



# Welcoming All Visitors: Museums, Accessibility, and Visitors with Disabilities

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The University of Michigan Museum Studies Program's series of "Working Papers in Museum Studies" presents emerging research from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, all focused on the multiple concerns of the modern museum and heritage studies field. Contributions from scholars, members of the museum profession and graduate students are represented. Many of these papers have their origins in public presentations made under the auspices of the Museum Studies Program. We gratefully thank the authors published herein for their participation.

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# Welcoming All Visitors: Museums, Accessibility, and Visitors with Disabilities

**Caroline Braden, The Henry Ford**

## Introduction

According to *Americans with Disabilities: 2010*, a report by the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 56 million Americans, or over 20 percent of the U.S. population, have disabilities. By 2015, that number had grown by 2.2 million and it is only likely to continue to rise in the years ahead (Leist, Levinsky-Raskin, and Stemler, 2015). The aging of the Baby Boom population, with approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population being over the age of 65 by the year 2030, is likely to bring an increase in the number of people with diminished eyesight, hearing, mobility, and cognition (Bienvenu, 2015). Also, the number of people affected by developmental and cognitive disorders and diseases, such as autism and Alzheimer's, is continually increasing. When family members and companions of people with disabilities are included, these overall numbers become even larger.

More than ever before, people with disabilities are living independently and going out to explore places within their communities. However, a 2012 *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) found that adults with disabilities comprised less than seven percent of all adults attending performance events or visiting art museums or galleries (summarized in Bienvenu, 2015). Although 21 percent of all adults visited an art museum or gallery in 2012, only 11 percent of adults with disabilities made such a visit. For museums, people with disabilities represent a very large potential audience that is beneficial to attract and retain.

In her book, *Programming for People with Special Needs: A Guide for Museums and Historic Sites* (2014), Katie Stringer touches upon the consequences for museums of the passage of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under ADA, museums and other public spaces were required to become accessible to all populations. This helped open the door for new audiences by providing guidelines for museums to make their spaces and program offerings more physically accessible. Increasingly, museums have been going beyond the legal obligations of

the ADA to enhance their service to all audiences, particularly focusing more recently upon serving visitors with developmental and cognitive disabilities, such as autism and dementia.

In addition, the very definition of what disability means and how to address it has changed. Whereas disability used to be defined by a medical model and a diagnosis of an individual's functional limitations, it is now viewed more as a status or group that anyone can join at any time and that can be temporary or permanent (Stringer, 2014; Leist, Levinsky-Raskin, and Stemler, 2015). This shift in thinking has brought about a focus on removing barriers to make places more accessible for and inclusive of all people, providing opportunities and education for people with a range of abilities, and encouraging people with disabilities to get involved as community members, advisors, and decision makers.

This paper provides an overview of the field of accessibility within museums—where it currently stands and the direction it appears to be going. It begins with a look at how the ADA has affected, and continues to influence, museums. This is followed by an exploration of some of the many ways that museums have tailored their exhibitions, offerings, programs, work with community groups, and staff training to be inclusive of people with different kinds of disabilities. These examples come both from museums across the country and from my own experiences enhancing accessibility at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan. The examples are then connected to three broader topics: the ongoing transformation of the museum, learning and visitors, and the value of museums for individuals and to society. The paper concludes with a look at the future of the field of accessibility within museums, particularly its potential for growth in the years ahead.

## Museums and the ADA

The Americans with Disabilities Act grew out of a disability rights movement undertaken by a disability



community comprised of people with mobility, hearing, visual, and cognitive or developmental disabilities that gained momentum after World War II (Stevens, 2015). It passed in 1990, following other related civil rights legislation. The ADA sought to guarantee equal access for people with disabilities to employment, government programs and services, public accommodations, transportation, and communications (Stevens, 2015).

Before the passage of the ADA, museums in the United States had varying levels of experience in accommodating visitors and staff with disabilities. Some museums were ahead of their time. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, for example, held talks for blind school children as early as 1913, while the Boston Children's Museum opened a landmark exhibit in 1976, called "What If You Couldn't?," that was designed to help children and their families better understand the challenges of living with a disability (Mohn, 2013; Stevens, 2015). In the 1970s and 1980s, various institutions began responding to the needs of people with disabilities by adding ramps, curb cuts, accessible parking, new signage, large print versions of labels, and other types of enrichment activities (Stevens, 2015). However, expanding accessibility and inclusion was "not always a swift and universal process" and many museums had still not adapted inclusive changes for visitors with disabilities well into the 1980s (Stevens, 2015, p. 27).

