

DBA Awards Submission

The Burrell Collection

Client: Glasgow Life
DBA Design Effectiveness Award
Entry 2026



Overview

After a bold and thriving start in the 1980s, the Burrell Collection was in decline. A failing building, falling visitor numbers and a story that was seen as irrelevant to Glasgow's diverse communities threatened its future. It urgently needed a capital investment to repair the building, protecting its built heritage and the heritage within its collection. Visitors reported finding the museum inaccessible, and hard to navigate around. The demographics highlighted a huge gap between the visitor demographic and the demographic of Glasgow's population. An injection of capital, energy and imagination was urgently needed to get this much-loved museum back on its feet, serving its communities and creating long-term financial sustainability.

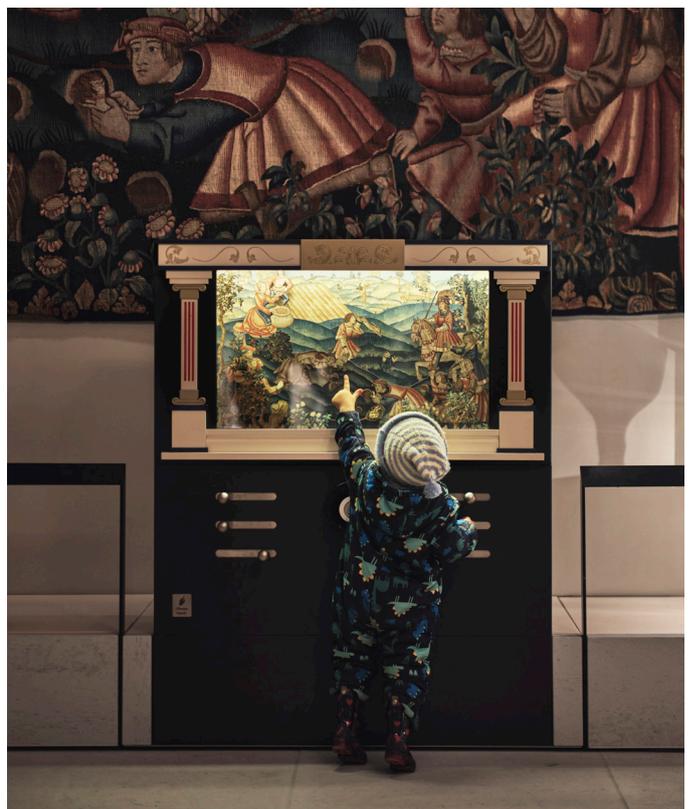
We were commissioned to create an architectural and exhibition masterplan that set out a vision for an improved and extended museum that enthralled visitors into lingering and inspiring them into returning. This masterplan was the basis for an ambitious - and successful - funding bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Critical funding in place, the project team went on to create the outstanding, modern, connected museum that Glasgow so needed and deserved.

Through an inclusive and radically accessible design approach, the museum overcame declining attendance, secured record-breaking funding, and transformed the visitor experience, proving the power of design to transform cultural institutions. The Burrell Collection redesign was a bold response to a set of challenges, and a model for how a city like Glasgow can protect its past and reimagine its future.

Achievements

- Secured £16.5 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, their largest-ever grant at the time.
- Achieved nearly 300% increase in annual visitors, from less than 200,000 to over 555,000 in 2024.
- Delivered £19.9 million in economic benefit to Glasgow within six months of reopening.
- Won Art Fund Museum of the Year 2023, recognised for "real rigour and imagination" in accessibility and design.
- 97% of visitors rated their experience good or very good; 78% intend to return.
- 50% of local visitors now come from Glasgow's most deprived areas (SIMD 1 & 2), aligning audiences with local demographics.

Fig 6. Child engaging with an interactive storytelling exhibit.



Context

The Burrell Collection

Overview and origins

The Burrell Collection is a nationally recognized museum located on the outskirts of Glasgow. William Burrell's collection tells stories of people, power and making around the globe over many centuries, and of Glasgow's relationship with the world. A vast collection of around 6,000 objects (later growing to 9,000) was gifted to the City of Glasgow in 1944, on condition that the collection was housed in a building close to centre of Glasgow and show the works to their greatest advantage. The Burrell Collection was founded in 1983, the building's opening credited with contributing to the city's transformation from industrial decline to a cultural powerhouse.

