

LIFE ON THE DARK SIDE

Unusual exhibition gives confidence to the blind and opens the eyes of the sighted to their world

By Sopaporn Kurz
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I felt insecure as I followed the dim path inside the "Dialogue in the Dark" Exhibition. A few more steps and then it was pitch black. I walked very slowly, tightened my grip on my blind person's walking stick and clung to the wall on my left. My eyes were wide open, but may as well have been closed tight.

My guide Uwe was waiting for me. Judging from his kind voice, he must have been in his 50s. He assured me that everything was going to be fun and guided me through different environments such as a park, a city and a bar. He glided past everything with ease while I struggled to inch forward.

It was probably the first time in years that I had to focus on my other senses rather than sight. Uwe asked me to notice the different noises I heard, things I touched and smelt. To my surprise, I really enjoyed touching. We use our vision so much that we do not even know how it feels to touch items around us, such as a traffic light or a ticket machine.

My 90-minute journey was very rewarding. It was also fun and I got an insight into what it might be like to be blind. I was also pleased to discover that because of the nature of the museum, which requires blind or

visually impaired people to work there, more than 5,000 marginalised disabled people have been employed and empowered.

"The response has been unbelievable. From being shy, introverted people, they suddenly develop and become very independent," beamed Klara Kletzka, managing director of Dialogue Museum in Frankfurt. "It makes me so happy."

Challenging task

But running a museum as a private organisation is never easy.

"We are a 100 per cent social-driven business entity. Unlike other museums, we do not receive any financial support from the government," said Kletzka.

Besides, the format of the exhibition requires a lot of guides, meaning they have greater costs than other museums. It is a challenging task to survive, but the museum, which was opened in 2005, seems to be on the right track.

"We have about 70,000 visitors each year, utilising about 80 per cent of our capacity and we are still growing," she said.

Besides the exhibition, the museum also offers a "dining in the dark" experience, organising workshops on developing communication skills for corporations as well as hosting private functions.

Internationally, they have also sold the franchise to other countries,

with the hope that their expertise will raise social awareness, reduce prejudice and show the competence of blind people.

The museum has been invited to stage exhibitions at several high-level conventions including the World Economic Forum 2007 in Davos, Switzerland, where world leaders got try what it is like to live in a lightless world – an experience which will hopefully make them understand the needs of the disabled and eventually make changes in policies.

"We believe that you can have a sustainable impact by letting them experience it by themselves," she said.



A school tour prepares to enter the Dialogue Museum.



Inside the Dialogue Museum in Frankfurt, Germany.