

## What Makes an Exhibition Inclusive?

### A 20-Year Conversation about Universal Design

by Clare Brown and Janice Majewski

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Those of us who helped build and apply the concept of Universal Design in the 1970s and 1980s, when in our thirties, are now in the Boomer Bracket. We're experiencing pragmatically what we advocated for theoretically. While some of us have disabilities, others simply notice that reading in low light, comprehending ambient audio, and weaving through acres of text panels and pedestals are a little more difficult. We've picked up three-foot high children who cannot see over barriers and explained text-heavy exhibits to those who can't read. We've watched our parents struggle with uncaptioned videos and seating that defies comfort and the ability to rise gracefully. And we've discovered how easy it is to trip over features that extend into the visitor path and to hit our heads on objects that protrude unpredictably from the walls. None of us, however, wants to give up going to museums. A colleague once said that it wasn't necessary to advocate vigorously for accessible exhibitions— just find older designers. He was right, but what we really need now are designers who recognize that variation in ability is a natural part of our museum audience's experience.

Late last year, Clare Brown and I began a collaboration to create six exhibitions for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The exhibitions were being developed for the Kennedy Center-Smithsonian 25/40 Celebration, honoring the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of VSA (formerly called Very Special Arts, begun by Jean Kennedy Smith to provide quality arts and education programming for people with disabilities of all ages

around the world). I knew Clare well from when she interned with the Smithsonian's Accessibility Program and I was its director in the mid-1990s. Almost 20 years later, we reunited as a team for this project: I as the contract project manager for all of the exhibitions, and Clare as professor in the Corcoran-GWU Master of Arts in Exhibition Design program, along with a group of her DesignCorps graduate students.

These were to be exhibitions on the passage of the ADA and on the work and lives of artists with disabilities. There was no doubt that these exhibits had to be models of Universal Design. Did our thinking on what constitutes a universally designed exhibition still align? Could we make these six universally designed exhibitions happen under a very tight timeline, with curators in four geographical locations and exhibition design students with limited practical experience?

The ADA became law in 1990 and went into effect in 1992. Accessible exhibition design was in its infancy. The Smithsonian Accessibility Program had just published the *Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design* (SGAED) in collaboration with all of the Smithsonian's exhibition departments, an effort to establish with Smithsonian designers a common meaning of accessible exhibition design. What we didn't realize then was that our guidelines were actually moving exhibition designers to think not only of minimum accessibility standards but of more inclusive design that worked better for museum audiences made up of diverse family groups, different age groups, and people of varied abilities.

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When Clare and I came back together to work this year, we wondered aloud just how much had actually changed during these 20 years. We shared notes and gossip about designers who still refused to consider access, let alone Universal Design; how some who had gone through formative personal experiences now understood the value of inclusion and practiced design in new ways; how the addition of hi-tech and high stimuli made inclusive design more challenging; and how the field had gone forward in some ways and backwards in others. Where were we then? Where are we now?

**Jan: As a student in George Washington University's museum studies program in the 1990s, what brought you to an internship with the Smithsonian's Accessibility Program?**

Clare: Well, I came to museum studies with an undergraduate degree in cultural anthropology and art, paired with a lot of work in theater production design. I didn't know early on that I wanted to become an exhibition designer, but I was very interested in how humans relate to each other and how humans relate to information through narratives in physical spaces. Accessibility was especially intriguing to me because of the direct focus on the need to acknowledge human variation that others had not yet fully addressed. I quickly recognized that accessibility posed some exciting challenges in design.

**Jan: Many designers still balk at the idea of making exhibitions accessible by meeting minimum standards, never mind designing inclusively. They see it as a constraint on**

**their creativity. How did you feel about that when you began your career as an exhibition designer?**

Clare: Yes, many designers choose not to embrace the challenges of accessibility or Universal Design. They usually cite lack of budget, lack of time, or how they perceive it as a barrier to creative vision. Some designers think of accessibility as too prescriptive. Or they think of it simply as a building code that they need to work around instead of embracing accessibility as a creative design strategy used to make exhibitions work better for visitors.

When I was just starting out as a young designer, I was somewhat alone in my approach of embracing accessibility in my design process. Back then, museum staff members were even more siloed than they are now, but I found that my best allies in considering the holistic visitor experience were the museum educators. Even when the exhibition development process did not readily encourage open exchange between designers and educators, I made it a priority to work directly with museum educators throughout my design process.

