

A photograph of a person in a wheelchair moving away from the viewer down a dirt path in a lush forest. The path is covered in brown leaves and is flanked by dense green ferns and trees. In the distance, another person can be seen walking on the path. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

The Accessible Museum

Model programs of accessibility for
disabled and older people

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



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The Accessible Museum

Model Programs of Accessibility for Disabled and Older People

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Cover: A visitor enjoys the beautiful Bloedel Reserve
Frontis: Guests chat on the deck at the Visitors Center

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Foreword

Museums across the country are working to make their collections more available to older adults and people who have various kinds of disabilities. Federal and state laws, including Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, have accelerated the timetable for the transition in national attitudes and actions. The focus is inclusion: to open up existing programs and services and to reach out to underserved communities in ways that promote human dignity.

Museum professionals are now realizing that fully accessible facilities and exhibitions are making museums safer, more comfortable, and more meaningful for everyone. Ramps and elevators reduce accidents, accommodate baby carriages and carts, and are preferred by many who do not have disabilities. Large-print labeling with good contrast is meant to accommodate everyone. Captioned film and video heighten reading skills for children and foreign visitors; and exhibits presented at a height accessible to those who use wheelchairs are appreciated by adults of short stature and children as well.

This publication is designed to encourage and assist you in making your facilities and programs available to older Americans and individuals with disabilities whether they be staff, volunteers, creators, or audiences. The diverse museums profiled in this book are opening doors in ways that promote independence and dignity, and develop new and larger audiences. Each program confirms how close communication with disabled and older constituents increases accessibility in the most economical, efficient, and expedient manner. The selected bibliography provides resources to assist this process. Most important, this book demonstrates full inclusion of older adults and individuals with disabilities, not only in the featured profiles, but in the production of the book as panelists, writers, and photographers.

The creation of this unique book grew out of an agreement between the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In September 1986, the agencies agreed to work together “to advance the Federal agencies’ common goal—to encourage and assist museums in making their collections and activities available to disabled people as mandated by Federal law.”

Initially, the Endowment’s Special Constituencies Office worked with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art (NMAA) to organize a nine-member advisory committee, composed of consumers with disabilities, accessibility experts, and staff to assist the NMAA in composing its National Survey of Accessibility in Museums that was funded by the Smithsonian Institution. This detailed survey was sent to 2,000 museums throughout the country, and 40 percent responded. This research, which was published in May 1989, uncovered a broad spectrum of exciting projects

and resources. It not only provided the initial research for this book, but reinforced the need for such a publication. Subsequently, the Arts Endowment developed cooperative agreements with NMAA to compose the selected bibliography and the American Association of Museums to produce *The Accessible Museum*, which were jointly funded by NEA and IMS. AAM worked with the two agencies to convene a nine-member panel on November 29, 1990, which recommended the models documented in this publication out of a pool of 61 museums.

I hope *The Accessible Museum* will motivate readers to look more carefully at how they meet the needs of their older and disabled staff, volunteers, and visitors; to seek their advice in discovering where gaps exist; and to make any needed improvements so that every American may have the opportunity to experience this nation's cultural richness.

—Daphne Wood Murray, Deputy Chairman for Public Partnership, NEA

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We extend our appreciation to the members of the Advisory Committee for the National Survey of Accessibility in Museums in the United States, conducted by the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution: Judith O'Sullivan, Margaret Cogswell, National Museum of American Art; Jan Majewski, Smithsonian Institution; Priscilla McCutcheon, Boulder, Colo.; Mary Ellen Munley, George Washington University; Mary Jane Owen, Disability Focus, Inc.; Margaret E. Porter, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services; Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl, Gallaudet University; Paula Terry, NEA; and Gail Weigl, Corcoran School of Art. For serving as chair of the selection panel, we thank Charles K. Steiner, Art Museum, Princeton University, and panelists Kathy Ball, Lafayette Natural History Museum and Planetarium; Ray Bloomer, Sagamore Hill National Historic Site; Karen Dummer, Children's Museum, St. Paul, Minn.; Lana Grant, Sac and Fox Library; Janet Kamien, Field Museum of Natural History; Dianne Pilgrim, Cooper-Hewitt, National Museum of Design; Beth Rudolph, Very Special Arts, New Mexico; and Deborah Sonnenstrahl.

At AAM we acknowledge the work of Kathy Dwyer Southern and Bill Anderson, and the research efforts of Nancy Hayward.