The passage of the ADA "really made people think," states Beth Ziebarth, Director of the Accessibility Program at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (Stevens, 2015, p. 27). Museums started planning, budgeting for, and implementing facility improvements. Museums also began incorporating an increasing number of accommodations and programs to enhance accessibility and inclusion for visitors with a range of abilities. Typically, these offerings went beyond the legal obligations of the ADA and represented a move towards a "greater emphasis on community, diversity, and inclusion" (Cohen-Stratynner, 2015, pp. 64-65). In the sections that follow, I explore some of these offerings and accommodations, particularly as they relate to exhibits, programming, work with community groups, and staff training.

## Universal Design and Inclusive Museum Exhibits

"Universal Design" is broadly defined as "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Hartley, 2015, p. 42). Universal Design enhances everyone's experience and encourages us to "put ourselves in another's shoes" (Snyder-Grenier,

2015, p. 3). The phrase was coined in the 1980s by architect, wheelchair user, and founder and program director of the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, Ronald Mace. He helped shift the conversation from one about meeting legally mandated requirements in the design of products and environments to one about designing products and environments that benefit everyone (Hartley, 2015).

Mace and the Center for Universal Design developed seven principles of Universal Design (Hartley, 2015, pp. 42-43). The first of these is "equitable use," the design is useful and marketable to people with a range of abilities. Second is "flexibility in use," the design accommodates a wide variety of individual preferences and abilities. Third is "simple and intuitive use," use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or concentration level. Fourth is "perceptible information," the design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's abilities. Fifth is "tolerance for error," the design minimizes possible accidental or unintended errors. Sixth is "low physical effort," the design can be used efficiently and with a minimum of fatigue. Seventh is "size and space for approach and use," appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, and use, regardless of the user's body size or mobility.

Universal Design principles have been increasingly incorporated into the design of museum exhibits. To showcase some examples and commemorate the 25th anniversary of the passage of the ADA, the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME) devoted the entire Fall 2015 issue of its publication, *Exhibitionist*, to Universal Design. Several examples emerged as models of best practice in the field.

Staff at the White House Visitor Center in Washington, D.C. took Universal Design into consideration when renovating existing space and creating a new space between 2012 and 2014 (York, 2015). Within their new space, staff aimed to ensure that visitors of all abilities could be oriented to the exhibits and locations referenced in the exhibits by incorporating multiple modes of presenting and receiving information (visual, tactile, and audio) into their interpretations of content (York, 2015).

Figure 1 on the next page shows an example of Universal Design in a display at the White House Visitor Center. In this display, a raised, tactile map of a section of the White House is accompanied by Braille and three different opportunities for tactile interaction (a piece of horsehair upholstery fabric once used on a chair in the Cross Hall, a reproduction of a bison head carved on the State Dining





Room mantel, and a reproduction of a doorknob from the North Portico Entry). While some of these features are specifically aimed at creating a more meaningful experience for visitors who are visually impaired, they actually enhance the experience for all visitors by extending and

adding to the information in labels and photographs. In this way, the exhibit takes visitors' different needs and abilities into consideration by incorporating both visual and tactile representations of content.



Figure 1: Universal Design in use in an exhibit at the White House Visitor Center (Photograph by author).

Through experiences with exhibit design, staff at the White House Visitor Center learned the importance of incorporating design decisions that impact visitors with a range of abilities into the initial concept stages of design, as well as the need to budget for multiple ways of presenting information (York, 2015). They also discovered that engaging with people with disabilities during all project phases was instrumental in ensuring that the museum was providing inclusive and meaningful experiences for all visitors (York, 2015).

Another museum that has embraced the principles of Universal Design is the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in Manhattan—a museum of historical apartments that have been restored to represent different

periods and interpret the lives of families who once lived and worked in the tenement building (Bader, 2015). Over the years, staff at the Tenement Museum has created a series of accommodations on their guided tours to better meet the needs of their visitors with disabilities (Bader, 2015). These include: having folding chairs available in the apartments, large-print versions of primary source materials, objects to touch, and training for staff members to help them use descriptive language during their tours (Bader, 2015). While these accommodations were initially provided because visitors had requested them, staff members discovered that the modifications were actually benefitting everyone, making all visitors more engaged and inclined to participate (Bader, 2015).



