

Accessible Exhibitions: Testing the Reality

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Introduction

The past few years have seen an effort on the part of the museum community to restructure itself to include and to reach out to members of the public—racial, ethnic and cultural minorities, women, workers, persons with disabilities and others whose particularity have been under-represented by and in museums. In part to endeavor to acknowledge the pluralism of American society and to help people learn about one another, in part to respond to protests about the exclusion of these groups, museums are becoming gradually transformed to reflect the composition of society and to facilitate mutual understanding of and among its members.

The tasks of acknowledging pluralism and doing justice to cultural and individual diversity are not unique to museums. They must be faced by all American institutions—but especially those with an educational mission. Confronted now with expanding audiences, museums must review their own responsibility. To whom are they accountable as public institutions, and what is entailed by that commitment? Some of the answers will arise from within cultural institutions as they grope with new ways of communicating with the newly empowered publics; some answers have been and are being imposed on the institutions from the outside. For example, the existence of Civil Rights legislation has had a profound impact on public hiring policies since 1973. The recently enacted Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 may well alter the physical appearance of the buildings which house our cultural institutions as well as the appearance and shape of many of the activities within them. In this paper, we will describe the ways in which the Smithsonian Institution is welcoming the ADA as an aid in empowering visitors and employees with disabilities.

Background

Like other cultural institutions, the Smithsonian Institution has addressed issues of access for persons with disabilities for many years. Legally the Smithsonian deals with the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968,

the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA. Administratively, responsibility for employee-related issues rests with the Office of Equal Employment and Minority Affairs (OEEMA). Visitor-related issues were previously divided among the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's (OESE) Outreach Program, the Office of Plant Services and a number of other administrative offices. Recommendations by the Smithsonian Office of the Inspector General led to the consolidation of visitor and employee accessibility efforts under one program. In 1991, Janice Majewski, formerly in charge of OESE's Outreach Program, was named the Smithsonian Accessibility Coordinator. The new Accessibility Program became part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for the Arts and Humanities.

Responding to ethical, constituent and legal responsibilities, the Accessibility Coordinator initiated a systematic and comprehensive assessment of the accessibility of Smithsonian facilities and public offerings for persons with disabilities, through the Office of Design and Construction and the Institutional Studies Office. Clearly, given the number of buildings, exhibitions, public programs, publications, etc. encompassed by this undertaking, some study boundaries and definitions were mandatory. The first major decision in delineating the scope of the assessment was to clearly differentiate between facilities for which precise legal requirements exist in legislation, and public offerings which were covered more in spirit by the legislation but for which specific standards do not exist.

Any assessment consists of measurement (or evaluation) at a specific point in time. Museum facilities to some extent (especially their public offerings) are continuously evolving and changing. Thus assessing levels of accessibility at the Smithsonian is both an immediate and continuing issue. In the short term, procedures and personnel are required to undertake a baseline assessment. In turn, these results can be used by individual museums and organizations in planning improvements. On a continuous basis, procedures and personnel are needed to ensure that accessibility requirements are integrated into the planning of all museum renovations, construction, activities and offerings. To accomplish these two interrelated goals, a cadre of individuals were recruited and trained to carry out the assessment and then to serve as accessibility advocates and resource personnel. In practice, each of the Smithsonian museums and smaller organizations was asked to assign permanent Liaisons and alternative Liaisons to the Accessibility Study. (The training and deployment of the Liaisons are discussed further below.)

Even with extensive training, it became clear that the Liaisons could not be asked to conduct a complete facility assessment, as the task would be staggering. The Office of Design and Construction with the assistance of the Accessibility Coordinator have contracted with an architecture and engineering (A&E) firm to conduct a facilities assessment at the Smithsonian. The A&E firm will use legal guidelines to focus on basic

physical/structural components of the facilities. At the same time, the Accessibility Coordinator and the Institutional Studies Office are looking at public and staff offerings. (As will be seen, there are some grey areas in this distinction.) It is the public and staff offerings aspect of the overall assessment that is of special interest here.

