

Vol. 16 No. 2 Winter 1997

Exhibitionist is published two times a year and features news, information, and thoughts on the profession from the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), the Standing Professional Committee on Exhibition of the American Association of Museums.

EXHIBITIONIST

NAME

News

- 2 From the President
- 2 From the Editor
- 2 Feedback
- 4 Positions Available
- 4 Murphy's Law of Exhibition
- 5 Bulletin Board
- 5 Exhibits Newslines

Feature Articles

- 7 The Cult of Object and the Lure of Home among "Museum People"
- 8 Conversation Tips for Designers and Evaluators
- 10 Creatively Challenged: Toward Universal Design
- 13 Many Truths, Many Questions: A Question of Truth
- 18 Preserving Memory
- 19 Treasures beneath Your Feet
- 21 Fibers of Light



page 7

The Cult of Object and the Lure of Home among "Museum People"

by Shannon Voirol

Conversation Tips for Designers and Evaluators

page 8

by Jennie Alwood Zehmer



page 10

Creatively Challenged: Toward Universal Design

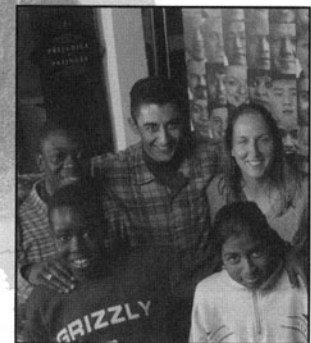
by David Whitemyer



Many Truths, Many Questions: A Question of Truth

page 13

by Lisa Berndt



Creatively Challenged: Toward Universal Design

by David Whitemyer

“Law, trying to make sure nothing ever goes wrong, doesn’t respect the idiosyncrasy of human accomplishment.”

—Philip K. Howard, *The Death of Common Sense*, 1994

Thus far, most of our efforts to respond to society’s demand for accessibility have been fundamentally reactive. Most of us have tended to deal only with the relatively small body of specific stipulations intended to make exhibits fully accessible to those with “disabilities.” Or we have used perfunctory checklists to make us feel that we are satisfying accessibility concerns: “I can read it from here,” “I think you can get a wheelchair through,” “The audiotope is optional, anyway.” Fewer of us have synthesized the larger body of guidelines and invented new ways to make exhibits physically and intellectually accessible to real people.

A narrow approach seems uncharacteristic of exhibit designers as a group. Isn’t one of our greatest joys searching for the best possible solution to challenges at hand? Aren’t we experts in comparing the many ways to match exhibit with audience?

Let’s be honest—many of us see accessibility as a burdensome ideal aimed at satisfying a small minority rather than as a liberating ideal aimed at improving the quality of exhibits for everyone. We often feel tense and restricted by the growing body of accessibility regulations and guidelines. We resent having to learn and understand an intricate and occasionally conflict-

ing patchwork of guidelines, codes, and laws in order to have our exhibits judged “safe” and “fair.”

Society has changed in the years beginning with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and in the era of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Various child-safety laws, environmental controls, fire and building codes, and historic preservation guidelines have helped to integrate exhibit design into the social “norm” and cultural “average.”

If we see ourselves as hampered by a set of arbitrary standards that benefit only a small group of individuals, our task will inevitably seem frustrating and unfair. But if we instead see ourselves as adopting a framework of logical goals that benefit everyone, our assignment will feel far more pleasurable. We need to start by recognizing that 1) museum audiences are made up of visitors with different abilities and disabilities and 2) most visitors welcome exhibit design that facilitates their experience of the material.

“If exhibit designers use [accessibility] guidelines as a place to start, rather than a place to end, they’ll have a much easier and more enjoyable time with their jobs.”

**—Janice Majewski,
Coordinator,
Smithsonian Accessibility Program**

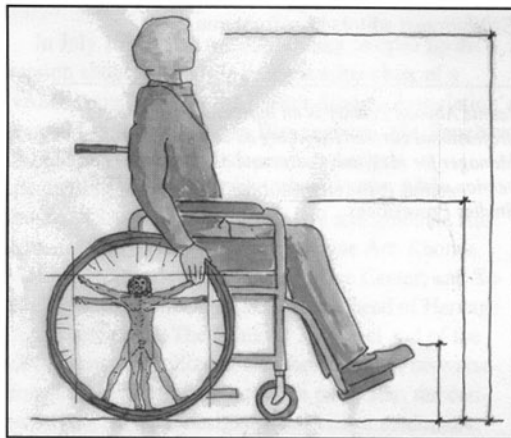
Correct from the Start

Beginning each project with a commitment to making the exhibit physically and intellectually accessible to the people who are going to “use” it can make the accessibility challenge much easier to handle. Integrating accessibility requirements into our design solution is ultimately much easier than treating them as “add-on requirements.”

Accessibility Guidelines as Exhibit Tools

Whereas accessibility laws and standards dictate end goals, guidelines offer suggestions toward achieving these goals. Of course, it would be a shame and a waste of our talents if we all stuck only to the black and white of what is written in the accessibility guidebook. Guidelines are design tools that should be tested, and interwoven with one another, to create new solutions.

We should be able to inspire the client’s confidence that we are responsible designers who



Illustrations by the author

create exhibits that are accessible and violation-free, period.

Experience has shown that there are countless ways to create exhibits that “meet the regulations” AND provide engaging, exciting, and informative experiences for the whole population.

You Can Get There from Here

Part of what leads many exhibit designers into a defensive stance regarding accessibility is the reality of designing for clients.

