's me.

Emily Yates *[00:02:47 - 00:04:05]*
Thank you so much, Fiona. And next we have the wonderful Anat Talmor, a Design Director at award-winning architectural practice De Matos Ryan. Anat has significant experience on a variety of projects within the museum, cultural and educational sectors. At the practice, Anat has been responsible for key design development, coordination and delivery for the British Library's new membership programme, Project Museum Base Build, Camden People's Theatre, WonderLab, the Bramall Gallery in York, and Tullie House Museum redevelopment

in Carlisle. Working with the community is a key passion and method of working that Anat enjoys, and she has led many of the practice's extensive and ambitious co-design programmes, engaging with local communities for a number of cultural institutions. Thank you so much for being with us, Anat. And again, if you could please provide a short visual description of yourself.

Anat Talmor *[00:04:06 - 00:04:25]*

Thank you, Emily, for having me. Welcome, hello everyone. My name is Anat. I have brown, straightish hair, I'm wearing a dark green top and I have rimless glasses. My pronouns are she/her.

Emily Yates *[00:04:25 - 00:04:35]*

Thank you so much, Anat. And last but certainly not least, Caitlin, if you could please say hello and provide a visual description of yourself before we start.

Caitlin McMullan *[00:04:36 - 00:04:52]*

Thank you, Em. Hi everyone, I'm Caitlin. I am a white woman in my early to mid-30s. I have brown hair which is slicked back in a bun, and I'm wearing a white shirt. I am a below-knee amputee.

Emily Yates *[00:04:52 - 00:05:07]*

Thank you so much, Caitlin. So, Anat, first of all, I want to come to you for our first question. What makes an exhibition truly inclusive to you, beyond physical accessibility? And why does this matter?

Anat Talmor *[00:05:08 - 00:11:09]*

Well, I suppose beyond physical access, to us it means creating equality of opportunities for everyone using the galleries. And when I say that, I mean both visitors and staff working in the gallery — making it as open and as welcoming and bringing as many new audiences in as possible. At the practice, an inclusive approach in its very broadest sense means designing spaces and places, as well as exhibitions, that can be enjoyed equally by visitors and staff with diverse backgrounds, very diverse knowledge levels, and different physical and cognitive requirements — and making it fully inclusive for all genders. For us at the practice, accessible exhibition design provides visitors with choices, it values their differences, and it recognises the rich resources and experiences that they bring with them. With WonderLab, for example, it was really important to acknowledge that not every visitor feels at home around science and engineering subjects. And the big challenge for us — or the exciting path, I suppose — was how do we make it accessible, how do we make it fun, and how do we make it welcoming in a playful and permissive manner? What we call the Mini Play Revolution, designed by the incredible artist Pippa Hale, is a large-scale, very active interactive — it's a large room where you build bridges, you build structures, you test things. It's very physical. And what was important to acknowledge is that not everyone feels comfortable in these spaces. So as we were designing the 18 interactives, we felt that we needed to pace things differently and create moments of calm next to moments of high energy. Pippa's Mini Play Revolution developed as a result of getting children and visitors who feel a bit nervous about going into the bigger space to feel more acclimatised — to test it first in a smaller, safer space. And what's always interesting about making spaces and interactives accessible is: how far can we push it? What can we do that's slightly different to how it's been done before? So together with Pippa Hale and with the NRM, we looked at whether we could add a vibration plate so you could actually test structures physically. And so what started as trying to make something accessible then became a whole interactive on its own, with its own personality and its own learning objectives. Equally important in terms of accessibility at WonderLab was establishing an interactive gallery that encourages

children — particularly young girls — to engage with engineering phenomena, and acknowledging that not everyone feels comfortable around STEM subjects. The true measure of success of the gallery is that people leave feeling really enthused and excited, and particularly feeling that STEM is for them — and the social and economic opportunities that that brings later in life. So that's what accessibility means for us at WonderLab. We also worked at the Young V&A on the base build project, and that started as a really ambitious co-design project. On both of these projects, we had a really ambitious client who really wanted to engage with the community and make things as accessible as possible. And as designers, magic happens when everyone is focused and passionate about doing that. The Young V&A is an incredible gem of a museum — very local, but with a broad international appeal — and the museum really wanted to bring in as much of the local community as possible. At the practice, we carried out over 40 workshops with the local community, particularly trying to engage with people who think that museums aren't for them, and to understand why. And we can't forget physical accessibility either, because exhibition design relies so much on the visual, for obvious reasons. The challenge — but actually the exciting part — is how can you engage with more than one sense? And if you can't do it throughout, how can you pace it across the gallery to make the experience as equitable as possible? And what I can say is that by making it accessible, everyone benefits, and the exhibition design becomes so much richer and more interesting as a result.