Assessing Public and Staff Offerings

With almost no exception, every museum program, activity, publication or exhibition, (i.e., public and staff offering), can include or exclude an individual on the basis of specific characteristics. For example, it would be difficult to name an activity that does not involve reading either directly (e.g., text panels and labels in exhibitions) or indirectly (e.g., directional signage to dance performances). Reading is a learned characteristic—in our society a correlate of education. Reading level is frequently discussed among exhibition designers and educators. Less frequently discussed, however, are the frustrations encountered by well-educated visitors with varying degrees of visual problems or individuals who do not read English. All museum-based activities, to cite another example, assume that individuals can reach a specific location. Yet individuals who are disabled and require use of wheelchairs or parents with children in strollers are often excluded by virtue of difficulties in maneuvering through museum spaces.

To simplify the assessment task, we decided to survey the plethora of public and staff offerings in phases. Exhibitions and the routes leading to them will be examined first (Phase I), followed by publications and audiovisual productions (Phase II), and finally programs, meetings, training sessions and receptions (Phase III). By starting with exhibitions we are acknowledging that a museum is:

...an organized and permanent non-profit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule.

(Bloom, 1984)

Toward the end of the process of assessing whether we are providing exhibitions without barriers, the past year was spent training personnel and designing Phase I Exhibitions. Together with the Accessibility Coordinator, we have developed criteria for assessing exhibitions and the materials necessary for the assessment. Each of these aspects is described in the following discussion.

Liaisons and Liaison Training

As noted above, each Smithsonian museum and organization named at least two staff members (a liaison and alternate) to become points of contact on accessibility issues and to participate in the project. A total of 115 individuals were named. Senior management received an outline of tasks for accessibility liaisons, to assist them in identifying the most appropriate members of their staff to serve in this function. Museum directors were encouraged to name a staff member who had responsibility for building management as one of the representatives.

While some liaisons were familiar with accessibility-related issues, others were quite new to the area. In order to provide the liaisons with the background for a broad spectrum of accessibility issues and develop a sense of comradarie and collegiality among them, a series of 10 monthly seminars and workshops was scheduled. Liaisons were required to attend a minimum of three sessions in addition to the initial one-day training. The diversity of workshop topics is evident in Table 1. Workshops, however, were not restricted to liaisons—rather, they were widely publicized. Smithsonian staff were encouraged to attend and participate in the discussion as part of the Accessibility Program’s goals.

Table 1

List of Accessibility Workshops

June 1991	Training Session for Smithsonian Liaisons and Alternatives
September 1991	Assistive Devices for People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
October 1991	Phase 1 Accessibility Study: Exhibition Access
November 1991	Life Safety and Fire Protection for Staff and Visitors with Disabilities
December 1991	Visual and Tactile Access to Exhibitions and Publications
January 1992	Accessible Computer Technology
February 1992	Accessibility and Historic Preservation: The Resolution of Differences
March 1992	Learning Styles and Learning Differences: Challenges for Museum Design
April 1992	Reasonable Accommodation: What Does that Mean for Staff and Volunteers?
May 1992	Publicity: Making it Accessible and Reaching the Audience
June 1992	Exhibitions and Public Programs: How Can They Be Designed for Accessibility?

Criteria, Procedures and Materials

The assessment of exhibitions can be viewed as an effort to evaluate the extent to which individuals with all types of disabilities—physical and mental—can visit a permanent exhibition in a Smithsonian public space and enjoy equal access to it. The visit to the exhibition, for purposes of the study, begins at the sidewalk to the museum or facility and continues to the exhibition exit. Some materials which accompany exhibitions, (e.g. lectures or publications), are excluded from this phase of the assessment as they will be addressed in subsequent phases. To conduct the assessment, we developed a manual, assembled tool kits, designed a questionnaire and worksheets, and selected a sample. Each of these is briefly described here.

Manual

The Accessibility Coordinator worked with legal requirements for an accessible route to and from exhibitions along with some existing materials about exhibition components, and drew from her extensive experience with access issues for professionals and exhibit designers before offering comments on draft versions of the manual. The manual includes instruction on the types of measurements to be made and a glossary of terms, as well as the criteria for assessing the route and the exhibition. Examples and diagrams illustrating a number of the criteria were included. Table 2 lists the sections and subsections of the manual with their corresponding number of criteria. Subsections were used for items that could be referenced more than once in the section criteria, (e.g., ramps and signage), to reduce the redundancy in the manual.