Mission

"The Burrell Collection is a people's museum that will continue working closely with everyone in Glasgow on more amazing projects and to enhance the diverse public and schools programme we offer." *Duncan Dornan, Head of Glasgow Life Museums.*

The museum's ongoing mission is to serve local communities, broaden public and educational engagement, and foster inclusivity.

The Market Context

Other significant players

In 2013, The Burrell Collection attracted just 193,472 visits, significantly fewer than Kelvingrove (1,044,067) or Riverside (740,276). These numbers underscored the urgent need to reassert the Burrell's distinct value proposition within Glasgow's competitive cultural landscape by designing a museum experience that would resonate more deeply with local and international audiences. (*Business 2, 2014*)

Aspirations

In a climate of drastically reduced public spending, 21st-century museums need to sustain visitor numbers to create financial sustainability. They need

to demonstrate relevance and broad welcome to win not only large capital funding pots, but also smaller, ongoing funding awards.

The impact of capital investment

Research by the National Lottery Heritage Fund shows that capital investment consistently delivers strong returns in the cultural sector. Across funded sites, average visitor numbers increased by 20% to 35% post-investment. The Burrell Collection set an ambitious target of a 100% increase to achieve the financial sustainability it needed. (*National Lottery Heritage Fund, Areas of Focus and programme evaluation reports*)

Key challenges and market obstacles

Failing building

The museum urgently needed a capital investment to repair the building, which was suffering from significant water ingress, and so protect the heritage both of the building itself and the important collections it contained. Visitors reported finding the museum inaccessible, and hard to navigate around.

Falling visitor numbers

Visitor numbers were low and dropping. Sustained visitor numbers create financial sustainability through retail and F&B spend, paid programming and ticketing, and compelling funding bids and cases for support and sponsorship. It was vital to entice people to visit, linger and return.

Lack of relevance

Displays had remained substantially unchanged since the museum first opened in 1983 and no longer reflected current museum practice, interpretive and technical developments or audience expectations. A visitor commented: "It just doesn't feel like a family friendly museum, so it's not one of our favourites to visit."

Context

Lack of local visitors

The demographic of visitors was far from representative:

- 1% of visitors to the Burrell classified themselves as being in 'lower supervisory and technical occupations' (compared with 12% of Scotland's population)
- 41% of visitors to the Burrell Collection classified themselves as being in managerial positions. Scotland's census returns identified 19% of the population as AB1s.
- <0.5% of visitors identified themselves as Pakistani (compared with 4% of Glasgow's population)
- 4% of visitors identified themselves as having a disability or long-term illness (compared with 22.7% of Glasgow's population and 19.6% of Scotland's population)
- 3% of the Burrell's audience identified as unemployed (compared to an average of 11.7% of Glasgow's population in 2012 and 10.6% in 2013, according to data from the International Labour Organization)

(Global Marketing Gateway visitor research report, commissioned by the Burrell Collection)

The Museum Champion teachers' panel stated: "It's a very clean, 'very white' museum. Everything is 'too precious' to let children run about. We want to look, touch and play!"

Goals

The client's objectives were:

- To secure significant funding through a transformative design & architecture masterplan - goal 1
- To double visitor numbers from 200,000 to 400,000 and sustain this uplift by creating visitor engagement through excellent interpretive design - goal 2
- To grow an international audience through an international reputation, secured by reviews, awards and visitor feedback based on resonant and engaging design - goal 3
- Through design interventions, to create a clear and enticing visitor route through the museum, that encouraged interaction, engagement and return visits - goal 4
- And, through relevant and resonant design, to create a visitor profile that reflected the local demographics - goal 5

Scope of work

We created the design & architecture masterplan and funding bid. Once funding was secured, contracted work split into two core teams working in synch – Business 8 working on the building envelope and landscaping, and our team, creating the exhibition and gallery spaces inside and orchestrating the visitor journey.

Context

Brief

- To design a museum that is relevant and resonant to a broad 21st century audience.
- To create a museum space that is radically accessible – not only physically, but emotionally and intellectually - and welcoming to all.
- To use interpretive design to connect visitors with stories and objects relating to very different times and places.
- To improve physical access and flow through the building.