This understanding led staff to shift their approach from incorporating accommodations into existing tours to actually creating an entire new tour experience in 2010 that built upon the principles of Universal Design (Bader, 2015). Some of the strategies incorporated into this tour included: considering physical access and comfort from all angles; designing content to meet the needs, cognitive abilities, and interests of all visitors; providing multiple ways for visitors to engage with the space, content, and tour; and experimenting with new technology (Bader, 2015). Overall, staff discovered that using these strategies enabled them to provide a “richer and much more universally accessible tour” (Bader, 2015, p. 33) and one that is now used as an example for making museums and other sites more welcoming and relevant to all visitors.

### **Museum Offerings and Programs for People with Disabilities: An Overview**

Museum offerings and programs for people with disabilities tend to be designated for use by the following audiences: individuals with mobility limitations; individuals who are blind or partially sighted; individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing; individuals with developmental and/or learning disabilities and those on the autism spectrum; and individuals with dementia and their caregivers. The east coast, particularly New York City with its large, diverse population and vast array of museums, has been a hotbed of accessibility work in recent years. Other museums across the United States are increasingly placing more focus on accessibility initiatives.

Examples of some of the different offerings for these audiences come from research that I have conducted on museums’ websites, observations that I have made while taking part in various museums’ accessibility programs, my own experiences developing and implementing accessibility programs at The Henry Ford, conversations I have had with people working within the field, and sessions that I have attended during the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) Conference. The LEAD Conference, held each August, is the only conference specifically devoted to accessibility at cultural institutions.<sup>1</sup>

*Individuals with Mobility Limitations:* The types of offerings for individuals with mobility limitations tend to be the most thought about by museums and the most closely aligned with the ADA requirements. Offerings for these

individuals include: wheelchairs, motorized scooters, ramps, elevators, accessible seating areas in auditoriums and theaters, accessible parking spots, and curb cuts. Museums are also paying more attention to physical access by ensuring wheelchair access to physical spaces and installing exhibits and displays that accommodate people with mobility limitations.

Another offering that some museums have for individuals with mobility limitations is an accessible map. For example, maps at Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village show buildings that are fully accessible, not accessible, or have limits to accessibility. Some museums have also created ways to help people view exhibit areas or buildings that are not fully accessible. For example, a virtual tour created by the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York City that is available on its website shows photographs and 360 degree panoramic views of inaccessible areas of its ship.

*Individuals Who Are Blind or Partially Sighted:* Offerings for individuals who are blind or partially sighted include large print labels, Braille labels and maps, audio guides, and audio description (descriptive narration of visual elements). There are also a number of different tactile offerings available at museums for these individuals.

One such offering is a touch tour, in which visitors are encouraged to explore different objects—either real or replicas—through touch (which may or may not involve using gloves). Offered upon request or sometimes scheduled as a public offering, touch tours can be found at museums ranging from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to The Henry Ford. In addition to touch, such tours generally also include verbal description, in which works of art and objects are described by guides in great detail.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2 (on the following page) shows a touch tour at The Henry Ford, in which members of the National Federation of the Blind of Michigan are exploring the Rosa Parks Bus through touch. Touch tours at The Henry Ford include opportunities to touch artifacts, such as the Rosa Parks Bus and Allegheny Locomotive, as well as handheld models of artifacts (such as a Model T die-cast model and 3D printed Dymaxion House) and various historic automobiles while using gloves.





Figure 2: A touch tour at The Henry Ford (Photograph by author, courtesy of The Henry Ford).

Other offerings for individuals who are blind or partially sighted include tactile diagrams with raised dots and dashes representing outlines of artworks, TacTiles with raised versions of artworks, and objects or models of objects that can be touched and handled. Specialized classes and programs for this audience are also available. One such program offered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is called “Seeing Through Drawing.” In this program, participants create works of art inspired by objects in the museum’s collection that are described to them by sighted instructors and that they can touch.

*Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing:* For individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, museums offer closed captioning on video screens, assistive listening

devices, real-time captioning, and sign language interpretation (see Figure 3 on next page). Tours and programs may also be led by sign language interpreters and include voice interpretation, such as the case with the “An Evening of Art and ASL” program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is open to all people – regardless of whether they know sign language or not. The Whitney Museum of American Art has also developed video blogs, or vlogs, with short videos featuring deaf museum educators communicating about artworks in American Sign Language. In addition to giving people an opportunity to access the museum without being physically present, these vlogs have also become popular among people without hearing impairments (Leist, Levinsky-Raskin, and Stemler, 2015; Mohn, 2013).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3: Sign language interpretation is provided during a presentation in the Tin Shop in Greenfield Village at The Henry Ford (Photograph by author).

*Individuals with Developmental and/or Learning Disabilities and Those on the Autism Spectrum:* Offerings for individuals with developmental and/or learning disabilities can include specialized multisensory programs, hands-on explorations, and art-making classes. The Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum offers a family program for children with developmental and learning disabilities, that includes a tour of the museum and art-making activities designed to offer a fun, educational, and structured social experience for families. The New York Transit Museum also has a number of specialized programs for children with developmental and/or learning disabilities and on the autism spectrum. One of these programs, “Travel Training,” is designed to teach children about riding on the subway—an important life skill in New York City, while “Subway Sleuths” allows students on the autism spectrum who have a passion for trains and transit to share experiences and interests.

For children with autism and their families, museums are increasingly developing and providing various types of supports. To assist with pre-visit planning, for example, many museums have created social stories and other visual guides or schedules that use pictures and text to prepare children for the sights, sounds, smells, and possible tastes and things to touch that they will encounter. At The Henry Ford, we partnered with the Autism Alliance of Michigan to create such social stories for Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village, and the Ford Rouge Factory Tour, which families can access both on the websites for The Henry Ford and the Autism Alliance of Michigan.

Also for visitors with autism and their families, museums are offering “sensory-friendly” days, during which the museums may open early for these families (so spaces are less crowded and quieter) and have other supports in place. Such supports can include: reductions in loud sounds and lights; noise-cancelling headphones and earplugs; sensory friendly maps, which show areas of a museum that are qui-





et, crowded, bright, and have subdued light; and designated quiet spaces. At The Henry Ford, we held our first-ever sensory-friendly days during April 2016. In addition to all of the supports listed above, these events included hands-on activities located in quieter areas, resource tables with information for families from the Autism Alliance of Michigan and The Color of Autism Foundation, and sensory-friendly movies in our Giant Screen Experience theater, in which the lights were turned up and the sound

was turned down. Our sensory-friendly days were a result of a collaboration between The Henry Ford and other museums in the Detroit metropolitan area, with the museums working together to share resources and publicity. We also developed “sensory assistance kits” at The Henry Ford, which are available at all times at our admission desks. These kits contain noise-cancelling headphones, earplugs, and communication boards with pictures to use for communicating with someone who is nonverbal (see Figure 4).

