Narrow Designs: Reconfiguring the Kröller-Müller Museum for Overlooked Audiences

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Introduction

The topic of accessible design was brought to the forefront of my mind by Kim Ferguson's presentation on ableism and accessibility during our site visit to DANS (Data Archiving and Networked Services). I kept thinking back to this presentation during the other site visits, and I began paying more attention to how each institution was approaching accessibility. What I observed was that, in nearly every institution, accessibility seemed to be something that was superimposed on top of the existing space and/or experience. I noticed various features such as ramps and sign language interpretations were added to expand accessibility to various communities that were excluded in the original design. These are, of course, positive additions, and in many cases they accomplished their goal of making the space more hospitable to a wider audience. However, I still found myself wondering: what would these spaces look like if they were designed specifically and intentionally for those communities from the very beginning?

I found one answer to this question in the DOK (Delft Public Library) youth section, where the books were organized using a system that was designed in collaboration with a group of children. Instead of organizing by genre, DOK orders their children's books by topic–for example, "plants", or "magic". Our tour guide, Maaike, mentioned that organizing their collection in this way encourages kids to explore the whole collection and more easily find the kinds of books that they want to read. This system has been highly effective in getting children to read a wider variety of books, especially nonfiction texts. It has not proven to be as popular among parents, however, since they cannot easily find specific children's titles that they are looking for.

This introduced me to an idea that, while very intuitive, completely changed my understanding of accessibility. Optimizing a space and an experience for a specific group of people almost always

means making that space and experience less accommodating to other groups of people. This goes directly against the idea of universal design, which is all about making things accessible to everyone, or at least to the widest possible group of people. But, in my opinion, a lack of universal accommodation and accessibility isn't necessarily a bad thing. After all, don't various marginalized groups deserve spaces that are specifically designed for them? For example, during our tour of the Amsterdam City Archives, I learned that the Black Archives had declined the City Archives' offer to digitize their collections for free. Their reasoning was that digitization would most greatly benefit white researchers, and they wanted to keep their focus on the Black community. In this situation, increasing accessibility–following the core principle of universal design–would have actually served to further marginalize the Black Archives' target community.

With this in mind, I began to think more about designing for single, specific communities, even at the expense of universality–something that I call "narrow design". For this project, I decided to redesign the Kröller-Müller Museum's permanent collection for three different groups that are often marginalized or overlooked by conventional art museum design: children, people with dementia, and blind people/people with low vision. In my redesigns, I took into consideration the objects chosen, where those objects are placed, how visitors are encouraged to interact with the objects, and the architecture of the space itself.

The idea of compiling these designs into a book was inspired by our site visit to Huis van het Boek in The Hague. I was immediately taken with their collection of modern books (so much so that I spent the train ride back to Amsterdam Googling "bookbinding degree???", "bookbinder salary", and the like), which included incredible, thought provoking works such as Love in the Time of War by Yusef Komunyakaa and Three Constitutions by Russell Maret. I am fascinated by the idea of the book as a creative object (an art piece, even) instead of just as a vehicle for a piece of writing. In each of the books, I could see that the contents of the book and the physical form were intentionally

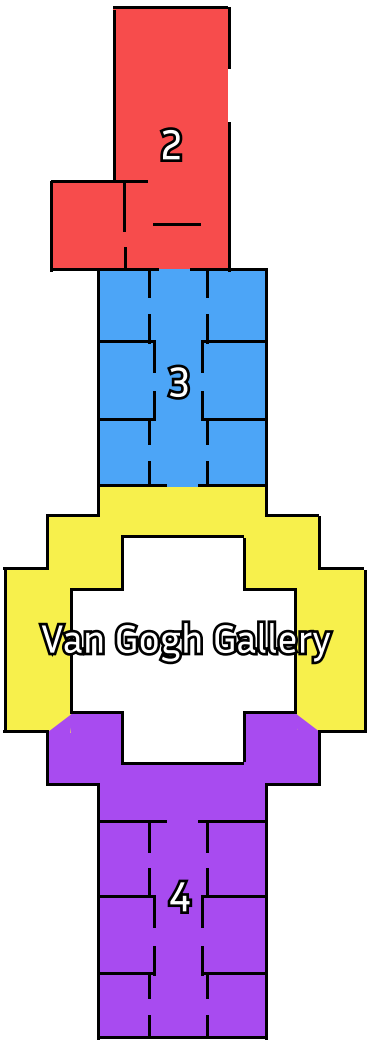
designed to amplify each other.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to fully explore these ideas in this project. I had originally planned to make a physical book and design the pages of each section so that they would be "optimized" for the community for which I created each museum design. For example, in the section about designing for children, I planned to use simplified language, and to explain more through pictures than through text. In the section about dementia-friendly design, I would have employed color coding and pictographs to make the designs easier to understand for people with impaired perception and cognition. In the section about my designs for visually impaired people, I wanted to incorporate braille and other tactile elements so that someone who cannot read the text or look at the diagrams would still be able to understand the design. However, I was unable to incorporate these elements due to various constraints (mainly time), as well as my own lack of technical knowledge and skill (sewing together the individual pages of a book is quite tricky, and hand embossing large amounts of braille is not as easy as it looks on YouTube, I have learned). In the end, I settled for the version of my book that you are reading right now, which is purely digital and does not incorporate accessibility features within the book itself. That being said, I think of this e-book as more of a prototype, and I would love to continue developing this project in the future.

