

Rethinking Disability Representation

I Stand Corrected? New Perspectives on Orthopaedic Footwear Northampton Museum and Art Gallery

I Stand Corrected? involved a temporary exhibition from 14th July to 11th November 2007 at Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, incorporating changes to the permanent display case in the 'Life and Sole' shoe gallery and a resource box for schools.

Consultation

The ideas, potential issues and exhibition content were initially discussed and explored with members of the **Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR)** team and then presented to the Think Tank at a residential in January 2007. The project was also presented to the Northampton Disabled People's Forum who expressed their views on the content and what they would like to see in the exhibition. This was particularly useful as these opinions came from a diverse group of people who had quite different perspectives on disability issues.

Collaboration

The main focus of the project was to create an exhibition that provided an outlet for orthopaedic shoe-users and wearers to express their views and experiences. Their opinions and experiences would highlight issues of disability representation and challenge the visitor to explore their own opinions, values and views upon the exhibition's content.

An appeal was placed in the local paper and an article included in the Ability Northants Newsletter for disabled people and their carers. The project was also presented to the members of Northampton's Disabled People's Forum. Through this publicity seven orthopaedic shoe users made contact and were prepared to be interviewed. Extracts from their interviews were used to form the main body of the text. The text was divided into sections examining different issues by asking the visitor direct questions backed up with personal quotes. This format was used to challenge the visitor to think about issues such as the choices that people have – or indeed the lack of choice; and raised question such as can people who wear

orthopaedic shoes be fashionable? And why does some mainstream footwear bear an uncanny resemblance to the orthopaedic footwear of the past?

The exhibition also contained a section on the history of orthopaedic shoe manufacturing. Two orthopaedic shoemakers were interviewed to understand the processes involved pre and post National Health. To gain a greater understanding of the history of orthopaedic footwear, we liaised with Northampton General Hospital Archive. This in turn led to further contact within the hospital with the staff of the Neuromuscular Department and the Podiatric team who run the shoe clinics for children. The opportunity was available to sit in on a couple of clinics to gain a greater understanding of what happens now in terms of treatment and the footwear available. Regrettably, despite our efforts, we could not make contact with a younger person within the time available who wore or had worn orthopaedic footwear, but sitting in on the various clinics brought the historical context up to date and provided a great insight into the attitudes of the medical profession.

Collections

Northampton Museum is home to probably the largest footwear and shoemaking collection in the world. It is also a Designated collection. Within the collection of twelve thousand shoes there are approximately sixty examples (mainly singles) of orthopaedic footwear. The earliest example dates to the 18th century, though the bulk of the collection can be roughly divided into date specific categories, 1900 – 1920 and 1950s – 1970s. The orthopaedic collection is largely typographical as is the bulk of the main collection. Past collecting has concentrated on building up a collection that showcases particular styles, designs and individual makers / manufacturers. As a result of this type of collecting most of the orthopaedic examples have no personal story or history attached to them. So the main challenge was get that personal detail and connection back into the collection. The other challenge was to not let the shoes become the dominating factor in the exhibition. Shoes have and can often be viewed by visitors as attractive stand-alone objects, with no personal or challenging substance behind them. It was important that the shoes were used as the platform to challenge and engage the visitor to consider the issues involved and think about the people involved. We had to remember that unlike many of the other shoe exhibitions we have held in the museum this was not an exhibition about shoes, but actually about the views and experiences of the people who wear them.

The exhibition also created the opportunity for some contemporary collecting. We were able to collect some of the footwear worn by those interviewed, along with material from one of the orthopaedic shoemakers who retired during the project and we were able to purchase several pairs of shoes that highlighted the parallels in style between modern designer and fetish footwear and that of orthopaedic shoes.

The small permanent display on foot care in the 'Life and Sole' gallery has been completely changed to incorporate a selection of shoes that were on display in the main exhibition and includes peoples' personal quotes to question and challenge the visitors' responses to these shoes.

Timescale

Northampton Museum and Art Gallery was invited to take part in the project in March 2005 and we received notification of funding in April 2006. The first meeting of museum partners was in Leicester on 12 July 2006, followed by the first RDR residential in London in January 2007. Our project in practical terms began in December 2006 when we began to make contact with the relevant groups and individuals. This was quite a struggle as we discovered there is no one group dedicated to orthopaedic footwear users. Through the Northampton Disabled People's Forum, Age Concern, Ability Northants and Northampton General Hospital seven people eventually made contact and were prepared to take part and be interviewed. At the same time contact was made with two orthopaedic shoemakers and the Northampton General Hospital Archive who were a resource for researching the historical context. Unfortunately those contemporary designers contacted to draw out parallels and influences in their own work with orthopaedic footwear did not respond.