Preface

DIANNE PILGRIM



he publication of *The Accessible Museum* is an important achievement for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Institute of Museum Services, and the American Association of Museums. By directly addressing the specific issues of accessibility for museum audiences, the NEA and AAM endorse what we know to be at the core of all museums: they are for everyone. This simple declaration, an element of every public museum's mission, is one that is all too often overlooked. Barriers of all kinds—intellectual, social, cultural, and physical—prevent museums from fulfilling their potential as educational and cultural centers.

As a museum director with a physical disability, I observe these barriers and their impact from a unique perspective. I am concerned both with making the content and presentation of museum exhibitions accessible to the widest possible audience and ensuring physical access to the museum facility for each visitor. From the vantage point of my profession, my concern is that both of these issues be successfully addressed. But as I enter my own place of work in a wheelchair, via the back door, never having been able to mount the stairs leading to the museum's front door, I have a special interest in accessibility, particularly as it relates to the museum environment. This concern is not just about physical access, but it is about creating exhibitions and educational programs that are inclusive for people with visual and hearing impairments as well as learning disabilities.

I believe it is the combination of physical accommodation and mutual respect that is the important factor in making museums accessible. It is not enough to adhere to codes and requirements of door widths or TT (Telephone Texts for hearing impaired people). These architectural changes and improvements plus adaptive devices facilitate movement in a building and make the programs accessible to a wide audience, but more than the physical site must be changed. Our attitudes

must be changed so that accommodation does not come only to equal inconvenience. Just because there's a ramp to the door, or a grab bar in the lavatory doesn't mean that the problems of accessibility have been solved. From museum guards to tour guides, curators to administrators, *all* of the public must be treated with dignity, courtesy, and human understanding. Our attitude must change to view the public as just that: a group of diverse people with various needs, concerns, abilities, and limitations.

My career in museums developed in a traditional manner—a love for the subject and eventually a desire to help chart the direction of an institution dedicated to design. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1978 and have used a wheelchair for the past six years. During this time the word “accessibility” has taken on new meaning. It is not good enough for something to be just beautiful, it must function well also. Good design is about creative problem solving. We all need to be better designers when it comes to organizing museum exhibitions and educational programs.

This is a critical message. Our museums of art, design, science, and history should be accessible to everyone. The truth is that what is being done in the name of accessibility for persons with disabilities will make everyone's daily life easier. As our population ages, we will all come to appreciate the changes that the Americans with Disabilities Act requires.

Some of the most impressive programs in this book are the ones that are inclusive. Rather than devising projects for people with special needs (i.e. older people, visually impaired individuals, etc.), educational programs should speak to multiple voices, concerns, needs, and interests.

As we begin to see advocacy result in physical changes at our local supermarket, on the sidewalks, and in museums, we must also work to broach the other side of the question. We must make our attitude one of acceptance and respect. It is only with alteration and attitude that accessibility can be truly successful.

*Dianne Pilgrim is director of Cooper-Hewitt Museum,
The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, New York.*



Introduction

CHARLES K. STEINER



he Accessible Museum profiles nineteen American museums with relative availability to disabled people. It is intended to encourage museums to devise similarly creative ways to make their collections meaningful to a constituency that has not heretofore had the opportunity to take advantage of cultural offerings, especially those of museums. The goal of this particular essay is to lead the reader to approach the issues surrounding accessibility for disabled people in museums as a discipline or field of study, rather than as a prescribed and limited set of precepts required by law.

As a premise, the notion of accessibility for disabled people is still considered by some to be a radical idea: one can cite various news items on the alteration of mass transit (e.g., kneeling buses, elevators in subways) to substantiate the view that accessibility for disabled people is perceived as extreme or fanatic. This “radical idea” was legislated into federal law by the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and its principles broadened and further articulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The often cited and critical portion of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 says: “No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States . . . shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

There are approximately 43 million disabled persons in the United States; it is estimated that one in five Americans have one or more impairments. The Arts Endowment’s 504 Regulations define disabled persons as “any person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment.” In addi-

Access to collections for disabled visitors fulfills the museum’s democratic mandate.

tion to widely introducing the concept of equal rights (including equal opportunity in employment) for disabled people, 504's other precepts include encouraging consultation with disabled persons (i.e., the consumers) in developing viable solutions to accessibility problems, and requiring institutions receiving federal support to prepare both a self-evaluation and a transition plan summarizing their current level of accessibility, and plans for improvement. While the legislation was not altogether successful, it did influence many museums, including those featured in this book, to consider disabled people as a viable potential audience and to explore various accommodations to make the constituency more comfortable in a museum setting. The Americans with Disabilities Act broadens the federal antidiscrimination mandate to all public services including public transportation, all public accommodations, including museums, and telecommunications. No longer may a museum opt to forego federal funding to avoid the steps or costs associated with making itself accessible to people with various disabilities.