Note

This book contains museum designs for communities that I personally do not belong to. Of course, if a museum were to actually create exhibits and spaces like the ones I propose in this project, then the designs would have to be further developed in collaboration with these communities. What you will see in this book is just a series of jumping off points that I have designed based on the examples I saw in various institutions in the Netherlands, as well as some additional research.

Current Design



This is how the Kröller-Müller's permanent collection is currently exhibited. The space is divided into four areas, which are labeled Expos 2, 3, 4, and the Van Gogh Gallery. Expo 2 is where the larger statues are housed, and Expos 3 and 4 are made up of smaller rooms in which pieces are organized based on the artistic movement they belong to. Each expo is made up of several rooms, and each room has somewhere between 4 - 10 works. This adds up to an estimated total of somewhere around ~180 pieces currently on display.

Floor plan adapted from the Kröller-Müller Museum's website

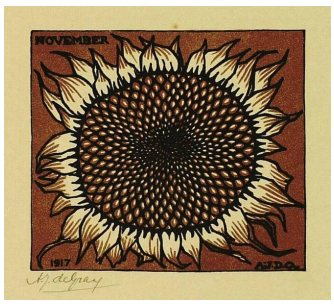
For Child Visitors

During our many museum visits, one sight that I came across quite often was that of an unhappy child. At almost every museum we visited, I noticed at least a handful of children who seemed bored or upset. This got me thinking about how most museums–or at least, most art museums–are not particularly suited to entertaining children.

One of the ways in which this design addresses this issue is by incorporating fewer pieces. In doing so, I have shortened the overall experience, which I thought would better accommodate childrens' shorter attention spans. Perhaps the biggest change from the original design is that this gallery is organized by subject instead of chronologically by artist or movement. This was inspired by the cataloging system used in the children's section at DOK. Instead of showing the characteristics of a particular artist or movement by displaying many similar works, this design would accomplish the same thing by showing works from different artists and movements and inviting the visitor to compare and contrast them. So instead of there being a room with, say, eight pointillist works, as there might be in the museum's current configuration, there could be a room with several different pieces about boats, or plants, or animals, all in different styles.

An exhibit on sunflowers may look like this:

Sunflowers, Bart van der Leck (1925)

