

Objects and shadows

Diego Ortiz, a joint creation with visually impaired individuals from UNADEV PACA June 2018 - September 2019

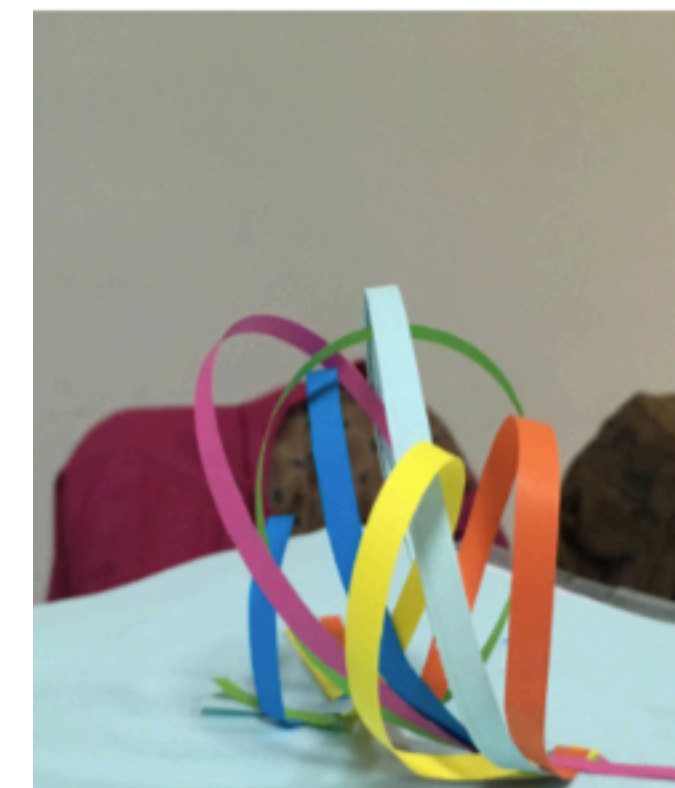
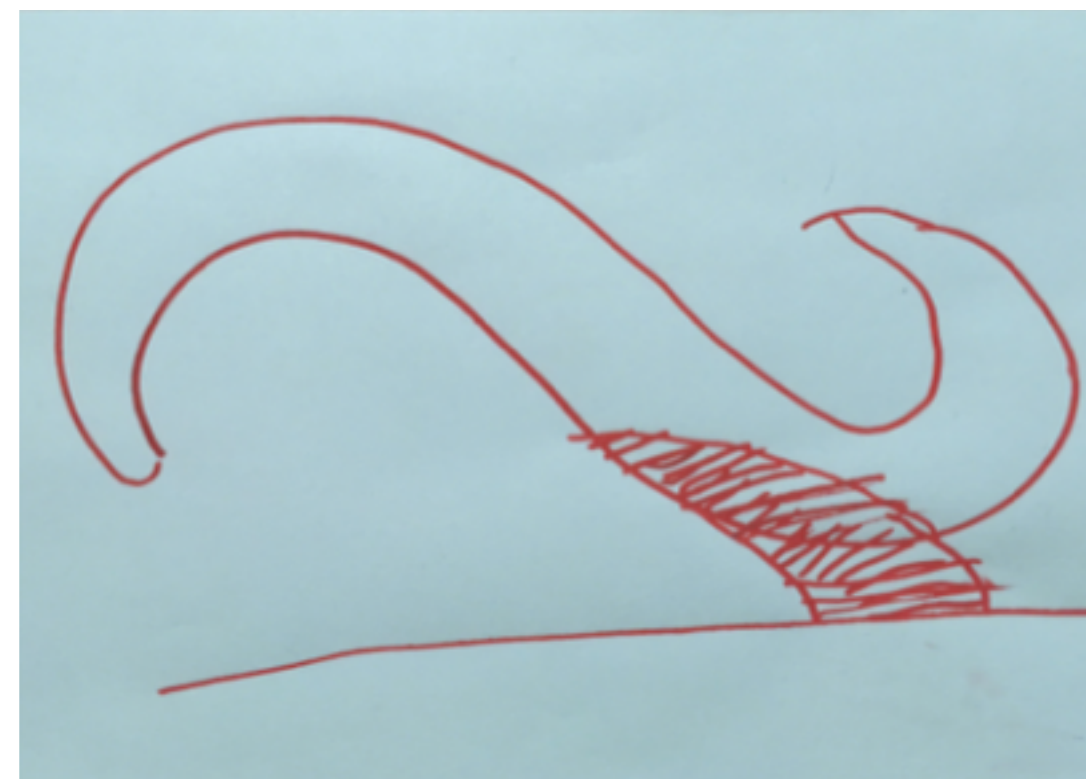
01 Genesis