The use of the term "disabled," while convenient as an abbreviation, is misleading because it implies a homogeneous subgroup of humanity. Everyone's disability is different and accessibility solutions that work for one person may not work for another. Further, there is sometimes an alienation between groups of disabled people such that a consensus on anything is impossible. The overlap between the population labeled as disabled and those labeled as senior citizens has always been sensitive; many older adults do not wish to identify themselves as disabled. Thus, there is frequently a schism between those over and those under 65 in self-perception; older adults who deny their physical limitations and the young who have, as the female lead in the Broadway hit *Children of a Lesser God*, a pride in their identity as "disabled."

Even within disability groups, there is frequently so much division that those who wish to deliver services to disabled individuals, like museums, have a very unclear focus. Among people who are deaf, there are those who communicate by sign language and those who won't; among blind people, there are those who support sheltered workshops and those who don't. There is a very great disassociation between disabled people who do and do not have neurological impairments, especially mental retardation. So frequently have the minds of people with physical limitations (blind, deaf, mobility impaired) been questioned, that they go to extraordinary lengths to disassociate themselves from people with mental disabilities. The British Broadcasting Company radio used to air a radio program called "Does He Take Sugar?" The title memorialized the waiter who asks a blind person's sighted escort how the blind person would like his tea, rather than the blind consumer himself.

Museum services for disabled people are not new, nor dependent on law. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has been serving such groups since 1913, when

Robert W. de Forest, Secretary of the Metropolitan Museum, offered two lectures on American sculpture and musical instruments, complete with touchable objects and braille. There are also records of the museum's "story hour for physically handicapped children" in 1924–25, and "lip reading lectures" in 1926. In the context of these Metropolitan Museum programs, what is really so new about the concept of museum accessibility for disabled people, and why has it taken all of us, disabled consumers and museum staff alike, so long to establish what has been popularly referred to as "cultural access"?

One answer is that the word "access" or "accessibility" has been overused and its meaning has become ambiguous in general usage. The term is also so closely associated with the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 that its underlying goal of integration has been lost by many. In turn, the need to comply with the law has sometimes eclipsed the philosophical and educational foundation for mixing disabled people into our society, including museums. (If asked to justify a particular program or architectural renovation, many museum professionals will answer "legal requirements" or "the law," without really knowing which law or any other legal specifications.) The mythic absoluteness associated with 504, which in fact proved to be so absolute that it required an additional piece of federal legislation—the ADA—precluded development of cultural access for disabled people as a discipline. Whereas art historians study the history of art or natural history curators study biology or botany and continue to do so throughout their careers in museums, few administrators expediting cultural access for disabled people in museums have reviewed anything but the most cursory surveys of solutions by other institutions. They may not have time to take the additional responsibility of 504 or ADA compliance, and, once more, they may not be particularly interested in the problem. Thus, the fiction of a prescribed solution is attractive. It also explains why, over the years, museums keep repeating the same mistakes and why the field of museum accessibility, or whatever we wish to call it, has moved forward ever so slowly—too slowly given the number of disabled people in the United States.

It is time to inject the field with new vocabulary, to evaluate methodology, to re-examine goals. Such a review should begin as it would in any other field, with a survey of the literature. Over the years, there have been influential books published by American and foreign museums or museum-related service organizations, authored by seminal figures in our discipline. To ensure improvement on past programs and progress in accessibility, these and other published volumes must be reviewed before proceeding.

One particularly important book is *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services* (1972) by Wolf Wolfensberger because it provides theoretical guidance in in-

tegrating disabled people into society from the point of view of institutions, mostly residential, that care for human beings. Instead of concentrating on aesthetic “concessions” that must be made to make services available to disabled people (e.g., lowering pedestals, enlarging typeface, etc.), the book concentrates on overall strategies for moving particular individuals from cloistered to less protective environments and lifestyles. In this author’s view, it is unfortunate that so much of the literature aimed at accessibility in museums has stressed concessions, what museum staff often perceive as aesthetically negative changes. While the justification “everyone benefits” is always included in these rationalizations, the argument has not been convincing. Wolfensberger argues for integrating disabled people into society, but from a very different point of view, and in so doing, is of great help to those of us trying to devise strategies for incorporating disabled people into the museum-going public. So frequently, museums install a ramp or special program, but lack consistent overall accessibility to the museum.

Wolfensberger defines normalization as the “utilization of means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible.” He goes on to add:

“The normalization principle as stated is deceptively simple. Many individuals will agree to it whole-heartedly, while lacking awareness of even the most immediate and major corollaries and implications. Indeed, many human managers endorse the principle readily while engaging in practices quite opposed to it—without being aware of this discordance until the implications are spelled out. Then a manager may find himself in a very painful dilemma, endorsing simultaneously a principle, as well as practices opposed to it.”