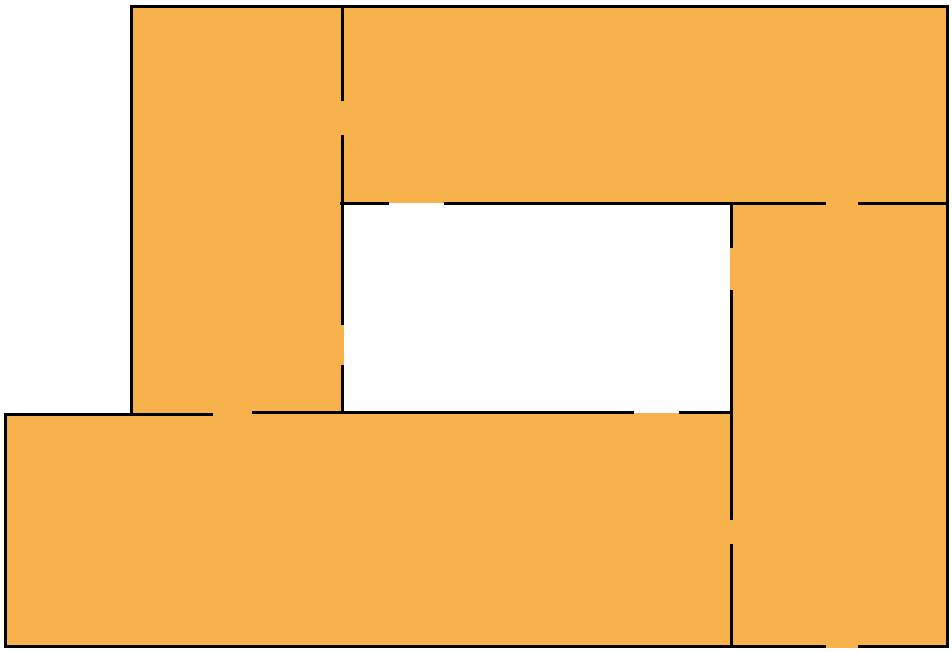


November (Sunflowers), Julie de Graag (1917)

Four Sunflowers Gone to Seed, Vincent van Gogh (1887)

Vincent, Vilmos Huszár (1915)

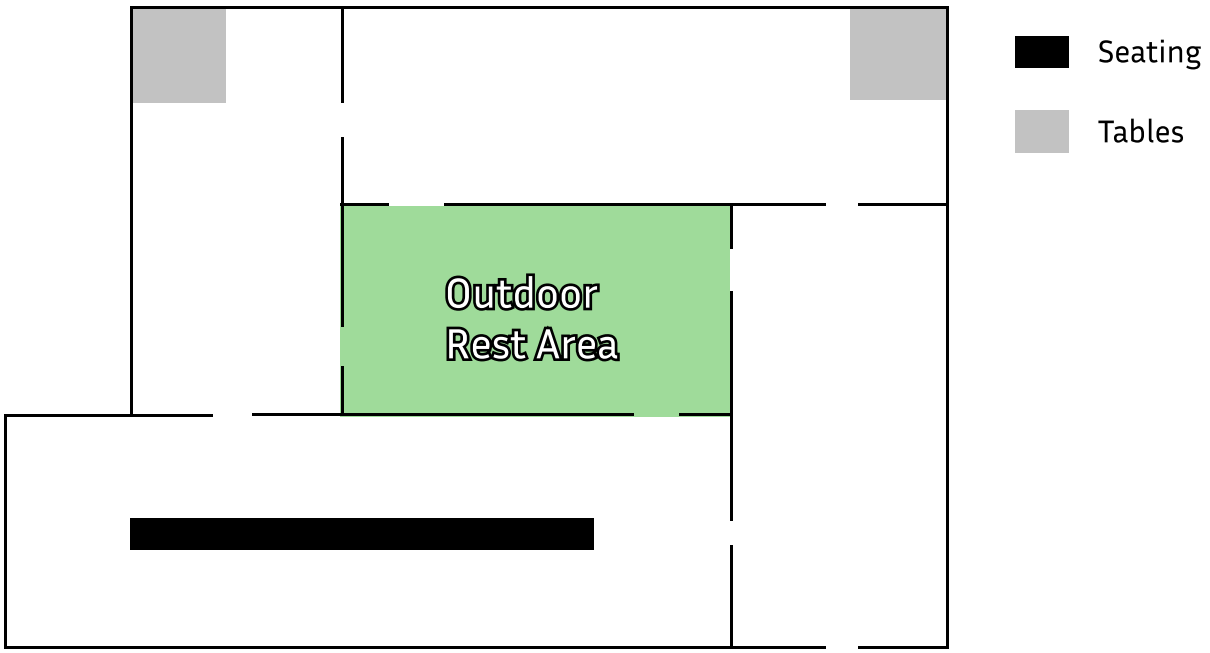
All photos of artwork were accessed via the Kroller-Muller Museum's website



Additionally, in most museums, the works tend to be displayed at a height that accommodates the average adult height. This ensures that the majority of visitors can view the works comfortably, without having to stoop or crane their necks. However, this makes it difficult for children to get a good view of the whole work, an issue that is sometimes exacerbated by the lighting creating a glare on paintings. In this design, the art would be hung at a lower eye level throughout the exhibit. At the end of the exhibit, I included a large hall, where many pieces of art would be hung salon style to provide visual interest. By the end of the exhibit, most children would probably have had their fill of walking around and learning about art. This space gives them an opportunity to admire the art without having to spend too long looking at any one piece or reading/listening to additional information. There would also be a large amount of seating in this hall, so that it can be used as a rest area.

In the overall architecture of the space, I tried to incorporate large, open rooms to encourage exploration. This also provides fewer nooks and crannies for kids to get lost in. In the center of the design, there is an outdoor courtyard that can be accessed from any room, so that visitors can take a break whenever they need.