My starting point was to explore the creative potential of digital practices, in particular 3D printing, with blind or visually impaired individuals, both upstream and downstream of the making of the creative work, and share the results. The French National Union for the Blind and Visually Impaired (UNADEV) in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region immediately agreed to work with me on this project. The call for projects by the Fondation Villa Seurat pour l'Art Contemporain gave me the chance to devise an ambitious artistic project, working together with the Make it Marseille FabLab.

At our first meeting with the UNADEV participants, three people volunteered to share this experience: Véréna Malet, Janine William and Frédéric Baldacchino. We also found the idea of the border especially interesting. That word has different meanings that have particular significance for the visually impaired, from physical limits to the limits of language. It is also strongly associated with the abstract. Encountering the abstract can present difficulties for blind and visually impaired people having to work with concepts that are far removed from their sensory reality. So we devised a method of working that uses digital resources by alternating the phases of virtual, tangible and solid creation.

02 The experimentation phase: June-August 2018

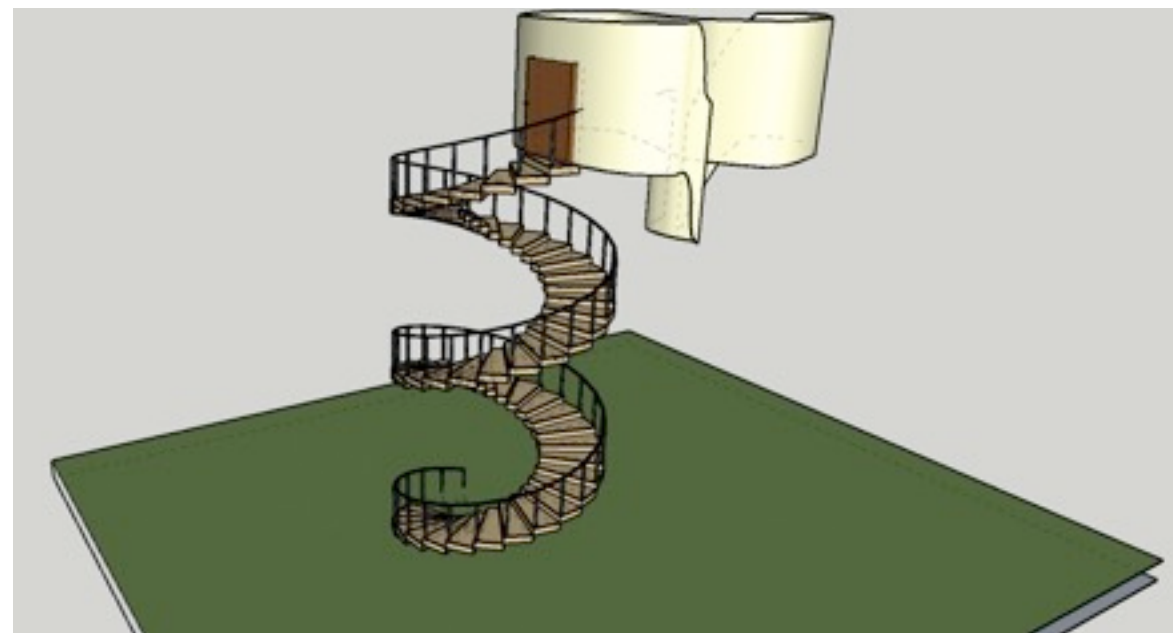
We began by building a 'library' of common references by gathering visual and tactile elements from everyday life, references from art and television, and words. The idea was to take each participant's sensitivity, characterized by their low level of vision, and use it to generate suggestions, approaching the subject using intuitive gestures, drawing simple geometric shapes and working with vivid colours. We very quickly reached agreement about designing sculptural objects to shape the public space. Three projects emerged, two individual designs and one collective: 'Janine', 'Verena' and 'Ville Braille' (Braille city).