Emily Yates *[00:11:10 - 00:12:19]*

Absolutely, agreed. Thank you so much, Anat. What a great introductory answer to the massive topic we're trying to discuss today. I think two things I really took from that were: choice is brilliant and really important and absolutely necessary — but if you don't have permission on top of that choice, that social and operational factor, it can undermine how welcome or included someone might feel in a space. So thank you so much, that was a really interesting point. Fiona, moving on to you and the second question: how does centring disabled perspectives challenge and enhance what a gallery or museum is trying to say through its curation, from concept to community engagement? How does this work for you from a museum perspective?

Fiona Slater *[00:12:20 - 00:14:48]*

I think Anat hit the nail on the head when she was talking about multi-sensory approaches to engagement. And I think that's the first challenge that we have as museums that have traditionally been very visually centric — you go in and you stand in awe at the collections. Being challenged to think in more multisensory ways is something that we really need to embrace. In children and young people's galleries, we do think a lot about being interactive and hands-on, but I think we lose that element a little when we think about engaging older audiences, and it's something we definitely need to see throughout. The second thing is probably about the stories we tell and whose stories are told. We have seven million objects and archives in the Science Museum collection, so the potential for what you can tell in terms of science, technology, engineering and maths is pretty vast. But museums have historically underrepresented certain communities. By bringing in different perspectives, we bring in new ideas, new reference points — and that means different stories, different narratives and different people in our museums. As we discussed earlier, it goes back to Anat's point about feeling that warm welcome when you come into a museum. Through WonderLab, there are panels with lovely, illustrative graphics of different visitors engaging with the interactives — they visually show you how you can engage, but they also mean that different audiences are represented throughout, which gives that human touch. So for me it's about those two things: how we engage, and who we are centring.

Emily Yates *[00:14:48 - 00:15:28]*

Absolutely, yes. Couldn't agree more, Fiona, thank you so much. The idea of representation and the authenticity of those stories — and what people learn from them — is really key, and it's something I'm glad I'm seeing more and more in museums. So that's really great. Okay, the next question is to both of you. Why is it important to engage those with lived experience early on in the design process, and what impact does this have? Anat, let's start with you.

Anat Talmor *[00:15:29 - 00:17:59]*

I'd say it's absolutely critical and a really integral part of the design process, particularly if you're designing interactives — because you can design something in principle and in outline, but without audience testing you don't know if it will work, you don't know if the learning objectives will be met, and you don't know how people will respond to it. There was extensive audience testing at WonderLab for exactly this reason. Another example was at the Young V&A. As I mentioned, we carried out over 40 co-design workshops with different audiences of different ages. One of the workshops was with a group of nursery school children, because we really wanted to understand what a two-and-a-half-year-old experiences — what they look at, what they see. With carers' permission, we attached GoPro cameras to their foreheads and chests, set them loose in the gallery, and watched hours upon hours of footage. What we thought two-and-a-half-year-olds were interested in wasn't always the reality. We knew they loved the ramp, for example, but we didn't appreciate quite how much — and the ramp wasn't even part of the gallery or exhibition. That informed our design: we had to move the ramp anyway, so let's make it more playful, more fun. We also thought everyone would go to the horses and love the interactives — but actually, two-and-a-half-year-olds were very focused on the exhibits at their own eye-height level. There's so much to learn that is beyond your own lived experience. So I think engaging lived experience early on is really, really important.

Emily Yates *[00:18:00 - 00:18:09]*

Thank you, Anat. Fiona, anything to add around the importance of lived experience engagement from a museum's perspective?

Fiona Slater *[00:18:10 - 00:19:44]*

Yes, and I think the timing was the key part of that question — because it's something we're always working on. These conversations need to start early, because otherwise you end up with a whole list of great ideas and insights but no resource and no budget to act on them. That's really frustrating from a team's perspective, and it's frustrating for the people you've had those conversations with too — they've shared ideas and thoughts but don't feel like they've been taken forward or taken seriously. I was at a conference last week and Hannah Thompson — a brilliant academic at Royal Holloway — talked about access resources not being a compensation for something someone is missing out on. And I think that gets to the heart of a lot of the solutions that people collectively come up with, because they feel that actually everybody gets something from, say, touching an object — you learn something about shape and form. That's really how it should be. Access shouldn't be a compensation; it should add something for everyone.

Emily Yates *[00:19:44 - 00:19:47]*

A beautiful point. Thank you.

Caitlin McMullan *[00:19:47 - 00:19:48]*

Yeah, absolutely right.

Emily Yates *[00:19:48 - 00:20:01]*

I'm going to move on to you again, Fiona, for the next question. What have you been doing since the opening of WonderLab to make the relationships that were built count, and last, as time has moved on?

