



# An Accessibility Adventure: Teaching and Learning Exhibition Design Through the Lens of Disability Studies

by Fran Osborne, E.M. Luby, and Christine Fogarty

The imminent arrival of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 2015 is a good time to pause and reflect upon how effective the museum profession has been in improving access to exhibitions and exhibit content. More positions are being created for museum staff specializing in access, and much progress has been made at large institutions. But is it enough? Can we go further and begin to put access at the heart of exhibition design and planning?

## Exploring the Complexities of Designing for Accessibility

We wanted to share some of the findings about access and exhibitions that emerged from preparations to teach a graduate exhibition design class in the fall of 2014 at San Francisco State University (SFSU). There is so much more to learn than practitioner literature might suggest, and in order to best serve our students, we ourselves had to go deeper into the disability discourse.

When disability studies scholars want to introduce new ways of relating to disability culture, they often introduce the subject of “universal design” to suggest what is possible in the built environment. Universal design is generally defined as the design of products and spaces for use by the widest possible range of people. The notion of “competing accommodations” is a part of universal design and reveals the complexity of disability access in practice. The simple curb cut is an example of both. Developed to accommodate wheelchair riders, curb cuts benefit many users such as those pushing strollers or rolling luggage, but can also be problematic for

blind people unless delineated by a bumpy, raised surface.

Disability studies scholars and contemporary curators who focus on disability content and methodologies have demonstrated the potential of using access as a dynamic new cultural practice (Kudlick and Schweik, 2014; Cachia, 2013; Kleege, 2013). They encourage us to discard the medical model of disability and approach access as a far more complex endeavor than simply complying with a building code. Disability is contextual and can change as the accessibility of an environment changes. The social model of disability argues that there is delight to be found in non-standard approaches, that there is significant value in the interdependency of disability, and perhaps of greatest interest to designers, that disability can be a creative and generative force.

Working closely with the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability (LI) at SFSU, we made preparations for teaching a 16-week postgraduate class on exhibit design and planning as part of the Master of Arts Program in Museum Studies. We want to provide students with a solid historical and theoretical foundation, and also find out what is possible for them after being introduced to the contemporary and critical discourse of disability studies. If access issues are not a priority at the conceptual stage of exhibition design and planning, they tend to fall by the wayside as budgetary and time pressures gather momentum. Opportunities to experiment that may enrich the exhibition objectives and bring in a wider audience can easily fade away

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A tactile version of this 1973 Berkeley City map is being made for the exhibition *Patient No More! People with Disabilities Securing Civil Rights*. Numbered dots indicate the location of planned curb cuts or wheelchair ramps. Map courtesy of the City of Berkeley, California.

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if the staff charged with responsibility for access cannot call the shots. We want to empower museum professionals who are interested in access to bring solid scholarship and research experience into the museum workplace and allow them to take a more activist role, while still meeting established standards. Indeed, we can all speculate about the exciting approaches that might arise if access coordinators were asked to lead the design process for a change.

### **Working with Experts and Scholars on Disability Issues**

Taking advantage of the pioneering work, as well as the proximity and encouragement of the staff at the LI, we developed an approach to teaching access issues that is not only rigorous, but designed with an “adventurous spirit” that seeks to fundamentally reframe museum approaches to exhibit design and planning.

The LI is a new organization on campus;

as both cultural center and think tank, it is leading exciting projects at the intersection of disability history, the arts, education, and policy that pairs SFSU students and faculty with various local communities. One important project is a history exhibition at the heart of the West Coast disability community, at the Ed Roberts Center in Berkeley, California. The exhibition will open in July 2015 to coincide with the ADA anniversary. The project is called *Patient No More! People with Disabilities Securing Civil Rights*, and presents the story of the month-long San Francisco sit-in to pressure the Carter administration of 1977 into signing the regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This law granted civil rights for people with disabilities for the first time.

Museum Studies graduate students will be working on the traveling component of *Patient No More!* and feeding their research into the final design,

...disability can be a creative and generative force.

programming, and logistics before the show begins its journey in the fall of 2015. The class will include standard lectures and visits, as well as a structured program of prototyping and evaluating exhibit elements. Students in the Spring Education class have been working with the visitor's experience from an accessibility standpoint and considering how this may benefit all audiences. In the exhibition class we will include direct consultation and feedback sessions with some of the more forthright members of the disability rights community. Our intention is that this will help students to begin combining theory and practice, and at the same time "get it" about disability.

### Researching Best Practices

Published sources of guidance go a long way in outlining best practices and the range of accommodations that might reasonably be expected from a public venue. For example, the *Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Design* (1996) is a very comprehensive resource and available as a PDF online, while the American Alliance of Museums' *Everyone Welcome: The Americans With Disabilities Act and Museums* (1998) is only available online to AAM members. Publications by the National Park Service such as *Programmatic Accessibility Guidelines for National Park Service Interpretive Media* (2012) are also very useful in suggesting the nuanced approaches that need to be considered and are also available online in PDF format. *Curator* devoted a whole issue to accessibility in its July 2013 issue, and some individual articles in the *Exhibitionist* are useful. However, what can be very hard to extrapolate from readings alone are the specific, lived experiences of disabled people as they

encounter and interact with the museum.