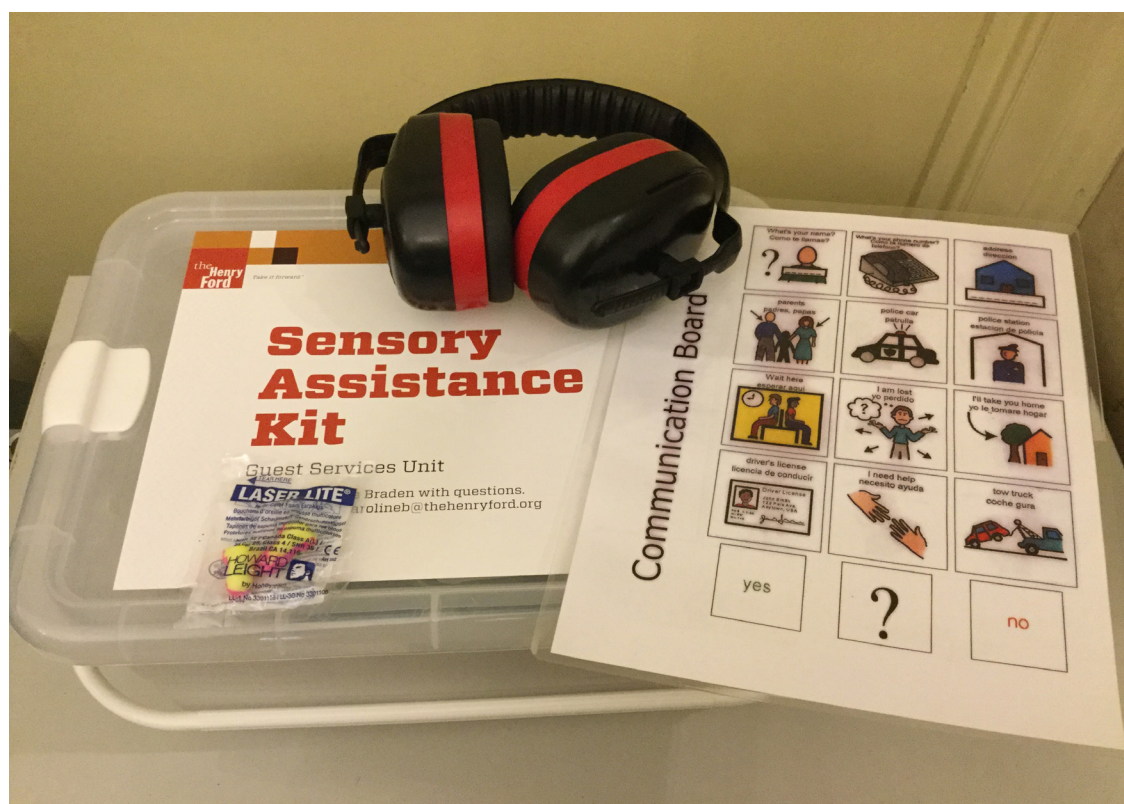


Figure 4: Sensory Assistance Kit at The Henry Ford ( Photograph by author).

Training for staff members so that they know what to expect and how to react to individuals on the autism spectrum is another step museums are taking to better serve visitors on the autism spectrum. Prior to the sensory-friendly days at The Henry Ford, for example, staff from the Autism Alliance of Michigan helped to train museum staff members to better understand the characteristics of autism and how to communicate and interact with someone on the autism spectrum.

*Individuals with Dementia and Their Caregivers:* The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City was

the first museum to create and offer a program specifically for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. “Meet Me at MoMA” has served as a model for similar programs across the country.<sup>4</sup> Such programs tend to have a theme and identify a number of artworks and objects that fit the theme. They also often involve various art-making activities. The programs tend to be inquiry- and discussion-based, with guides asking questions that foster conversation and spark memories among participants. These types of programs are spreading across the country and more museums have been developing partnerships with their local Alzheimer’s Associations in recent years.



## **Collaborating with Community Organizations and Museums**

A phrase that has been making the rounds in accessibility and disability rights communities in recent years is “nothing about us without us” (Bienvenu, 2015, p. 30). In other words, in order to ensure that offerings for different kinds of audiences are meeting audiences’ needs, museums should work with, listen to, and incorporate the desires and needs of people with disabilities into their planning and work. This can mean reaching out to organizations within the community surrounding a museum that serve people with different kinds of disabilities and attending group meetings to ask members how the museum can benefit them.

At The Henry Ford, for example, while developing and testing our touch tours, I worked with members of the National Federation of the Blind of Michigan and the Greater Detroit Agency for the Blind and Visually Impaired. These individuals provided feedback that helped to ensure that the touch tours would meet their needs and expectations. In addition, staff members from the Michigan Department of Education-Low Incidence Outreach (an organization that provides materials and resources to students with visual impairments) provided invaluable training on working with individuals who are blind or have low vision to staff members giving the touch tours at The Henry Ford. I also worked closely with the Autism Alliance of Michigan and The Color of Autism Foundation while planning and carrying out our sensory-friendly days. These organizations not only assisted with preparations for the days—such as creating social stories for Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, they also helped us with marketing, since they had many of their own contacts to whom they were able to get the word out. In addition to organizations such as these, it can also be beneficial to reach out to such places as the Hearing Loss Association of America and the Alzheimer’s Association when developing programs for these particular audiences.

Building relationships with people in the community, such as those using the services of different community groups, can help a museum lay a foundation for the creation of an advisory committee comprised of representatives from various local organizations, people with disabilities, disability advocates, and museum staff (Braden, 2015). Such a committee is useful for reviewing and providing feedback on a museum’s accessibility practices and initiatives and can also help a museum maintain an awareness of people’s needs within its community (Braden, 2015).

