

Access on show

The London Festival of Architecture took place in June and July of this year. Among the installations were two with access as their focus: a solar energy water-powered lift at the Duke of York steps, and an exhibition on making London's buildings accessible at City Hall. Madeleine Gray, Editor of *Access by Design*, visited the festival to see these thought-provoking contributions

Duke of York steps lift

by Madeleine Gray, Tony Heaton, Chief Executive of Shape and Matthew Lloyd, Director of Matthew Lloyd Architects

The lift installation at the Duke of York steps was exhibited for two weeks during the London Festival of Architecture. Hailed by its designer Matthew Lloyd as probably the world's 'first solar energy water-powered lift', the installation, which was the result of a concept developed between Matthew Lloyd Architects, the disability-led arts organisations Shape and Architecture Inside Out, the Royal Engineers and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), was intended to address and highlight issues around access at the steps.

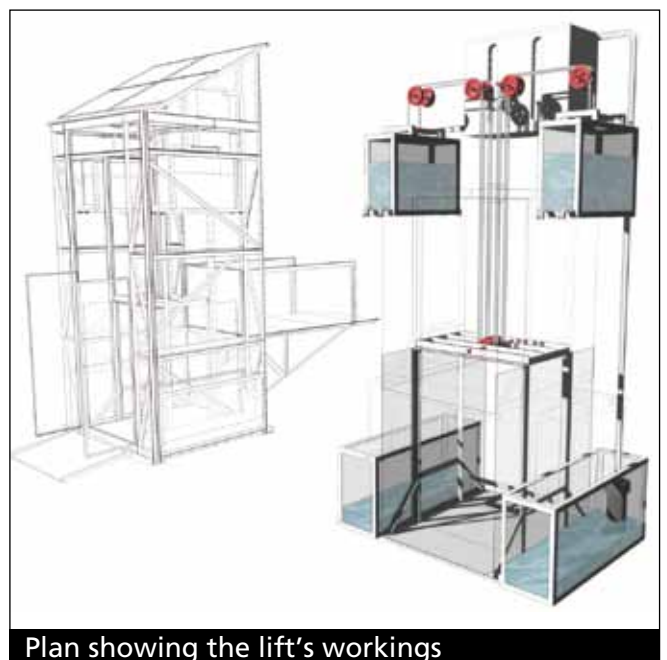
The original intention was to build a series of three lifts to provide access from the top set of steps to the bottom; but, as this was impossible for the exhibition due to time and budget constraints, a single lift took users from the top to the middle section of the steps and back. However, were this ever to become a permanent installation the series of three lifts would be employed, allowing step-free access across the full series of steps.

The design

The lift is covered by transparent Perspex panels, making its workings fully visible. A bridge leads from the steps to the entrance gates. Once inside the lift, in a playful gesture, two 'toilet'-style chains are used to operate it. Pulling the first chain releases a valve, causing water to fall from

the top tank into the counterweight tanks which drop downwards, forcing the lift car into the up position. Pulling the second chain empties the counterweights into two bottom tanks so that the lift moves downwards. A solar-powered 800W pump pushes water back to the top again. Should the lift be installed permanently, these chains could be replaced by buttons; this would hopefully alleviate one of the teething problems of the prototype, where one of the chains was located at an inaccessible height.

The project came about when Matthew Lloyd approached Architecture Inside Out, a group of disabled artists who had previously staged creative events at the Tate Modern, London, and The Lightbox, Woking, as reported in *Access by Design* issue 119 (Summer 2009). Together, they talked to the Director of the London Festival of Architecture about their plans for the installation.



Plan showing the lift's workings

Matthew Lloyd describes the Duke of York steps as 'perhaps the most important set of historic steps in the country'; undoubtedly, due to their strategic location between Buckingham Palace and Whitehall, they are constantly pounded by powerful feet, as well as being a photogenic magnet for the crowds of tourists constantly streaming past. The lift certainly gained the public's attention: a striking spectacle wrought from

Perspex, aluminium and steel, from the bottom of the steps it almost looked absurdly situated in a limbo with steps above and below, while the fish tank-style water troughs, complete with a bed of stones, added to its quirky appeal. Such was the spectacle as the waterfall caused the lift to rise that when Shape's Chief Executive Tony Heaton emerged from the lift on one occasion, a group of visiting teenagers burst into applause.

Here, Matthew Lloyd and Tony Heaton explain why the installation was created, and what impact they would like it to have.