A prime example, in some museums, of the conflict between principle and practice is the appointment of a disabled person to teach other disabled individuals rather than nondisabled visitors in the public galleries. The principle of normalization would encourage the integration of disabled museum employees in jobs other than those which have exclusive contact with disabled visitors. Similarly, how would the normalization principle apply to special touch exhibitions of art in museums which do not normally allow touching? This is not to say that museums shouldn’t hire disabled teachers or organize touch exhibitions; Wolfensberger emphasizes the importance of criteria and values in the decision to “normalize.” The goals surrounding accessibility need to be clarified and museums must recognize their own biases as a profession in influencing the course of the discipline.

Is the issue before us accessibility, integration, and equality in a legal and a theoretical sense, or is it quality programming and contact with museum collections? A

conflict arises here between these concepts from the museum's point of view. Most of us are concerned with bringing museum collections and disabled people closer together. At the same time, it is a fact that our museums have grown to become more than collections-centered institutions. Many museums have gift shops, parking lots, rest rooms, and restaurants, as well as sponsor parties and receptions. Many museum visitors, both able-bodied and disabled, come to museums expressly to take advantage of these services rather than to view the collections. Indeed, there is a fundamentally false assumption being made as a premise for many programs that are accessible to disabled people: that disabled people necessarily want to have contact with museum collections. As museum professionals, we only assume this premise because it is in the self-interest of museum professionals to do so; we do not allow disabled citizens the same rights of disinterest that we allow other visitors. Therefore, our discipline of accessibility has two subfields of study: facilitating integration in compliance with legislation (e.g., making buildings architecturally accessible and providing comparable services in an accessible location) and encouraging disabled people to use, enjoy, and learn from museum collections.

These, however, can be mutually exclusive ideas. To date, many museums have been using a museum program, often *one* museum program, such as a touch exhibition or the installation of a ramp, as a standard bearer or substitute solution to 504/ADA compliance. This has presented the government and the consumer with a quandary: on the one hand, it is heartening to see museums finally make a substantive gesture toward disabled audiences. But by condoning or complimenting the effort, are the consumer and government sanctioning the postponement of a necessary, broader, museum action toward accessibility? A corollary to this quandary is from the perspective of the museum professional. Suppose a curator believes the primary business of museums is collections-oriented and that the first aim of accessibility should be facilitating contact with the collections to the point of excluding the architectural alteration of gift shops or museum restaurants. Accessibility cannot be approached selectively but must parallel the functions, however diverse, of the museum.

This book, then, is a departure point, not an end in and of itself. The museum community should use it to further develop the field of disabled visitor services by understanding the need to become familiar with similar work being carried out by other museums, by treating the issues involved as they would other disciplines, and by exploring new solutions, while recognizing that the solutions established to date are imperfect, which is not to say not very good—but imperfect.

Charles K. Steiner is associate director of the Art Museum, Princeton University

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PART ONE



Unique Outreach Programs

Brookfield Zoo

BROOKFIELD, ILLINOIS



When ten-year-old Mark entered the After-School Program at the Children's Zoo (a part of the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago), his therapist expected him to go on temper tantrums with kicking, screaming, and hitting, just as he had done in the past. Mark's behavior in the six-week program surprised everyone. He participated willingly in learning about and working with animals. Along with seven other children who had behavior disorders or learning disabilities, he milked goats, groomed horses, and held bottles of milk for young animals. And, he gave the staff no trouble.

Mark is just one of many individuals to benefit from the programs available for special populations at the Chicago Zoological Park, usually known as Brookfield Zoo.

In the early 1970s the Brookfield Zoo, like many institutions, became more aware of the needs of disabled persons, and it undertook the removal of barriers to these populations. During that decade it built ramps and inclines to provide access to buildings. It put up clear, easy-to-read signs, made paths level and wide enough for wheelchairs, and reserved parking areas for disabled visitors. For the benefit of visually impaired visitors, it issued large-print and Braille versions of some handouts and put Braille labels on many exhibits.

In the 1980s the zoo made rest rooms, telephones, drinking fountains, and restaurants accessible. It created a special-visitors brochure offering information on tours, wheelchair accessibility, handicapped parking, and other matters of interest to disabled zoo-goers. And it created the office of special populations coordinator and hired Mark Trieglaff, a former zoo-keeper who holds a degree in outdoor and therapeutic recreation, to fill it.

When Trieglaff took over the office in 1982, "special populations" meant persons

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*Visitors board a trolley at the Brookfield Zoo.*