Cultural organizations in various cities and regions across the country have also created accessibility consortia. Such

consortia provide members with opportunities to discuss and share ideas on accessibility initiatives at their institutions and to partake in professional development. New York was the first city to have a museum access consortium. The New York Museum Access Consortium (MAC) provides a network of mutual support to help practitioners engage with people with disabilities and disability advocates to learn about, implement, and strengthen best practices for access and inclusion (Bienvenu, 2015). In addition to holding regular meetings to share ideas, MAC also has a website, on which they share helpful resources and list all of the access programs happening across the city.<sup>5</sup> Using MAC’s model, the Detroit area has also started to take steps towards creating our own access consortium. Our consortium had its roots in the collaborative work that was undertaken by local museums to put together sensory-friendly events in April 2016. Since then, the number and type of institutions involved in the consortium has grown and we have been holding periodic meetings to discuss accessibility-related projects at our institutions.

## **Training Staff to Work with People with Disabilities**

Since ensuring access and inclusion are part of everyone’s job in a museum in one way or another, training staff to work with people with disabilities should be museum-wide (see Braden, 2015). While staff may have received some disability training related to the ADA in the past, newer types of training are needed to help all staff think about the wide variety of visitors coming to their museums.

At the very least, staff members should be trained on applicable and relevant laws, while also being made aware of disability etiquette (such as using people-first language – that is, “people with disabilities,” rather than “handicapped people”). Additionally, staff members could be given opportunities to have direct experiences with people with different types of disabilities, such as a low vision training in which a person who is blind attends and gives tips or a panel session in which people with various types of disabilities share their experiences. Activities, such as moving around a space in a wheelchair or being led through a space while wearing a blindfold, can also help staff members understand what it is like to have different disabilities. Using the resources offered by museum staff members with disabilities, representatives from local organizations serving people with disabilities or special education teachers from local schools can also be helpful in training staff and raising awareness about the behaviors, desires, and needs of people with disabilities.

Ways to train staff members are extensive and varied and can range from tips sheets to hour-long training sessions to



all-day workshops. All of these can be helpful in training staff members to better understand their visitors, their museum's offerings for these visitors, and to learn how to better communicate with all visitors. Such training can also be beneficial in simply raising awareness among staff that people with disabilities are visiting their museums.

For small museums, it is beneficial for staff members to be knowledgeable about their museums' offerings for visitors with disabilities and to have strategies in mind for interacting with visitors with different types of disabilities. For larger museums, training can be more specialized to the types of roles of particular staff members. Front-line staff members, for example, should be trained to interact with and provide excellent customer service to all visitors. Staff members in the education department should have skills in creating and facilitating accessible programming for all audiences. Exhibit preparators should be provided with tools to make accessible exhibits and environments, such as those listed in the *Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design*.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, marketing staff members should know how to effectively reach out to and engage with the disability community, while staff members in development should be given tools and language to be able to speak about this with donors. In general, all staff members in both small and large museums should have some kind of disability awareness training. See "Suggested Training Resources" at the end of this paper for websites with tips and strategies.

### **Connection to the Broader Museum Field: The Ongoing Transformation of the Museum**

Traditionally, museums have existed to collect and preserve objects, exhibiting and maintaining them not only for the public, but also for use and inquiry by scholars (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Weil, 1999; Hein, 2000). Within this model, power relations within museums have been skewed towards curators, who make decisions about what may be viewed, how it may be seen, and when (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). In contrast, the public's interaction with collections has traditionally been curtailed to looking at "fully completed and immaculately presented displays" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 7). Furthermore, the public has tended to accept the idea that if certain objects are in museums, they are "not only real but represent a standard of excellence" (Cameron, 1971, p. 17).

In his now classic article, "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," Stephen Weil (1999) argued that museums are shifting from an inward focus upon the growth, care, and study of their collections to a more outward focus upon the provision of educational services to the public. According to Hilde Hein (2000, p. 2), as museums endeavor to expand their educational services and reach new audiences, they also strive to become "more democratic in their structure and more responsive at all

levels to the interests of a broad-based public." One consequence of this has been a change in exhibits from being less "linear" to more public-oriented (Hein, 2000, p. 5). In addition, museums are increasingly involving audiences in developing public programs and exhibits, evaluating programs and exhibits to understand their impact on audiences, and striving to make museum spaces more adaptable to a variety of public uses (Weil, 1999).

The growing commitment to accessibility within museums reflects this ongoing transformation of the museum. In endeavoring to expand museum content to reach all audiences—including those with a range of disabilities—museum staff members involved with accessibility and accessible exhibits attempt to make offerings and exhibits more responsive to the needs, interests, and desires of the public. Working with community organizations and listening to the needs and desires of people with disabilities can help museums to identify people's needs and work towards addressing them through their exhibits and offerings. Conducting visitor studies with such individuals can also be beneficial in evaluating whether needs are met.