Tony Heaton, Chief Executive of Shape

'Zoe Partington-Sollinger, a director of Architecture Inside Out, invited me to join this project, so that, as a practising disabled artist, I could contribute my sculptural skill and access knowledge. I like a challenge, and this seemed a challenging project. The lift is different because it is fun: it does not look like a medicalised piece of kit for disabled people, unlike most wheelchair lifts. Usually it seems as though designers associate disability with illness out of ignorance, and this comes across in the design. As it is a prototype, improvements could obviously be made; but this is an interesting solution to an access problem and, crucially, it draws attention to the lift rather than to the person. Clearly the lift

Getting a lift: (left) a cyclist ponders the impressive structure; (right) Whizz Kidz ambassador Karl Woods celebrates the lift's opening



© Jonathan Short

needs to be fully functioning to fulfil its purpose, but this demonstrates that it can be so with style and elegance.

The way that the public have engaged with this lift suggests that they are not used to seeing anything like this, and it provokes fascination, drawing spectators like bees around a honey pot. Creating a lift which doubles as a piece of theatre is of benefit to disabled people, who very often are unintended performers; this shifts the focus from the person to the machine.

Placing the lift slap bang in the middle of the steps was deliberate: not only did it please Matthew Lloyd's architectural logic in maintaining the symmetry and allowing the usual flow of pedestrians at either side of the steps, but it also gives access a central focus, putting disabled people at the centre. Too often disabled people are forced to slink in the back way, but this presents a solution which is impossible to ignore.

As an architect, Matthew obviously wanted to create an architectural event, but he was concerned that this might miss the point of making the steps more accessible. Being an unreconstructed modernist, my view is that form follows function: if the lift performs the task it was intended to, it will be an object of beauty. I also think that the lift is for everybody to use,

and if it were to become a tourist attraction, that would be great – as long as wheelchair users did not have to wait at the back of a long queue to use it. The lift could form a really attractive addition to London's access solutions.

The low-energy and carbon-neutral aspects of the lift are also vitally important; we should all be aiming at carbon neutrality. Certainly, shrewdly capitalising on the sustainability of the lift and the fact that it presents a solution to wheelchair access acted in our favour in requesting permission to set this up. However, I don't think that this is a bad thing; on the contrary, these factors and the temporary nature of the exhibition allowed us to subversively sneak the lift in. The authorities may have expected howls of public protest at a lift desecrating these sacred steps, but instead there has been nothing but positive feedback, and people have thought that access should be provided to this main thoroughfare. I would recommend scouring London for sites where the lift could be allocated time and some space, setting it up and seeing what happens.'

Matthew Lloyd, Director, Matthew Lloyd Architects

'For me, a key point about this project is that it was a genuine collaboration between architects and disabled people. Rather than an architectural polemic, it is a highly functional machine which was built to solve a physical problem on a major site. The location is unparalleled in its historic status: with Grade I listing, it has the highest level of historical protection and Royal Parks, which kindly granted permission for the installation, were naturally insistent that this be respected. Our solution was to avoid bolting the lift down, so that it sits freestanding on the steps, with a bridge that cantilevers out from the main structure. The small 800W water pump is powered by solar energy, and as the lift is constructed from steel, Perspex and aluminium it is entirely recyclable. Furthermore, the whole structure can be dismantled and removed by crane in half a day.

The lift provides a safe, slow, calm ride, allowing access particularly for wheelchair users, people with buggies, cyclists and older people. For me, the splashing of water as it rises and falls calms the spirits, but more important is its carbon

neutrality: with the water providing the power, all that is required is a small electric motor. British-designed, and constructed entirely in London, the lift has a wide application that I hope more people will be able to take advantage of in future.'

1 City, Many People: Inclusive design exhibition

Bridging the access gap: The background to 1 City, Many People by Steve Lowe, Seedgen Ltd

The original intention for this exhibition, which took place at City Hall from 28 June to 30 July 2010, had been to explore access problems between Tower Bridge and the Thames Path and to suggest solutions as to how these could be resolved. However, following consultation with different stakeholders and a tragic death, the original idea, named *1 Bridge, Many People*, evolved into *1 City, Many People*.

A discussion paper for the original exhibition was circulated in January, identifying the issues and plotting a roadmap that could see them at least partly resolved by 2012. The document referred to studies previously commissioned by the local authorities concerned, which had proposed a step-free link between the southeast pavement and Shad Thames. It went on to consider the link between the southwest pavement and the Thames Path. This is a far busier route and there is no way of linking it to the east pavement with a pedestrian crossing: the Port of London Authority will not allow impediments to traffic flows on the bridge, in case it has to be opened for a river emergency. Two solutions were considered: the less costly was a stand-alone lift; however, this would pose aesthetic problems, as views of Tower Bridge from the west would be compromised. The alternative was for a more ambitious architectural addition: a horizontal walkway, perpendicular to the pavement, leading to an appropriately elegant link bridge cut through the parapet. This could then be serviced by two lifts plus additional stairs, so as to greatly increase capacity.