Table 2
Manual Sections and Subsections

<u>Section</u>	<u># of Criteria in Manual</u>	<u>Applicable Subsections</u>
I. Accessible route to the building	20	2
II. Entrances	8	3
III. Doors	3	1
IV. Building lobbies and corridors	20	4
V. Information desks	18	4
VI. Accessible route to the exhibition	23	2
VII. Routes within the exhibition space	23	1
VIII. Accessible emergency routes from the exhibition	6	1
IX. Exhibition space:		
A. Public programming spaces	16	3
B. Color	4	0
C. Lighting	7	0
D. Furniture	7	0
E. Labels	19	0
F. Label text	6	1
G. Audiovisuals and manipulatives	23	0
H. Collections	12	0
I. Content of the Exhibition	4	0

<u>Subsection</u>	<u># of Criteria in Manual</u>
i. Ramps	20
ii. Curb ramps	15
iii. Elevators	42
iv. Lifts	8
v. Stairs	18
vi. Doors and gates	19
vii. Signage	25

Tool kit

Each liaison is provided with a tool kit for use in the assessment. These kits will be returned to us at the end of the assessment to be used again in the third phase. Liaisons, however, are being encouraged to purchase their own tools for future long-term use. The contents of the kit are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
Tool Kit Contents

1. **Measuring tape** to examine the width of doors, ramps, seating areas and pathways. Also to measure the height of furniture, head clearance, knee clearance, changes in level, and protruding objects.
 2. **Line level in a wooden wedge** to measure the slope of ramps and curb ramps.
 3. **Line level on mason's line** to use with a measuring tape to determine cross slope of ramps and sidewalks.
 4. **Fish scale with mason's line** to measure the pounds of force needed to open doors.
 5. **Protractor** to be used with the measuring tape and chalk to look at the degree of door opening.
 6. **Chalk** for the degree of door opening.
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Questionnaire and Worksheets

The Institutional Studies Office designed a questionnaire and worksheet format that relates to the manual. The questionnaire states the element to be assessed, referencing the appropriate page numbers in the manual. A worksheet is provided for any criteria that have subsections. Ratings of MET and NOT MET are used for sections I to VIII and all of the manual subsections. A rating of MET, NOT MET or NOT APPLICABLE is used for exhibition criteria in section IX of the manual. The difference in rating scales emphasizes that some of the criteria are legal minimums and some are optimum levels of accessibility based on museum experience. Appendix A provides an example of a manual page with its corresponding questionnaire and worksheet pages.

Sample Selection

Within a museum, it would be very time-consuming to assess every exhibition. Instead, we opted to assess two permanent exhibitions. In time, the liaisons will work with contractors or in-house personnel preparing all new exhibitions and renovations to ensure their accessibility. In preparation for the assessment, each museum was asked to provide information about each of its permanent exhibitions including size, date of construction, and estimated levels of attendance. We then stratified the permanent exhibitions into two groups by attendance (high versus average and low) and size (large and small) in the event that all levels of attendance were the same. For each museum, exhibitions were randomly-selected from each group; (e.g., one with high attendance [independent of size] and a second with average or low attendance).

All of the materials—the manual, tool kit, questionnaires and worksheets—were assembled in a three-ring binder along with a cover memo, instruction pages and two questionnaire cover pages that identified which exhibitions the liaisons are to assess. Each binder was numbered and

assigned to a museum. The binders were distributed and the liaisons were given the opportunity to sign up for one of three training sessions within an exhibition. Completed assessments are due one and a half months from distribution. Each museum will return the completed original questionnaire, worksheets and tool kit within the three-ring binder to the Institutional Studies Office, keeping the manual and copies of everything submitted for their files. Liaisons will ultimately be responsible for writing an informed five-year plan for their museum or office to improve access for all visitors, including visitors with disabilities.