The rise in touch tours and other multisensory offerings illustrates this transformation. In more traditional exhibits, with the focus placed upon labels and objects, vision is the primary sense used. As a result, people who are blind or visually impaired—and even people with other types of disabilities—would likely not get much out of the experience. By incorporating tactile and other multisensory elements (i.e., sounds or smells), however, people with visual impairments and other kinds of disabilities are able to get much more out of the overall experience, learning more about the content presented than they would have been able to otherwise. Additionally, including such features can benefit all visitors, enabling there to be multiple entry points and ways in which to discover and learn about the content presented.

Involving audiences in developing programs and exhibits, evaluating the impact of those programs and exhibits on the audiences, and adapting museum spaces to fit a wide variety of audiences and their needs and abilities are all significant to the field of accessibility. Each also illustrates a move away from the more traditional use and existence of museums toward the newer types of museums described by Weil.

### **Connection to the Broader Museum Field: Learning and Visitors**

As articulated by Falk, Dierking, and Adams in their 2006 article "Living in a Learning Society: Museums and Free-Choice Learning," in the constructivist theory of learning





that now dominates approaches to meaning-making in museums, learning is understood as being influenced by an individual's personal, socio-cultural, and physical contexts over time. In other words, learning is an active and contextualized process, dependent not only upon the content of exhibits and programs, but also upon individuals' prior knowledge, experiences, interests, abilities, and what they see, do and talk about while within the museum setting (see also Hein, 2006). From this perspective, learning in and from museums is not just about what museums wish to teach visitors, but also about the meaning the visitor makes of the museum experience (Mason, 2006). Within this "contextual model of learning," none of these three contexts is ever stable or constant (Falk, Dierking, and Adams, 2006, p. 327). Instead, all change over an individual's lifetime.

Falk, Dierking, and Adams (2006) describe each of these three contexts in more detail in their article. The personal context represents the personal and genetic history (i.e., past knowledge, interests, and beliefs) that an individual carries with him/her into a learning situation. In this respect, learning is influenced by an individual's selection and control of his/her learning. Within the socio-cultural context, museum learning is influenced by an individual's upbringing and culture, the meaning and authority an institution like a museum has within the individual's community and culture, and interactions that occur not only within the visitor's own social group while at a museum, but also with others at the museum (such as guides or performers). The physical environment (i.e., lighting, crowding, presentation, context, and the quality and quantity of information presented) also impacts visitors' learning experience in museums. Beyond these three contexts, it is also important to take into account what happens in visitors' lives and environments after their museum visit that relates to their initial experiences and plays a role in what is learned.

Personal, socio-cultural, and physical contexts influence the learning of all museum visitors and that includes visitors with different kinds of disabilities. For these visitors in particular, the physical context may have an even more significant influence upon learning than it does for visitors without disabilities. For example, wheelchair accessibility through a space—or lack thereof—can affect learning by people with mobility limitations by determining whether they can gain access to all parts of an exhibition. Furthermore, size of label text, lack of closed captioning, or lack of tactile elements could put limits on the learning done by people with visual impairments, hearing impairments, or various cognitive disabilities. Similarly, for individuals on the autism spectrum, factors such as sounds, lights, and crowds can all have significant influences upon whether these individuals are able to focus and learn within their surroundings.

When developing offerings, programs, and exhibits for all visitors, and especially for visitors with different types of

disabilities, it is important to keep these different contexts and their influences in mind. In developing exhibitions or programming, museum staff should keep in mind that that learning is highly individualized and that the museum space itself facilitates interaction and communication. For example, when creating an offering like a touch tour for people who are blind or a family program for children on the autism spectrum, if supports (such as models of objects for people who are blind or social stories for people on the autism spectrum) are put into place at a museum, they would likely have a significant impact upon the learning that happens while individuals are within the museum setting.

### **Connection to the Broader Museum Field: The Value of Museums for Individuals and to Society**

According to Stephen Weil (2002), in his article, "Museums: Can and Do They Make a Difference?" the initial attribute of a "good museum" is that it is "operated with the hope and expectation that it will make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives" (p. 61). Since the factor that makes museums truly distinctive is their objects, museums can use the "awesome power of those objects" to trigger a range of human experiences: "social, spiritual, therapeutic, aesthetic" (Weil, 2002, pp. 71, 70). Museums should offer a supportive environment for everyone, regardless of their backgrounds and needs (Museums Association, 2013).