Fiona Slater *[00:20:02 - 00:22:31]*

Time has moved on and the teams have been super busy, but we still have to make those relationships count. We have something called our Community Access Scheme, which means that groups we've worked with — or other local groups around the museum — get free access to the gallery and can book visits through it. Last year around 1,200–1,300 tickets came through that scheme, so it does have a real impact. We also have other ticketing schemes like the Max Card, which is a nationally recognised scheme for children who are cared for or looked after — so removing those financial barriers is a key part of what we do. We've also been focusing on programming. Relaxed Sessions have just launched in WonderLab — sessions where there are fewer people in the gallery, some of the sounds are turned down, and what is normally a learning or schools briefing space becomes a sensory room with fidget toys, ear defenders and other resources made more visible. The team also delivers shows and demos in a more conversational, relaxed style. The gallery design lends itself beautifully to this — having those spaces that you can transform into a relaxed, sensory environment. So I think we've been focused on getting people through the door and then thinking about more tailored programming to extend the invitation. Even though it is already a very relaxed and chilled gallery, tailored programming still really matters to people — and it has a lovely social element too.

Emily Yates *[00:22:31 - 00:23:09]*

Thank you. I loved what you said about getting people through the door and that affordability factor — that's a massive part of accessibility, and the socioeconomic factors are ones we often don't think about when it comes to access and inclusion. Really nice that you focus on that. I'm going to move on to our next question for you, Anat, if that's okay. Tell us more about the importance of working with an access consultant, whilst also bringing your own personal lived experience into the process — not a selfishly asked question at all, I promise. What have you learned, actioned and implemented from that technical advice and those recommendations?

Anat Talmor *[00:23:09 - 00:25:07]*

Thanks, Emily. Well, I'm probably going to make you blush now, but at the practice we work collaboratively and not in isolation — we're always part of a bigger team. For this project it was really crucial to have Mima, and particularly Emily, on the WonderLab project. We're strong believers that working together as part of a single team always ends up with a better result. On a more practical level, working with an access consultant reminds you of the building regulations and standards — what needs to be done, when, and so on — and at every RIBA stage it's always good to have that sense-check. But beyond that, Emily provides provocations: have you thought about this? Could we push the boundaries even more? A lot of the changes we made were a result of that ambition. We did have some technical challenges with certain exhibits where we had to physically fit in AV equipment, so they couldn't be fully accessible all the way around for wheelchair users. Emily was very pragmatic and said: let's have this section work in this way, and as long as people can assist each other and start talking to each other, that works. It was really helpful to work with Emily throughout — right from the beginning all the way to the finished product.

Emily Yates *[00:25:08 - 00:25:24]*

Thank you, Anat, that's very kind. Fiona, moving on to you — I'd love to know a little more about the group's access resources online and Access Hubs on gallery: how they're implemented, why they matter and what they include.

Fiona Slater *[00:25:24 - 00:27:18]*

I think Access Hubs reflect a growing way of thinking about our resources, and it probably speaks to the fact that we have a lot more now that we can spotlight, hand out and let people engage with. We just opened the Sound and Vision galleries at the Science and Media Museum in Bradford, and we're quite proud of that. An Access Hub is essentially about having a welcoming point where everything is located in one place, and then it sends you off on your journey of exploration around the gallery. Some of the feedback we'd had previously was that we do have resources like Braille guides or large print information, but people need to know where they are. So an Access Hub is your one-stop shop: we have a BSL welcome, an audio trailer, a tactile map, a sensory map, a large print guide — and if you enter the gallery at that point, you can navigate your visit from there. Before you've even got through the door, there may be access resources on the website, like a sensory map or a visual story — lots of images of the different spaces that help people prepare before they visit. Some people just want a bit more information, or want to reassure themselves and know more about the spaces. So those tend to be the common ones we're seeing at the moment.

Emily Yates *[00:27:19 - 00:27:59]*

Lovely, thank you so much. And yes, seeing the difference that Access Hubs and those resources make to so many people is really positive — whilst, as you said earlier, they shouldn't be a replacement for inaccessibility or exclusivity elsewhere. Being provided with adjusted, adapted, inclusive information to allow someone to get the most out of their visit is extremely valuable. Really nice, thank you. My final question to you both is about your plans for the future. Anat, if I could briefly start with you, please.

Anat Talmor *[00:28:00 - 00:28:53]*

We've just completed phase two of Tullie House Museum, which also included Carlisle Gallery — a gallery that celebrates the great and wonderful things of the city, with a lot of interactive exhibits and significant audience and community participation. Tullie House is a really forward-thinking museum. We're also working on an arts centre in Ucheldre, Holyhead, Wales, and we're delivering a transformational capital programme for the arts charity Britten Pears Arts at Snape Maltings. We're completing a gallery in Middlesbrough and at Oriel Myrddin in Wales, to name but a few.