Creative Approach

Our design philosophy was to:

- Use hybrid digital/tactile storytelling to increase engagement.
- Design with the community not for them.
- Design for clarity of visitor journey and interpretive message.
- Design for emotional connection with the building, setting, stories and collection.

Fig 2. Interactive display, rotating projection-mapped interpretation on

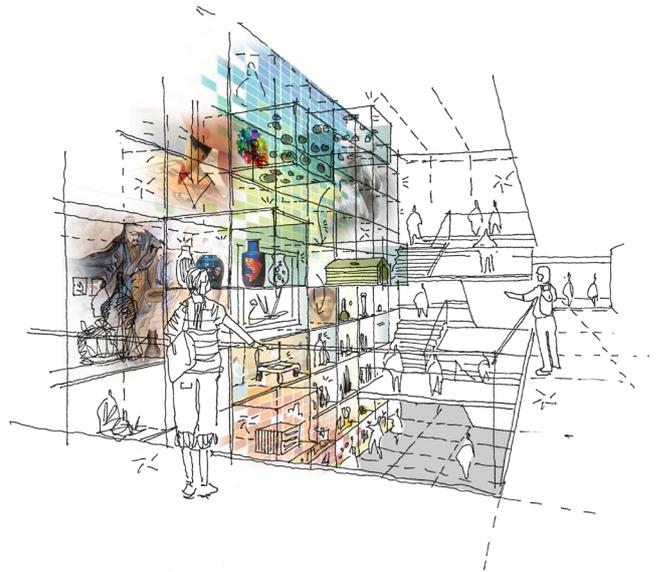


Fig 1. Concept sketches of our central atrium and display case design.

Our design strategy was to:

- Open up the centre of the building like an apple core to create a coherent and easily readable visitor route and dialogue with the building. (See fig.1)
- To build a deeply community co-created approach, ambitiously planning to work closely with large numbers of community groups to create the displays.
- To create radical access with multiple ways into stories across the senses.
- To use digital interpretation to encourage people to look more closely at the objects, appreciating their beauty and craftsmanship.
- To share stories in relevant, resonant and enticing ways.
- Design every part of the display with multiple audiences in mind, with children's storytelling threaded through, for instance, and multiple senses used throughout.

Key facts

- Opening date – 29th March 2022
- Design fees - REDACTED CONFIDENTIAL DATA

Goal 1 – Secure significant funding

Challenge: The Burrell Collection urgently needed capital investment to repair its failing building and protect a world-class collection, but faced stiff competition in a shrinking public funding landscape

Design response: We created a bold, inclusive and future-facing masterplan that demonstrated a design-led transformation of the visitor experience and broadened relevance. The plan included significant amounts of co-curated displays, community-led storytelling, and radically accessible, multi-sensory design.

Result: The project secured £16.5 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, its largest-ever museum grant at the time, with judges citing the “creative and inclusive design approach” as a key reason for support. (Caroline Clarke Director Scotland, The National Lottery Heritage Fund)

Successes: “Our major award of £16.5m was given in recognition not only of the importance of The Burrell’s stunning collection and architecture, but also because of the creative and inclusive design approach taken by Glasgow Life, with over 15,000 people sharing their ideas and collectively helping to create the new displays. We should applaud the effort of each and every one of these people as we celebrate the news that this much-loved cultural icon will be re-opening this coming March.”

(Caroline Clarke Director Scotland, The National Lottery Heritage Fund)

Goal 2 – Double visitor numbers from 200,000 to 400,000 and sustain the uplift

Challenge: Pre-refurbishment, visitor numbers were in decline, with many finding the museum inaccessible and outdated. Long-term financial sustainability depended on growth and retention.

Design response: We radically reimagined the space to create a seamless visitor journey, embedded multi-sensory and interactive exhibits, and used digital interpretation to bring objects to life.

Result: Visitor numbers grew by nearly 300%, reaching 494,000 in the first 9 months and 555,017 in 2024, with 97% satisfaction and 78% of visitors saying they intend to return. Visitors increased by nearly 300%, ten times the usual uplift following major capital works, with uplift sustained and still rising. *(Visitor figures provided by Glasgow Life Museums, 2025)*

Successes: A significant and sustained increase in visitor numbers alongside qualitative and quantitative indications of visitor satisfaction with the new design demonstrate the key role of design in uplifted footfall.