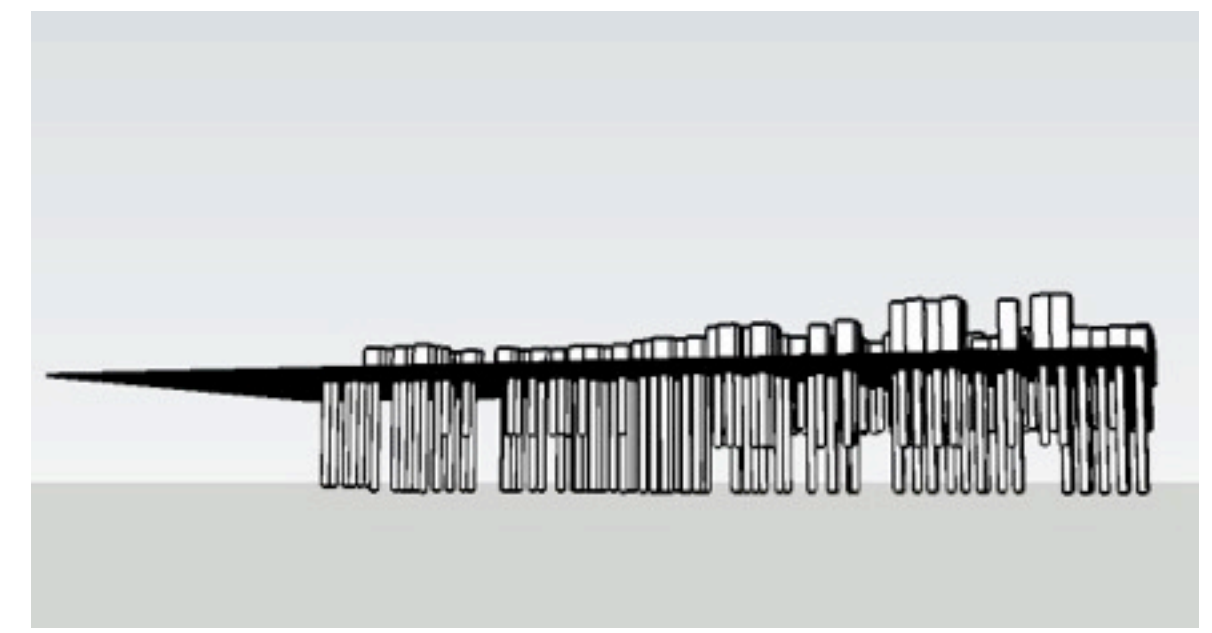
03 The 3D modelling phase: September-October 2018



«Jeanine»



«Verena»