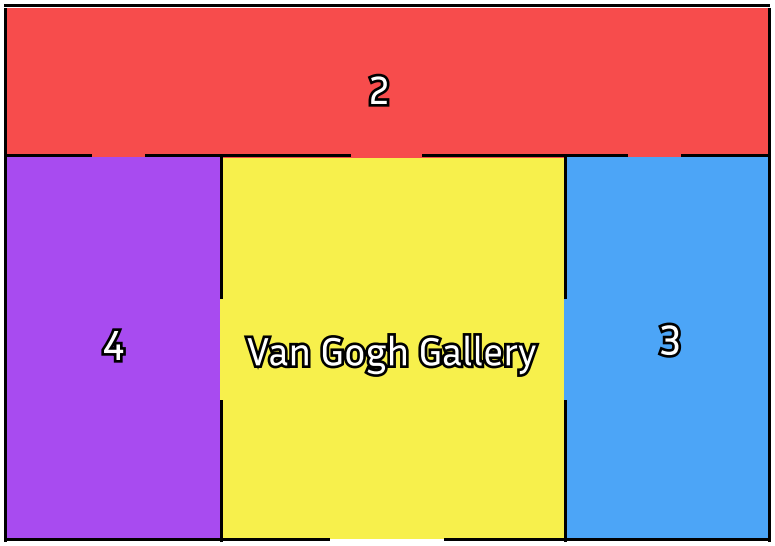
The final feature I added to this design are the two tables where visitors can create their own art. These tables would be stocked with art supplies and several prompts that relate to the art in the exhibit (ex: “Draw your own self portrait”). Finished pieces could then be pinned to the walls and displayed. My hope is that this would encourage visitors to feel a greater sense of belonging in the museum, and to think more about the process of creating art. This was inspired by our tour of the Stedelijk, where we did several drawing activities in the gallery. I wanted to give visitors a way to do something like that without having to have a dedicated tour guide, as we did.



For Visitors with Dementia

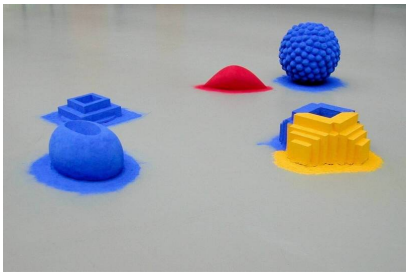
With this design, I wanted to create a space that provides intellectual and sensory stimulation for people with dementia. The cognitive impairments that come with dementia can cause the outside world to become a confusing, dangerous place. This contributes to sufferers becoming isolated in their homes, which severely impacts their quality of life. While designing this gallery, I relied heavily on the information available on the Alzheimer Society of New Brunswick's website, including the steps that they took to make their resource center a more accessible space.

Similarly to the design for children, I decided to include fewer pieces of art overall, as well as fewer pieces in each room. The main purpose of this is to reduce visual clutter and prevent confusion in our visitors. I also prioritized works that feature bold colors and/or high contrasts. These pieces are easier to perceive, especially for people with dementia-related visual problems.



Expos 3, 4, and the Van Gogh Gallery are roughly equivalent in content to the current expos of the Kröller-Müller of the same name

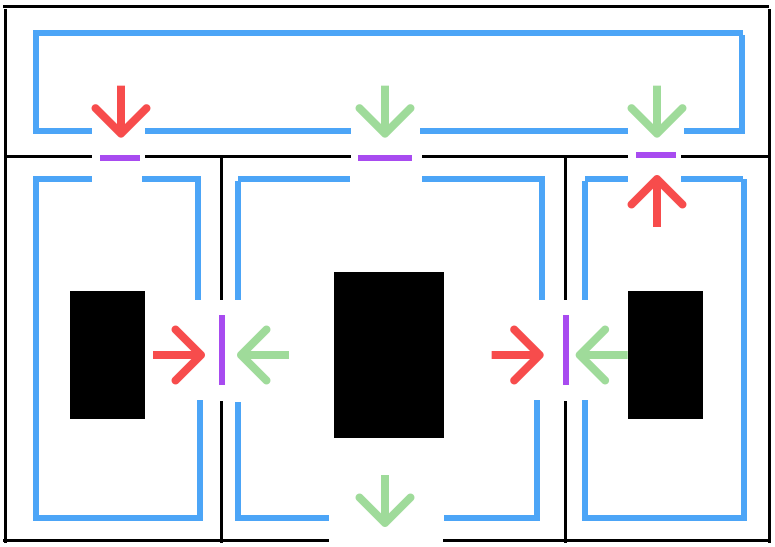
Example works that fit this criteria:



Part of the Red,
Anish Kapoor (1981)

Work at the Docks, Bart van der Leck (1916)

The breakdown in executive functioning caused by dementia may make navigation within the exhibit difficult. To help visitors find their way around within the gallery, I decided to include a number of clearly visible signs, through which a general route is suggested. My hope is that this will reduce the stress of making decisions. My initial idea was to design this gallery so that there was only one way to go through it. However, I realized that this would make it difficult to get back to the first room, which could be confusing. Instead, I chose to include clearly marked automatic doors in between each room (either NEXT or EXIT). As an added bonus, in this configuration the visitor is never more than one room away from an exit, should they need one.

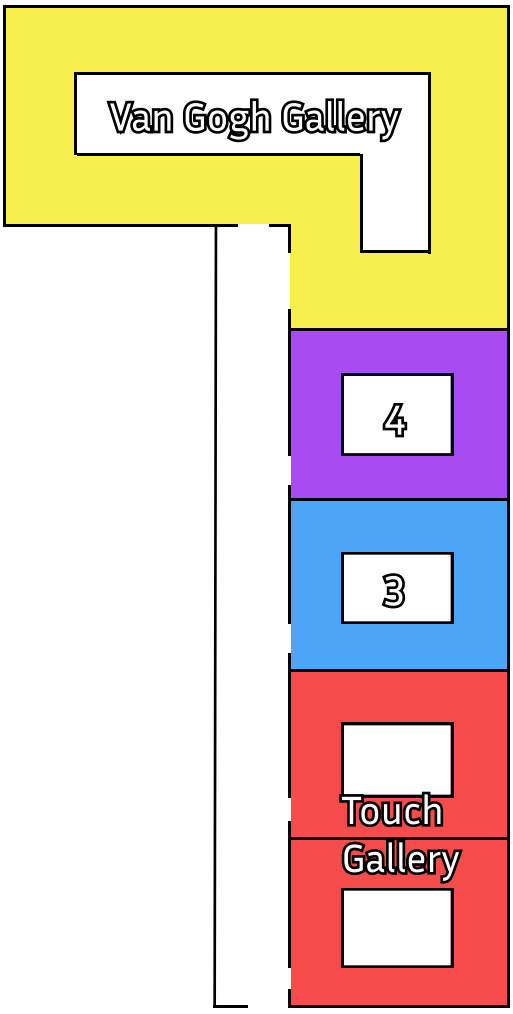


People with dementia tend to be older, so a large amount of available seating was a must. I put the seating in the middle of the rooms, so that the art could still be viewed even if you were sitting down. These sitting areas double as a spot where visitors can exercise their own creative muscles. These spaces would be stocked with art supplies and have some prompts for various little projects, making them similar to the art tables in the children's design. The process of creating art can have positive effects on many demographics.

There are also a number of features that I included in order to increase the safety and comfort of the visitors. The most obvious of these are the handrails that encircle each room. Dementia can impair balance and coordination, making it difficult to walk. In addition to providing physical support, the rails serve as another signal that visitors can follow in order to navigate through the space. Additionally, all floors would be carpeted to reduce noise and prevent overstimulation. Finally, this gallery would use high wattage light bulbs throughout. This is important because dark or shadowy areas can cause confusion or distress in people with dementia. As an added bonus, exposure to bright lights during the day helps preserve the circadian rhythm, which can become disrupted in dementia patients

For Blind and Visually Impaired Visitors

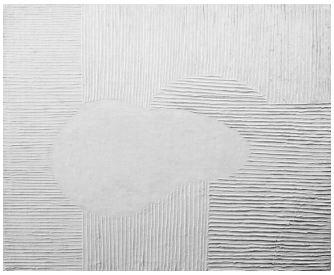
Perhaps the biggest difference between the current exhibits at the Kröller-Müller and this one is in how the visitors are prompted to interact with the works. Instead of appreciating the art from a distance of two or three feet away, the visitors in this gallery would be invited to touch some of the exhibits (with gloves on, of course!). These areas are marked “Touch Gallery” on the diagram to the right. The Touch Gallery would hold more tactile or three-dimensional pieces. This includes sculptures as well as some more textured paintings. This section was inspired by a guided tour that The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds for blind and partially sighted people.