**Jan: Back in the early 1980s, when museums were just beginning to address access for visitors with disabilities, those of us working in the field realized quickly that if you make exhibitions accessible to individuals with disabilities, you make them better for a broad range of people with and without disabilities. We started thinking about going beyond accessible design to encompass the needs of older adults, individuals for whom English was not their primary language, and people who had little experience visiting museums, for whatever reason. If we could**

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**reach all of those audiences with a more inclusive design, we would, in fact, save money, time, and creative energy. What do you think exhibition designers need to understand in order to accept accessibility and a more human-centered design approach?**

Clare: Human-centered design is grounded in ethnographic methodology. What I mean is that human-centered design has a strong focus on researching humans—much in the same ways that ethnographers study human cultures. This includes observing people, talking to people, and becoming part of a community of people, all to gain the best possible understanding of what the real challenges are and how to develop solutions to those challenges that are truly useful and productive. When it comes to accessibility, reading a book of accessibility guidelines is never a substitute for actually being in an exhibition gallery with people who have disabilities. Understanding the human factors in any given situation is a far more powerful way to generate good design.

**Jan: So often it takes a personal connection with disability before designers and others recognize the importance of accessibility. Minus personal experience, getting out into museums and learning from visitors is extremely valuable. Many exhibitions today still don't work for people with disabilities and for older adults. Labels continue to have low-contrast, print-on-print designs that are difficult to read by people with vision loss, brain-based disorders, and increased age. Videos are not captioned for people who are deaf or hard of hearing; interactives often use touchscreens that are inaccessible**

**to people who are blind and out of reach of people who use wheelchairs. Why is that?**

Clare: Most exhibitions are created under less than ideal circumstances for true creativity and true Universal Design. Working with the real constraints of real people is a messy business that requires time and energy. When crunched for time and money, accessibility is often overlooked. Although, I should clarify that accessibility doesn't have to be expensive or time consuming, especially if it is part of the creative process from the outset of any given project.

**Jan: How do you make the tough choices when the reality of the exhibition process seems in conflict with inclusive design? How do you convince the client that integrated accessibility is required and that Universal Design is a best-practice choice and not an add-on?**

Clare: Every exhibition team and every client should have goals for what they want the exhibition to do—and meeting the needs of the audience should be at the top of the list. It is the role of the designer to constantly remind the team or client of their original goal(s) and their audience(s), and to simultaneously demonstrate ways in which the design can accomplish those goals. The designer should prove, with well-thought-out designs, how effectively and attractively an exhibition can be developed according to Universal Design principles. Choices in design tend to be less tough when you are able to focus on the goals and develop informed strategies to accomplish those goals.

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**Jan: What do you teach your students about setting goals and using human-centered design at the core of their work?**

Clare: One of the hidden roles of the designer on an exhibition team is not only responding to the goals of the project, but also helping the client or team to evaluate and shape their goals. Even if the team or client comes to the first meeting with a declared set of goals for the project, it is the designer’s role to dig deeply into those goals to understand why they exist and where they are coming from. When the designer has a deep understanding of the reasoning behind a project it is much easier to develop a design that actually works for the audience. I teach my students methods of engaging with a client or exhibition team to deconstruct the goals and put them back together again in ways that provide direction to the design of the exhibition. At the core, it is about asking “Why?” again and again.

Once the designer and the team or client understand the core goals, the next step is to learn about the audience. This is where the human-centered design comes in. One of the many methods I teach my students is visitor tracking: monitoring and documenting the movement of people within an exhibition, noting how they really engage with the content, the space, and with each other. This practice helps students understand that while designers intend exhibitions to be used in certain ways, real people often subvert those intentions.

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floor plans that simply “fit all the objects in.” For example, using Universal Design principles, we would consider the length and complexity of the path of travel through the space; strategic locations for seating equipped with arms and backs so that people can rest and then stand up again easily; an alternate route out of the exhibition at a midpoint, for people who are tired or overwhelmed by the stimuli; and limitations on changes in floor level. The concept of Universal Design, in which all people benefit from good, informed design, is a more realistic approach when making human-centered design choices.

Our joint conclusion? Museums still have a long way to go before universally designed exhibitions are commonplace. “Form” too often overrides “function.” As our colleague said decades ago, we need older designers who recognize and address their own and their peers’ variation in abilities. But more importantly, we need young, innovative, and assertive designers who will step out and move the field forward by 1) recognizing that we all want museum audiences who are gloriously diverse so that museums can remain alive and relevant; and 2) designing creatively and respectfully so that these diverse audiences will be amazed, delighted, and able to learn from the exhibitions.

And, our Kennedy Center exhibitions? They ended up differently than planned, but an audience of disability rights activists and Kennedy Center patrons and tourists who knew nothing about the ADA-VSA anniversaries were equally amazed, delighted, and accommodated by the exhibitions. We, the curators, and the students had met our goal. ✨

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