As we brainstorm with our clients, we often find ourselves backtracking to say, “We’re not allowed to do that,” or “We’ll never get away with that.” Conversely, we also sometimes find ourselves face to face with clients who focus more on the prospect of possible violations than on actual design challenges, e.g. the “Can a kid get their head stuck in it?” syndrome. The result may be a room full of educators, curators, and other problem solvers who are fixated on what could go wrong and what is required rather than on what could work and what may be desired. At this point designers in effect cease to function as exhibit developers and designers and become de facto ADA consultants. Under such circumstances actual design can hardly proceed because the group’s attention is outside the context of the developing exhibition.

We should be able to inspire the client’s confidence that we are responsible designers who create exhibits that are accessible and violation-free, period. Only then can we properly focus our efforts on what we’ve actually been hired to do: create successful exhibits that educate and stimulate everyone.

You Can Please (Pretty Much) Everyone: Universal Design

“Universal design,” in the world of exhibits, is defined as creating environments that benefit everyone, not just people with disabilities, and provide enjoyment and stimulation for all visitors. In practice it means thinking carefully—perhaps in new ways—about all aspects of an exhibition: circulation through the space, color, lighting, typography, context, 3-D design, presentation of artifacts, and interactives.

Universal design is concerned with finding ways to appeal to all the different ways human beings relate to exhibit material. It attempts to gear designs to the dif-

ferent ways in which people—disabled or not—experience the world around them.

According to Bethany Coleman, a recent graduate of the Creative Arts and Learning program at Lesley College, “The theory of multiple intelligences explains that every person learns best in a certain mode. For example, some people learn best kinesthetically, using their hands or moving their body. Each person has a specific way that he or she takes in information best.”

In “Something for Everyone,” (*Museum News*, November/December 1996) Patricia Burda cited *John J. Audubon: Watercolors for the Birds of America* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, first-place winner of the first annual American Association of Museums (AAM) Accessibility Award. The exhibition encouraged visitors to touch and investigate bird wing specimens and cardboard models as one way of helping them to see how Audubon found such objects useful in creating his paintings. The technique made that portion of the exhibition accessible to people who favor a

hands-on, tactile approach as well as to some people with visual impairments . . . as well as to others.

Some benefits of universal design can be mined from existing exhibit approaches. Designing at the Watercourse exhibit in Clanton, Ala., and at the Columbus Museum in Georgia, Boston-area exhibit designer Michael Sand built on the observation that closed-caption video displays

worked for people who used English as a second language as well as for the hearing impaired. For many non-native speakers, the written word is easier to comprehend than the spoken word. Sand observed, “Our in-

“Providing aural, visual, and tactile access to an exhibition is important not just for accessibility needs, but for education in general.”—Patricia Burda,

“Something for Everyone,” *Museum News*, November/December 1996

tent was to aid those with hearing impairments, and then we discovered that the exhibit was helping a whole different group of visitors.” At the Big Dig exhibit in Boston’s Museum of Science, Sand found that closed caption worked well for videos displayed in very loud and crowded spaces.

During Main Street Design’s development and design of exhibits for the new Grasslands habitat areas at the National Zoo, we proposed an idea for a graphic wall that featured touchable plant illustrations made of etched metal plates. We thought that this would be a wonderful tactile experience for young children. Only later did it occur to us that it would also be helpful to

“The real impulse of altering exhibit design to improve should arise not from legal demands, but from the same source that impels human-factors research: the desire to place the needs of the user at the center of the exhibit design process.”

—Jeff Kennedy, *User Friendly*, 1994



“I can give you example after example of projects . . . where the laws [pertaining to accessibility] have led us to solutions we would not have uncovered before because we were insufficiently challenged.”

—Architect James Polshek, in an interview regarding renovation of the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City

those with sight or vision impairments.

All of these examples of universal design represent methods of entertaining, educating, and informing museum visitors. They are not panaceas for checking off accessibility concerns on a checklist.

Reeducating Ourselves

Unfortunately we are still crippled, so to speak, by the mentality that the principles of universal design are intended primarily for designs for persons with disabilities.

Realizing the full potential of universal design will be a slow process. In the meantime, each successful use will contribute to the exhibit designers’ repertoire for making exhibits fun and informative for our entire audiences. It will help to teach us about human abilities—not disabilities.

David Whitemyer is an exhibit designer at Main Street Design in Cambridge, Mass. He has a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Iowa State University.

References

- Burda, Patricia. “Something for Everyone.” *Museum News*, November/December 1996.
- Disability Statistics Center. <http://dsc.ucsf.edu/abs/ab16.html>. Modified 1/30/97.
- Howard, Philip K. *The Death of Common Sense: How Law Is Suffocating America*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Kennedy, Jeff. *User Friendly: Hands-On Exhibits that Work*. Washington D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), 1994.
- Pilgrim, Dianne. “Redesigning the National Design Museum.” Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Autumn 1994.
- Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design*. Smithsonian Institution. Washington D.C.: June 1996.

What’s in a Number? What’s in a Name?

Dissenters to the accessibility and universal design movements believe that universal fairness can be logically quantified and distributed by ratio. As interesting and thought-provoking as the numbers may seem, arguing with statistics will not make accessibility issues go away. Exhibit designers are not designing for any specific population. Our designs must always be created so as to work effectively for any given audience on any given day.

Arguments about “who is covered” can be just as futile. The ADA, for example, includes a list of qualifying disabilities but does not specifically indicate how these disabilities should be measured or by whom. It also does not address the impact of an individual’s disability/disabilities in dealing with, say, an exhibition.

“Them” is an inherently frustrating term in this context. Not only is it so vague as to be virtually meaningless; it promotes separatism. “Us” is a much more effective concept for exhibit designers.