Emily Yates *[00:28:54 - 00:29:02]*

Not busy at all then! Amazing. Thank you so much, Anat. And Fiona, how about you?

Fiona Slater *[00:29:03 - 00:29:42]*

We've got lots going on as well. As a museum group with six sites, there's always a new gallery opening or being developed. Station Hall at the National Railway Museum will open later this month. Power Hall at the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester will be opening later this year. We're also reopening the Space gallery at the Science Museum in London. There are constantly new galleries opening, and each one is an opportunity to showcase more accessible features and design. So yes, lots and lots going on.

Emily Yates *[00:29:43 - 00:29:46]*

Brilliant. And now passing over to Caitlin for any Q&A.

Caitlin McMullan *[00:29:46 - 00:29:55]*

A question that we have is: how do you decide who to include in the design process to ensure true and meaningful representation?

Anat Talmor *[00:29:56 - 00:30:48]*

I think we've been very lucky with the museums we've worked with, because it starts and ends with the museum. Their ambition matters. They have a lot of groups and charities they're associated with, and they work with lots of schools — as was also the case with WonderLab. So there's a whole network of people to engage with, and we feed into that. We'll say: we're designing with this demographic in mind — be it children or adults — who do we know, who can we speak to? Getting all those local community contacts in turn builds really strong connections to the local museum as well. It benefits things in more ways than just making them accessible.

Emily Yates *[00:30:49 - 00:31:08]*

If you each had one top tip — Anat, perhaps for fellow designers and architects, and Fiona, for fellow museums and galleries — one top tip from your own accessibility and inclusive design journeys, what would it be?

Fiona Slater *[00:31:08 - 00:32:05]*

Mine would go back to the question of how we approach accessibility — and it would be to embrace the creative potential. Don't think of it as something you do at the end of a project; it's something that feeds throughout, and the interpretation ends up offering something to all audiences. I'll give a plug to a great child-led audio description of one of our temporary exhibitions at the Science and Industry Museum — kids taking you through the exhibition in the most joyful and incredible way. It's also an audio description, so for blind and partially sighted visitors it's an accessible resource, but it just adds something completely different for everyone. So yes: embrace the creative potential.

Anat Talmor *[00:32:07 - 00:33:14]*

I couldn't agree more. It's actually the fun part, and everyone benefits from it — you're not designing for a small group of visitors or staff; everyone benefits. And to add to that: embrace all the senses. When you're designing something, ask yourself, okay, I can see that — but can I feel it, can I touch it, can I smell it? Audience participation is so important for that, because you can only design within your own team and your own parameters. Everyone has biases — physical, perceptual, cognitive. The more people you talk to, the more you understand how a person feels in the space and how you can cater to that.

Caitlin McMullan *[00:33:14 - 00:33:29]*

I've got one more question if you're both happy with that. From your experience, what are the most significant barriers that visitors with access needs still face in exhibitions, and which of these require greater attention, research and investment to address?

Anat Talmor *[00:33:30 - 00:34:17]*

"Access needs" is such a broad term that it's very difficult to single out one thing, but I would say perceived barriers to entry is something that needs to be addressed — why do certain groups of people not feel that museums are for them? I think that's a big challenge. And I would also say engaging all the senses: there is a massive reliance in exhibition design on the primarily visual, and for obvious reasons — but how do we make it much more inclusive?

Fiona Slater *[00:34:19 - 00:34:53]*

I agree. Thinking in multisensory ways does require more budget and more time, but it will be absolutely the most rewarding. It means we're not putting up barriers for blind and partially sighted people, but it also benefits neurodivergent audiences, people living with dementia — if we're thinking in multisensory ways, we're making things so much more accessible to everyone. And we all love to get hands on, as I've said before. So I think that's where we need to focus our attention.

Caitlin McMullan *[00:34:54 - 00:35:11]*

I think what you both mentioned earlier is that it makes things so much more exciting and engaging for all audiences, and I think that's a really nice way to finish the Q&A — this multi-sensory experience is beneficial for everyone.

Anat Talmor *[00:35:11 - 00:35:15]*

Universal design really is universal, I think is what we'll say.

Emily Yates *[00:35:15 - 00:35:38]*

Yes! What a perfect close. Thank you so, so much, everyone. Thank you so much, Fiona and Anat, for your extremely generous time, your expertise and your insights. Thank you so much, Caitlin, for co-hosting with me and being my pal today. Much appreciated.

Fiona Slater *[00:35:38 - 00:35:39]*

Thank you, Emily.

Emily Yates *[00:35:41 - 00:36:09]*

And to all of our listeners out there, thank you so much for tuning in. We hope you've enjoyed the conversation and gained some fresh new insights. Head over to our website, mimagroup.com, for more information on our work, or to reach out to see how we can help you on your next project. Be sure to subscribe for all future podcasts wherever you get them, and we'll see you on the next one.