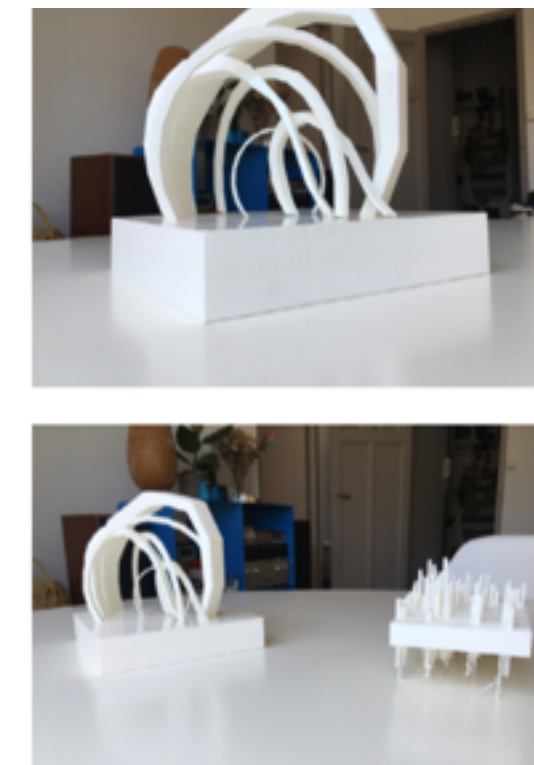


«Ville Braille»

Using the virtual reality headsets during the design process was a game-changer for the participants. It let them move around among their creations in a simulated space. They not only regained a form of vision, but could get closer to the volumes and materials. It made it easier for them to change the form of staircases, angles or arches, or decide whether there should be railings, or which areas should communicate, to come up with proposals that suited everyone. This meant we saved precious time before launching the 3D prototypes. For the 'Ville Braille', we drew inspiration from 'cut-up' and 'redacting' techniques, extruding the Braille cells to give them shape and meaning. We ended up with an architecture built on stilts.

04 The machining phase: November-December 2018

Printing out the Ville Braille in 3D proved extremely complicated: the city was not readable. This meant we had to design a model in wood. By using purely digital manufacturing processes together with traditional drawing and sculpture techniques we produced not only the volumes but also a new common language.



05 An unexpected opportunity: an exhibition at FRAC PACA, 15 July 2018 - 22 October 2019

The PACA Regional Contemporary Art Fund (FRAC) wanted to organize activities that would involve UNADEV beneficiaries, so we submitted our project to their public outreach manager. She was immediately impressed by our approach and the quality of the work we had produced, and she offered us an exhibition. For us, this was an exceptional opportunity to pursue our project to its conclusion, and show, share and relate our experiences. We went back to work with the teams from UNADEV and the FRAC to produce, transport and exhibit the final pieces. We had to translate the texts into Braille, design the layout of the exhibition, and highlight the perspectives and shadow play. Most of all, we had to decide whether we needed to allow the public to touch the works. The visually impaired co-authors argued forcefully for a ban on touching the works, determined to have a relationship of equals with the public and the space. They agreed to accompany some of their blind colleagues, but only at the opening.

‘We feel valued because we have completed something and ended up in a museum. That feels good.’ JW



06 What they said: Verena Malet, Janine William, Frédéric Baldacchino

- ‘It was hardest for Diego, as he had never worked with people with disabilities.’ VM
- ‘It made me realise that I could design and create, work with all kinds of people and not be limited to the world of disability. It brought the barriers down.’ JW
- ‘We outdid ourselves. Sometimes we worked until quite late at night.’ FB
- ‘If someone offered me another joint arts project tomorrow, I’d have the confidence to say yes, I’m up for it!’ JW.

07 Objects and shadows: what next?

A catalogue and an enhanced maquette will be produced with the FRAC PACA in 2020. On the initiative of Denis Ruiz, the person in charge at UNADEV PACA, a project catalogue is being compiled for the first quarter of 2020. The idea is to continue working with the project’s visually impaired co-authors to design a catalogue as a published work reflecting the specific features of our approach. At the same time, the FRAC has offered to work with us to develop a museographic work that could serve as a tool for mediation, making exhibitions accessible to the largest possible numbers with no distinction between sighted and visually impaired people.