The many offerings, programs, and exhibit techniques mentioned above illustrate that museums are indeed working in ways aimed at using their existing objects, stories, and spaces to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives—whatever their abilities or needs. Although it may take additional supports (i.e., large print labels, touch tours, social stories, etc.) for people with disabilities to be able to experience all that museums have to offer, many steps are being taken in that direction. For example, with dementia programs, museums are bringing people in and using the museums' collections and stories in ways aimed at improving the quality of these people's lives by triggering memories and fostering social interaction among participants and their caregivers.

Beyond enriching people's lives, museums also have a potential to contribute to "strong and resilient communities" by understanding how they can improve their surrounding areas and working to create better places to live (Museums Association, 2013, p. 2). This can mean museums and their audiences working closely together, thereby enabling museums to make better use of their collections and other resources to meet the needs and interests of the public.



Listening to and working with people with disabilities and the community groups serving them are very important for ensuring that museums' programs and offerings are meeting the needs and interests of their intended audiences. Additionally, by understanding their surrounding communities and the people within them, museums can contribute to stronger communities by having offerings and programs in place that better meet the needs, interests, and desires of their community members. For example, knowing that parents of children on the autism spectrum could benefit from understanding the community resources and organizations available to them, many museums are starting to offer events for children on the autism spectrum that not only have these organizations represented, but also enable parents to socialize with other parents having the same experiences. Focusing on such audiences and having programs like this helps museums contribute to stronger communities.

## Conclusion

The future for accessibility within museums looks bright. Museums are increasingly creating programs and offerings for people with disabilities. Participation at the LEAD Conference grows each year. Museum access consortia, like that in New York, are spreading to new cities and regions across the country. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) has also been placing more focus on accessibility and inclusion recently, highlighting "diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion" as one of three focus areas in its strategic plan for 2016-2020, devoting an entire issue of its *Museum* magazine to accessibility in 2015, and hosting periodic accessibility-focused webinars. With the number of people having disabilities steadily on the rise and more focus and awareness being devoted to how museums can draw in this large, significant audience, there is only reason to think that this field will continue to grow in the years ahead.



## End Notes

1. For more information about the LEAD Conference, see <http://education.kennedy-center.org/education/accessibility/lead/>.
2. For more information about touch tours at museums, see “At some museums, blind visitors can touch the art,” by Menachem Wecker ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/at-some-museums-blind-visitors-can-touch-the-art/2015/07/09/df4a5bba-fd6d-11e4-833c-a2de05b6b2a4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/at-some-museums-blind-visitors-can-touch-the-art/2015/07/09/df4a5bba-fd6d-11e4-833c-a2de05b6b2a4_story.html)) and “Philly Touch Tour guides those with low vision through the arts,” by Brandon Baker (<http://www.phillyvoice.com/philly-touch-tours-guides-low-vision-accessibility/>).
3. To learn more about and watch the Whitney’s video blogs featuring Deaf museum educators communicating in ASL, see <http://whitney.org/Education/Access/Vlogs>.
4. For more information about Meet Me at MoMA and resources for designing museum programs for people with dementia, see “The MoMA Alzheimer’s Project: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia.”
5. See <http://museumaccessconsortium.org/> for more information about the Museum Access Consortium, resources for making facilities and programs more accessible to people with disabilities, and a list of access programs happening across New York City.
6. See <https://www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED> for the *Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design*.

## Suggested Training Resources

For disability awareness training tips and strategies see:

- “Working Document of Best Practice: Tips for Making All Visitors Feel Welcome,” Museum Access Consortium, <http://museumaccessconsortium.org/resource/inclusionary-best-practices-tips-for-making-all-visitors-feel-welcome/>. (Includes general recommendations, tips, and best practices for interacting with visitors with different kinds of disabilities.)
- “Disability Equality Training Resources,” Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/learn/disabilities/resources>. (Includes general recommendations, tips, and best practices for interacting with visitors with different kinds of disabilities.)
- “Disability Awareness Training,” Art Beyond Sight, <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/dat-accessibility-skills.shtml>. (Includes strategies and tips for communicating and interacting with people with different kinds of disabilities.)





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