### Workshops and Conversations with Disability Advisors

An essential idea for disability studies and activists, as well as for the Independent Living Movement is that of self-advocacy and the importance of honoring the practice of "nothing about us without us." If there are no staff members with a disability, then consultation is even more important.

### Discoveries from the workshop

From a formative evaluation workshop organized by the LI for *Patient No More!* we discovered a great deal that may be of interest. For instance, wheelchair riders often like to make visits with friends. Some museum display spaces do not work well for two wheelchair riders, positioned side by side, who may want to discuss and engage with an exhibit together.

### Provision for blind people

Many vision impaired or blind people rarely go to museums because there is so little to entice them into making a trip. Exhibitions are often ocular-centric, or to put it simply, tend to rely on vision alone for delivering content.

While recent developments in digital technology have been important for many blind people who use smart phones to unlock resources or navigate spaces and journeys, people with visual impairments still need audio descriptions for images and video content. In addition, the ownership of a smart phone is a privilege not open to all. The implications for museums are many, and go far beyond ensuring that all online images have alt tags, so that search engines can find them

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## What if contemporary artists provided audio-described files for each work they produced?

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and screen readers can access them for blind or visually impaired users. Conversations with some community and humanities advisors suggest that there are other creative ways to produce audio descriptions. The Smithsonian has developed an open source app for crowd-sourced audio descriptions that others can use (Ziebhart & Proctor, 2013). Disability is not always of great interest to the general tech industry but perhaps by engaging with it in the museum new collaborations are possible. How can we involve digital innovators in creating, for instance, new apps and approaches if disability is not a central curatorial question?

### **Audio description**

Can we push the question still further? What would an audio description of an archive photograph by the original photographer add? What if contemporary artists provided audio-described files for each work they produced, as suggested by curator Amanda Cachia (2003)? Could there be choices of description and different voices available? Exploring these opportunities need not add to the budget or workload if they can become integral to the design and planning process. Such inclusive practices can surely re-invigorate tired and habitual planning and design methodologies, and create new content and a richer context for everyone.

Georgina Kleege suggests that the experience of blind or vision impaired people investigating the haptic qualities of objects and sculptures (often only possible by appointment or on “special” disability access days) could be recorded for the benefit of a wider public. Such provision shifts the emphasis away from

reliance upon sight to an unfamiliar place and as Kleege suggests, has the potential to unlock an artwork or object for other visitors and aid their understanding in a way that a bland text label never could (2013).

Members of the LI workshop also discussed the value of tactile photographs and images. While line images derived from original art or schematic plans are useful, tactile photographs fall short because they are abstractions of an image that is already an abstraction. Tactile elements have to bring something of value to the experience. We noted that blind visitors also appreciate audio descriptions for specific details within a tactile model or plan.

### **Designing for Access Affects Every Aspect of Exhibition Design**

A major complaint from many visitors with disabilities (and often those over 50) is that the text on exhibit labels is often far too small for the average visitor to read easily in a dim gallery space. While this might be no surprise, it also reminds us of our reliance upon the object label as a communication vehicle. Perhaps our dependence upon established best practices has locked us into a dull and predictable treadmill. For instance, when can we experiment with object labels using large text at 36pt or even 48pt so that many more people can read them easily, and who has the authority to try this out? And again, what if the access coordinator led the design process?

We believe that the use of language in the museum is a helpful place to begin thinking about the awareness access coordinators can bring into their work.



A small break-out group at the accessibility workshop discusses the visitor experience and the challenge of competing accommodations. Photo courtesy of Anthony Tusler.

Documents that encourage sensitivity such as *Disability Etiquette* produced by the United Spinal Association describe preferred terms and the ways that language has stigmatized and sidelined people in the past. At the same time, however, the use of “people first” language is problematic for some in the autism community who may prefer to identify as “autistic” rather than a “person with autism,” and members of the Deaf community, who do not consider deafness a disability and prefer to be called deaf rather than “a person with deafness.”

Another common issue for Deaf visitors to museums is the availability of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and captioned video; and although ASL tours can be booked at many institutions, this need for advance planning makes spontaneous visits well nigh impossible. Similarly, we discovered that captioned video is more effective if accompanied by an inset screen showing ASL signing of the voice track, because it provides the nuances of language that text alone cannot do.

Designing exhibits for a range of disabilities can create a set of constraints

that forces the design team to work in a somewhat uncomfortable but highly productive zone. Despite the fact that the concepts of universal or inclusive design are now well known and understood, there are still misconceptions and apprehension about how best to “do” access. If we are to produce access specialists who are both cognizant of the nuanced and current critiques of museum practice and clued into the new scholarship and growing field of disability studies, we need to include these topics in the curriculum and provide more opportunities to research and engage with them in practice.

Planning for our course has led us to collaborations with disability organizations, the identification of current research on the topic, conversations with the disability community, and the exploration of current best practices in exhibition design for accessibility. All of these resources will be combined into our fall 2014 course, which at the time of writing is still before us. We plan to document and publish further on our experiences and explorations with teaching an approach to exhibition design that places accessibility at its center. ✨

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