From January until the end of June 2007 we planned the exhibition and pulled all the elements together, which included interviewing the nine participants, choosing objects, firming up ideas and content, writing text, creating publicity and briefing the designers. The exhibition officially opened on 14th July and initially was going to run until 16th September. A change in the exhibitions programme extended the exhibition until 11th November 2007. The changes to the permanent gallery took place March 2008 after the second RDR residential in February. The resource box for schools is currently under construction and evaluation, and will be completed to by the new school term September 2008.

Process

The biggest challenge we faced was to explore what exactly the focus of the exhibition was going to be and what themes and issues we were going to cover. The shoe collection is largely typographical and so we were faced with plenty of the raw materials – shoes – but nothing that had any real personal or human connection. We knew that this element of the project, to get back to the people who wear / wore these shoes, really had to form the basis of the exhibition.

The biggest personal challenge was to think outside the 'shoe' box and not create simply an exhibition on shoes. In the past shoe exhibitions have been very much subject based – shoes from a particular factory, wedding shoes, shoes from India or

peoples' creative responses to the collection. Very pretty to look at, but not challenging in any way to either the creator of the exhibition or the visitor.

The process involved looking closely at how we could insert much needed input from those most closely related to the subject and focus on raising issues in an innovative, interesting and exciting new way to get our visitors thinking in different ways within the context of the shoe collection. After much discussion the content of the exhibition was split into three loose and flexible themes: fashion, function and historical context / makers. All three themes had to be led or strongly linked with personal experiences and opinions.

The fashion section covered the dichotomy between designers / manufacturers producing footwear of a very orthopaedic nature yet quite clearly for non-orthopaedic wearers. Just think of the 'Super Elevated Ghillie' shoe by Vivienne Westwood and the towering boots of the Goths. Is such footwear accentuating and celebrating difference in a positive way or simply acting as a stark reminder that orthopaedic shoe users have no real choice in what they wear unlike the rest of us? We hoped that this approach would appeal to a wider audience through creating common ground and get people thinking about exactly what fashion is and the ideas surrounding personal choice and or the lack of it.

Other issues explored included why we only usually have one orthopaedic shoe in the collection and not the pair? Do any orthopaedic shoe users seek to be noticed by going out of their way to accentuate their impairment? What do people actually feel when they wear such shoes and what is their experience of other people's perceptions? What do the shoes 'say' about the wearer's identity? Do they stigmatise the wearer?

The section on the historical context tried to follow the lead of the main body of the exhibition and tell the story from the view point of those shoemakers making the shoes using the language of the time such as the newspaper headline from the 1920s on the opening of the local orthopaedic hospital that read: 'The Conquering of Crippledom!'

It was also thought that humour could play a role in the exhibition and we included a couple of cartoons and an extract from the TV comedy series 'Extras' that quite neatly encapsulated the 'embarrassing' nature of disability to those who are non-disabled and the use of language and actions which call into question the viewers' own responses.

Although the exhibition was probably text heavy the majority of it was the participants' own words rather than those created by a curator.

The issues raised in the main exhibition were edited to fit the small permanent display case and will form the basis for the resource box.

Issues learned

One of the biggest personal challenges was to think outside the 'shoe' box and not simply fall back of the usual type of exhibition. It was a challenge to explore the issues involved and also a positive challenge for the visitor, to consider disability representation issues in new ways.

The RDR project gave us an opportunity, along with time, money and resources to create this exciting exhibition using a very specific approach. At times it was incredibly hard to devote the time as the Shoe Department only has one member of staff, so without all the support and structures in place, the exhibition may never had had a chance to happen, which would have been a great shame. We persevered with the project and were ultimately rewarded with a fresh approach and an innovative exhibition that made the visitor think about what they were looking at and who they were reading about.

Legacy

The completed evaluation cards and responses from visitors that we have received have made it clear that our visitors have been challenged to think about issues such as the choice or the lack of it and to question received assumptions and opinions in a way that hasn't happened before, certainly not through the shoe collection. We managed to be reasonably successfully in cutting through the usual response from visitors, which is simply 'I love Shoes' and get them to think more deeply and engage with the subject matter.

I think the various comments testify to this:

"I was shocked at how similar the Vivienne Westwood shoes were to the orthopaedic shoes."

"What made the exhibition very powerful...was reading people's own experiences."

"The display challenges assumptions we all make about disabled people."

From a personal and institutional point of view the legacy will be to be more open and flexible in thinking about future exhibitions and projects – thinking about new approaches to the subject matter and trying to think in a different way to challenge and engage.