Across NLHF funded sites, average visitor numbers increased by 25-30% post-investment. The Burrell Collection dramatically outperformed this benchmark, achieving a nearly 300% uplift, with sustained growth over multiple years. This demonstrates the transformative power of a strategic, design-led approach to redevelopment. *(National Lottery Heritage Fund, Areas of Focus and programme evaluation reports)*

Our early visions of “a beautiful and accessible museum” came to life through our thoughtful material choices, displays that created resonance with the building and park, AV that invited visitors to see the beauty of objects and by understanding the skill and care with which they were made - from spinning a plate to see its pattern appear, paintings coming to life with animated backdrops of falling leaves (see Fig.2 and 3). All of this encouraged deep engagement, evidenced in visitor feedback. “I haven’t been for many years. It’s so much better than I remembered. Spacious, well-lit, not too many exhibits beautifully displayed. Lots of very imaginative hands-on displays.”

Visitors were surprised and delighted by the changes: “I hadn’t visited since a child in the 1990s, and was blown away by the recent redesign and how the collection is presented. The way the curators have used digital elements such as projection or touch screens genuinely enhances the objects on display rather than competing with them.” *(Visitor feedback from Google)*

And by their broad appeal: "Interactive exhibits and informative displays make the collection accessible to a wide audience, from art connoisseurs to casual visitors." (*Visitor feedback from Google*)

Goal 3 – Grow an international audience and contribute to Glasgow's visitor economy

Challenge: In a competitive tourism market, the museum needed to position itself as a cultural destination with global appeal to justify ongoing investment and create economic value.

Design response: We made the collection more legible and emotionally resonant to global audiences through clear narratives, digital storytelling, and multilingual support, while design decisions deepened the spectacular building's connection to its stunning parkland setting, creating a unique visitor experience.

Result: The museum generated £19.9 million in economic benefit for Glasgow in six months, and £21.1 million for Scotland.
(*The Burrell Collection, 2023*)

Successes: The Burrell became one of Scotland's most visited free attractions in 2024. (Alva Rank 69 UK-wide) The design enhanced Glasgow's brand as a cultural city and destination. 88% of surveyed visitors said Glasgow Museums influenced their decision to visit the city.
(*The Burrell Collection, 2023*)

"I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to the Burrell Collection. Unfortunately, I only had a day to spend in Glasgow, so I was trying to cram in..." (*Tripadvisor review*)

"I saw foreign tourists being surprised and delighted at this free service." (*Tripadvisor review*)

Goal 4 – Create a clear and enticing visitor route that encourages interaction, engagement and return visits

Challenge: The original building's layout was confusing, with poor sightlines, limited circulation, and underused spaces, leading to low dwell time and minimal re-visitation.

Design response: We opened up the building's central spine with a new staircase (see fig. 1), improving circulation and legibility, introduced layered storytelling, and used objects themselves as orientation tools.

Result: Visitors now report a clear, engaging journey, with 95% of visitors saying they'd recommend the experience, and strong emotional responses in feedback such as: "Stunning re-design: the routes flow, the context is always explained - so engaging I'm planning to return in six months!" (*Visitor feedback*)

Successes: Design decisions influenced visitor flow and visitor access, with the core of the building opened up to allow a central staircase that clarified wayfinding, and the basement opened up for collections access, increasing objects accessible to the public from 20% to 95%.
(*The Burrell Collection, 2023*)

Design used objects to help orientation and wayfinding, so improving physical access, for instance, the placement of iconic objects in vistas and sightlines through the building to aid orientation (see fig. 4) and to create a hierarchy of object and collections display.

Visitors now found reasons to engage: "I have visited Burrell Collection twice since it reopened - the transformation is staggering, and there's always something new to discover." And reported on a clarity of interpretative planning and layout: "The clarity of displays, the immersive story-telling and intuitive layout made this feel like a fresh and vibrant place."

Impact

Goal 5 – Create a visitor profile that reflects the local demographics

Challenge: The museum's audience was disproportionately white, affluent, a notably older profile, and non-disabled, with little local community engagement, creating a mismatch with Glasgow's diverse population.