One person who strongly endorsed the proposals was David Morris, the former External Inclusion Manager at the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games. With no budget of his own. David was tasked with helping to improve

access in the public realm. A wheelchair user, David had visited the Acropolis in Athens and part of the Great Wall of China courtesy of access improvements before the 2004 and 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games. He suggested making the River Thames the 'Great Wall' for London 2012, by creating an accessible 'Paralympic superhighway'. As part of this, he had been trying to raise £40,000 to fund a scoping study to pinpoint possible access improvements along the Thames Path.

In response to the Tower Bridge discussion paper, David produced a document called *Turning towards the river: London's Great Wall – the River Walk*. This again called for London 2012 to be an 'inclusive Games', referring to Beijing's efforts to improve inclusion, such as a total of \$62 million US dollars spent on city-wide access, the installation of 132,633 km of tactile paving and dropped kerbs at 21,150 intersections, and 12,000 museum staff being trained in sign language.

The *1 Bridge, Many People* proposals and David's paper had started to have an impact, with the confirmation that the many authorities involved with Tower Bridge would convene to review the situation in July. However, tragically, David died in April. Following his sudden death, the focus of the exhibition shifted to general access improvements. This was to wait for the outcome of the discussions around access, to acknowledge David's wider vision for an accessible Thames riverside, and to synthesise material from contributors into a coherent whole. The resulting exhibition comprised three main sections:

- 1 case studies showing how it is possible to retrofit improved accessibility into even highly sensitive buildings
- 2 case studies showing how London's buildings



Graphics providers Four Graphics setting up *1 City, Many People* at City Hall

have become increasingly accessible over the last 20 years

- 3 a look to the future, which suggested that the major challenges ahead were in the public realm, and referred to David's vision for an accessible Thames walkway, highlighting proposals for a 'London Promenade'

As the exhibition came to an end, it emerged that a Mayoral team pulling together various authorities connected with Tower Bridge had convened in July, and it now seems probable that at least some access improvements will be put in place by 2012. In addition, the London Assembly's Transport Committee is to consider the London Promenade proposal to widen the Thames Path as part of a wider investigation into walking.

"The river walk is a great pedestrian thoroughfare and enhanced access will leave a legacy for generations."

Turning towards the river

Inclusive design displayed at City Hall

by Madeleine Gray

Independent consultant Steve Lowe approached CAE towards the end of last year, asking if we could provide any examples of access improvements to historic buildings. As readers will be aware, we were able to draw upon a wealth of case studies from *Access by Design*, as well as from the excellent *Museums and Art Galleries* by Adrian Cave. Steve worked indefatigably to curate an impressive exhibition tackling the sensitive issue of retrofitting listed





(left to right) Tony Pincham, Antonia Faust, Ian Kiloh, Steve Lowe, Michael Davis, Richard Barnes, Madeleine Gray and Emile Melki at the exhibition.

Inset: Deputy Richard Barnes admires striking images of St Paul's where access improvements are ongoing



buildings, managing to secure the publicly open lobby gallery at City Hall as a venue. At the suggestion of CAE's Chief Executive Kevin Davis, the panorama viewed from City Hall's floor-to-ceiling windows became the starting point for the buildings featured in the exhibition.


Steve had also managed to secure the input for the exhibition free of charge from some extraordinarily generous individuals. Among these were:

- photographer Tony Pincham of Images for Industry, who provided the stunning panoramic photograph which formed the centrepiece of the exhibition
- Emile Melki of Four Graphics, who produced the graphics and organised the set up and tear down of the exhibition
- Antonia Faust, Projects and Events Manager at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), who had provided RIBA's inclusive design videos which were played on a loop during the exhibition
- Ian Kiloh and Lisa King of Sellar Design and Development, who gave in-kind sponsorship in the form of graphic design and layout services

- Michael Davis of Thames Promenade, who provided content for the London Promenade exhibits

Stirring images of the Roundhouse, St Paul's Cathedral and the Royal Exchange indicated the possibility, and the importance, of improving accessibility to architectural treasures; while references to modern developments like the Shard highlighted the need for ever-improving design standards in future. The London Promenade also provided one intriguing solution to the problem of access by the Thames. The exhibition was visited by Deputy Mayor Richard Barnes, whose remit covers accessibility. Admiring the images, the Deputy Mayor commended the work undertaken while acknowledging the need to constantly improve access in a city into whose skyline new buildings are constantly crowding.

To support the exhibition, Steve launched a website named betteraccess.org. This holds information about the exhibition and its background, details of all the case studies featured, and a tribute to David Morris; and it has the potential to be developed further into an interactive access resource. ●

For more information, visit the Better Access website  www.betteraccess.org