Summary

In this paper, we have described the overall approach to the Smithsonian Institution Accessibility Study (SIAS), briefly touched on the context in which it is being conducted and described Phase I, *Exhibitions*, in some detail. The above discussion, however, does not communicate the enthusiasm and optimism which we and our colleagues feel about the overall effort. The Smithsonian Institution has made a commitment to ensure that the composition of its staff, as well as its exhibitions, public programs, research and outreach activities are more responsive to the society it represents. The SIAS and the implementation of its results are integral and critical parts of that commitment. We invite other institutions to join us.

Reference

- Bloom, J.N. (1984). *Museums for a new century. A report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums.

Appendix A

Examples of a Manual Page, Questionnaire and Worksheet

Q. The cross slope of the accessible pathway is no greater than 1:50. (Fig. 13)

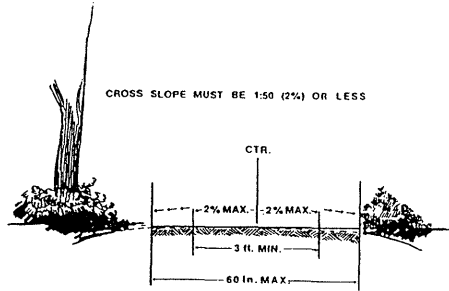


Fig. 13

R. When walkway levels change, the vertical difference between them is less than 1/4 inch. (Fig. 14)

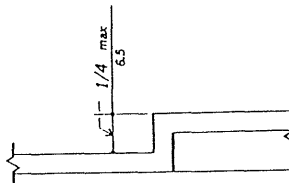


Fig. 14

S. If there is a change in level of between 1/4 inch and 1/2 inch anywhere on the accessible route, the edge is beveled with a slope of 1:2. (Fig. 15)

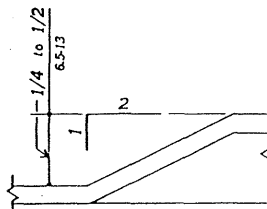


Fig. 15

T. If there is a vertical level change greater than 1/2 inch, it is treated with a sloping pathway, curb ramp or ramp. Ramps and curb ramps meet all accessibility requirements. (See Subsection: RAMPS and CURB RAMPS)

ACCESSIBILITY ASSESSMENT

Worksheet for Question 1. T. Ramps and Curb Ramps

SUBSECTION: Ramps [pages 32-34] and Curb Ramps [pages 34-35]

_____ Number of ramps _____ Number of curb ramps
 If you have more than three ramps or two curb ramps, photocopy this page to assess the additional items and attach the copies to the questionnaire.

Criteria	Curb Ramp 1		Curb Ramp 2	
	MET	NOT MET	MET	NOT MET
A				
B				
C				
D				
E				
F				
G				
H				
I				
J				
K				
L				
M				
N				
O				
TOTAL				

Criteria	Ramp 1		Ramp 2		Ramp 3	
	MET	NOT MET	MET	NOT MET	MET	NOT MET
A						
B						
C						
D						
E						
F						
G						
H						
I						
J						
K						
L						
M						
N						
O						
P						
Q						
R						
S						
T						
TOTAL						

Use the information from the totals above to answer 1. T in the preceding pages.

ACCESSIBILITY ASSESSMENT - PHASE 1

Getting to and around the Exhibition

Please answer each of the following questions on the basis of the criteria in the Manual. References to the appropriate Manual sections are listed after each question.

Definitions

MET = All criteria in appropriate Manual section are met.

NOT MET = All of the criteria in appropriate Manual section are *not met*.

- I. Is there an accessible route to your building? [Section I: Accessible Route, pages 7-12]

Criteria	MET	NOI	MEI
A	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
B	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
C	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
D	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
E	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
F	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
G	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
H	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
K	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
L	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* M	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
N	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
O	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
P	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
R	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
S	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* T	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
TOTAL:	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Comments: _____

* For M and T above, fill out the attached pages, if you have signage, ramps and curb ramps, or elevators and lifts. A met response indicates that all the requirements are met for each sign, ramp and curb ramp, or elevator and lift on the accessible route to the building.