Design response: We co-designed 15 displays with community partners, integrated sensory and language-inclusive interpretation, and prioritised accessibility and representation across every gallery. Radical access was achieved through multi-sensory displays.

Result: 50% of local visitors now come from the city's most deprived areas, 15,000+ people contributed to the new displays, and 82% of visitors said they felt a greater connection to Glasgow after visiting.

The Burrell Collection, 2023

Successes: The galleries invite exploration through tactile (see fig. 5), audio, digital & hands-on elements that create a playful and deeply accessible experience for visitors of every age and ability. The museum won the Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2023, with judges commenting on the imaginatively accessible and welcoming approach: "the sensitive renovation and collection redisplay invite exploration and delight, with innovative digital displays offering new ways of understanding the art and objects in the museum's light, welcoming spaces" and "they have realised, with real rigour and imagination, the true depth of what it means for a museum to be accessible".

Visitors also responded strongly to the accessibility and sense of welcome: "It's so accessible and friendly with paintings, furniture, artefacts, carpet, glass, linen-ware, even Egyptian tomb relics displayed sided by side. You certainly won't be bored. There is something for everyone in this museum. It's a fun, interactive gallery. I will definitely be back."

Visitor feedback, Tripadvisor

The design approach was explicitly inclusive involving over 15,000 people and community groups in co-creating the galleries, representing all age groups, from pre-5's at Pollok Children's Nursey to older adults from Wing Hong Chinese Elderly Centre, refugees, LGBTQ+ groups, all faiths through inter-faith Scotland and the input of many with additional accessibility requirements.

"Several refugees... spoke of their joy at being 'seen' in a museum for the first time; many LGBTIQ tour participants spoke of their joy at being 'seen' in a museum."

We introduced family friendly zones, such as numerous interactive exhibits (see fig. 6), family-friendly labelling and large readable format text available across all interactive displays allowed visitors to engage across all age groups.

Visitor surveys noted strong family engagement - prior underrepresentation of families and early years were notably improved. And in 2025, the Burrell was shortlisted for the Kids in Museums Family Friendly Award – the only UK museum award judged entirely by families: a testament to the museum's enticing and accessible interpretation

Fig 3. Gallery views with animated floral projections.



Impact

"Our pupils had a fantastic time at the recent opening of the Burrell Collection. The interactive exhibits were some of their favourites. From whittling wood to glass blowing, the clever use of technology kept them fully engaged. Many have talked about return visits with parents and family, especially mentioning the gift shop and coffee shop!" - *Jennifer Lindsay, Principal Teacher at Tinto Primary*

Other influencing factors

In the year after re-opening, major museums and attractions can expect an uplift in visitors. NLHF research puts this expected figure at 30%. The year after opening also saw extensive PR and marketing pushes by the team at Glasgow Life. Both of these factors would be likely to push visitor numbers up for the first year after opening.

The year of opening, 2022, saw the country's COVID-19 restrictions ending, a month before the museum reopened. The results of this are likely to be mixed, with many rushing out to the public spaces they had been restricted in visiting previously, and others remaining more cautious.

While these background factors contributed to a supportive launch context, the sustained growth and high satisfaction levels can be directly linked to design impact.

Client feedback

"What makes a museum successful is a combination of the richness of its collection, the magnificence of the building, and, importantly, how people feel when they visit. The Burrell Collection champions inclusion and accessibility for all. It's exciting, engaging, and fun. Strong visitor numbers and the overwhelmingly positive visitor sentiment that the museum is inclusive, well designed, family friendly, and has displays that convey clear information to many different audiences is welcome reading."

Baillie Annette Christie, Chair of Glasgow Life



Fig 4. Armour and artefacts displayed in daylight-lit gallery.



Fig 5. Tactile replicas below original glassware for hands-on learning.

Other consultants

Masterplan – Business 2, Business 3

Exhibition design – Business 4, Business 5 Business 6, Business 7

Architect –Business 8

Credits

Museum Studio (Previously known as Event)

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John MacAslan and Partners
Beck Interiors
Meyvaert
Heritage Lottery Fund

Photography credits

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Glasgow Life