Works that may be displayed in the Touch Gallery:

Wheat Field with Reaper and Sun,
Vincent van Gogh (1889)

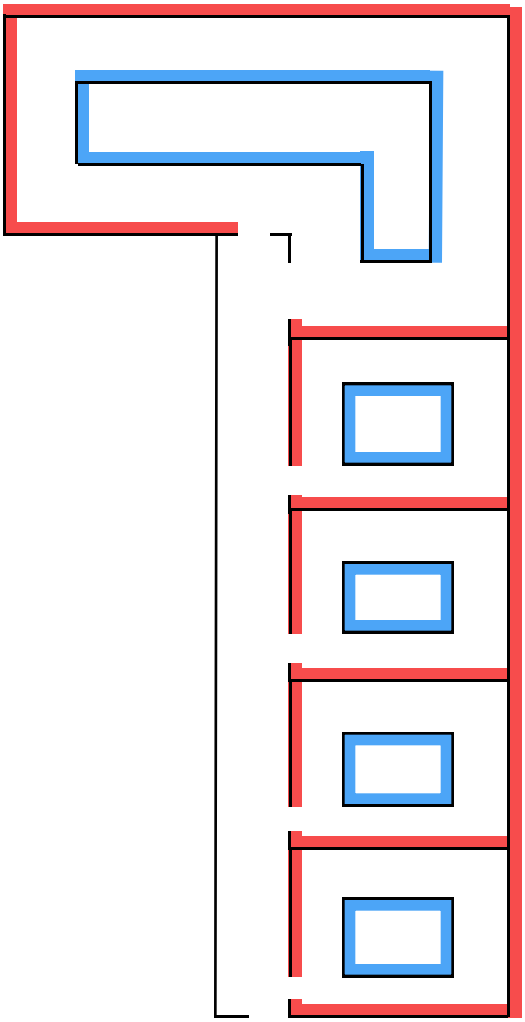
Walking Man II
Alberto Giacometti (1960)



Composition,
Henryk Stazewski (1934)

I think that browsing is an important aspect of visiting a museum. In general, most museumgoers do not spend an equal amount of time in front of each display; we look more closely at the things that interest us and skip the things that don't. For sighted people, this process usually starts with walking around a little and taking a quick look at all of the works in a space. To find an alternative for people with limited or no vision, I took some inspiration from the Hazelwood School, which is a school in Glasgow for students with a variety of disabilities. There, they have walls covered in cork panels, which helps students navigate their way around the school by touch. In this design, the tactile wall would also include braille descriptions of each piece in the room. This way, visitors would be able to read a short description of each work and stop at any one that interests them.

In addition, I tried to include several other features that work with senses other than sight. One of these features is the incorporation of standard tactile surfaces on the floors throughout the gallery. This was probably the most common accessibility feature that I saw during our site visits. These tactile surfaces complement the architecture of the gallery, which is built around one long hallway. My hope was that this hallway would serve as an anchor point, so that visitors are easily able to find their way back to the exit. Additionally, the walls would be made from materials that muffle outside sounds, to prevent distraction and



disorientation in the visitors. This is similar to the gallery for people with dementia, but unlike in that design, I didn't want to muffle all of the sounds within the room. Some sounds, such as footsteps, are important for navigation for people with impaired vision. Finally, I think that a good addition to this design would be an audio guide that gives detailed descriptions of each of the pieces. This would be especially important for the pieces that are not in the Touch Gallery. Some works are too fragile for regular handling, and some works–for example, pencil drawings–may not feel like much even when touched. The audio descriptions would give visitors a way to interact with these pieces as well.

Tactile Wall

Art

Limitations of “Narrow Design”

The biggest limitation of “narrow design” that I have come across while creating this project is that it assumes people fit into discrete categories. For example, one of the underlying assumptions of creating one design for blind people and another, completely separate design for children is that these are two communities with no overlap. In other words, it assumes that there are blind people and there are children, but there are no blind children. As I mentioned in the introduction, I attempted to optimize these designs for their intended users, even at the expense of their accessibility to people outside of that specific audience. However, this specificity also ignores the fact that each of these communities is not a monolith, and includes people with overlapping accessibility needs. In the aforementioned case of blind children, for example, they may not be able to fully use the design for visually impaired people if they have not yet learned how to read braille, or if they are too short to comfortably use the tactile wall. This also underscores the importance of working with the communities that you are designing for. Especially if the designer is someone who does not belong to the specific community (as was the case with me in this project), it can be easy to overlook the complexity and diversity that exist within them.