Are Museums Deliberately Blind to the Needs of the Blind?

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Preface

The subject of this paper was inspired by a visit to a local museum with one of my university classes on October 15, 2003. One of my fellow students was blind. It was my privilege to escort him back to the university. His first comment as we walked out the door of the museum was, “I learned something today. Museums are for the sighted.” He had not had a good experience.

Museums are supposed to be for everyone. The definition, “Museum n: A building or institution in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are preserved and exhibited and held in trust for society.” Where in this definition does it say that this building or institution is to be accessible only to the able-bodied and sighted? A continuation of the OED definition of museum is, “The collection of objects held by such an institution is for the public benefit.” Where in this definition does it say that this collection of objects held by the institution is solely for the enjoyment of certain privileged individuals?

I wanted to cling to my vision of museums as uncaring bad guys who did not want their premises cluttered up with white canes. Over the past two-plus months, I have reluctantly concluded that museums are not deliberately blind to the needs of the blind; instead, I believe that museums have historically been caught up in a “catch 22” situation. This may have made the average museum ignore-ant, creating an attitude or belief that if they ignore the disabled, they will not be visible. This attitude is doubly true with the visually impaired population.

I do not believe that museums are deliberately blind to the needs of the blind; they just need someone like me to give them a nudge in the right direction. Throughout history, there has been someone to give the development of tools for the disabled a push in the right direction.

In 1500 when physician Girolamo Cardano recognized the ability of the deaf to reason²; it was a great stride forward. Previously it had been
thought that those with physical disabilities were also mentally deficient. The ability to reason lifted the deaf up into the realm of human beings. It gave them access to human congress.

The name of one man, Louis Braille, is considered synonymous with enhancing the life of the blind. While I was doing my research, I particularly enjoyed the story of the “battle” of Braille that I found through a thread on page two of “Disability Timeline”; the thread ultimately led to “The History of Reading Codes for the Blind.” According to this source, Valentin Hauy, a Frenchman, was actually the first to develop a system of embossing letters to be “read” by touch (the year is not given). Nonetheless, in 1829, Louis Braille did develop a raised point alphabet that subsequently became known as Braille; it was a point method by which the blind could both read and write. Others followed with their own “Braille” point systems; eventually there were a multitude of point systems. The result of this plethora of point systems was a war of the points: the NY Point v. American Braille v. British Braille. The war finally ended around 1916. British Braille won because of “the wealth of code already available in the British Empire and the desire for a unified English language code.” With the ability to read and write the blind came one step closer to accessing the rest of the human race.

The importance of the “battle of the points” is that it is a perfect example of what has occasionally happened while attempting to aid the disabled. There are many different ideas about how to accomplish the same thing. Sometimes those with ideas are caught up in “my way is the only way” mentality, even though it may, in fact, not be the best solution for those with the disability that it is designed to aid.

This brings me to my perception of the “catch 22” situation that museums are caught in. Museums have touchable artifacts, but they cannot be touched. Touching artifacts leaves a history of that touch from the residue of the oils, sweat, and other chemicals on our hands and fingers. Over time, this residue can destroy the artifact. Additionally, some artifacts are loaned to museums on condition that they are not to be touched. I was surprised to learn during my interview with Redmond Barnett and Patricia Tobiason at the Washington State History Museum, that in addition to paper, fabric, wood, fur, ceramics, paint, and some metals—quite literally almost everything can be ruined by being touched. Or if not ruined, they are altered or diminished in
unwanted and unattractive ways.

I was equally surprised to learn, through research, the wide variety of titles that apply to museums: history museum, art museum, botanical garden, zoo, science museum, aquarium, etc. I think that museums can also be defined as “discovery places with universal appeal.” But—how, if you are denied full access to the offerings of museums, can you discover the riches, wonders, excitement, and learning that museums offer? I have come to consider access as the greatest challenge in museums v. vision impaired. Access is not just elevators and Braille beneath the buttons on elevator panels or Braille on bathroom doors; access is not curb cuts, ramps, or wheelchair-accommodating toilet stalls with sturdy rails around the toilets. Access means that there is an equal opportunity for the disabled to enjoy any public presentation.

Cliff Schulman, Executive Director of the Center for Independence, believes that access goes beyond just having an equal opportunity to enjoy any public presentation; he believes that access is when everyone can enjoy to the fullest, limited only by their individual ability, everything the museum has to offer. Today, there are museums being built with this concept of accessibility. Three examples are: 1) The New Orleans Museum of Art – Sculpture Garden, where visitors wearing thin plastic gloves are allowed to touch the sculpted works of Rodin, Picasso and others. 2) The Washington D.C. National Building Museum, where there are touchable replicas of buildings of the national capital. 3) The Museo Tiflologico, Madrid, Spain, where visitors run their fingers over replicas of the world’s great monuments.

Mr. Schulman showed me photographs of exhibits he had designed. The photographs were taken inside the Israel National Museum of Science at Haifa, Israel, where all exhibits are accessible to the physically challenged. I could have gone to that museum and cheerfully spent many hours seeing, hearing, touching, and experiencing the exhibits. I had believed, prior to my interview with Mr. Schulman, that access to and enjoyment of flat artwork, paintings, would be a necessary exemption for the blind. This is not automatically so. Through laser technology and polymer techniques, paintings can be reproduced in sections, brush strokes and all; sections are used both to keep the reproductions a manageable size and to prevent an overload of sensory systems with too much input. Bear in mind that the value of these tactile reproductions is enhanced because they are available to all, not just the disabled.
While my focus is on access for just one disability, the vision-impaired, both Don Brown, who is responsible for the city of Berkeley’s Disability Compliance Program, and Mr. Schulman are concerned with all disabilities. I think this includes the dis-ability of some of the physically, emotionally, and psychologically whole to see those who are unable to do certain things as complete human beings.

Spurred by the civil rights movements of the sixties and seventies, which did not initially include the disabled population, the United States passed three wonderful laws designed to stop discrimination against the disabled: first, the 1968 Architectural Barriers Act; second, the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act, section 502 and 504; third, the 1990 Americans with Disability Act. All of these acts suggest, “the blind, the visually handicapped, and the otherwise physically disabled have the same right as the able-bodied to the full and free use of the streets, highways, sidewalks, walkways, public buildings, public facilities, and other public places.” A literal interpretation is that these three acts deal with physical access; they address the ease with which a person’s body can enter a facility and then the ability of that body to move about comfortably after entering. Unfortunately, as Dianne Pilgrim points out, on page eight in the preface to The Accessible Museum, “[There are] barriers of all kinds—intellectual, social, cultural, and physical—that prevent museums from fulfilling their potential as educational and cultural centers.” My contention is that access to museums for the vision impaired should be, can be, just as rich, rewarding, exciting, and educational as it is for the sighted.

For universal access to have a chance there must first be changes in attitudes. As a part of attitude change, we must stop thinking of the disabled in terms of problems to be solved and start thinking of the disabled in terms of welcome challenges. “Accessibility . . . pertains not just to buildings and programs but to attitudes of tolerance and sensitivity as well.” This does not mean that access gives people, not even disabled people, permission to enter restricted areas in public places. If the general public is excluded, then, logically, so are the disabled. A romanticized view of the lack of accessibility was expressed by the son of a disabled visitor to the Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island, Washington. He said, “There are places in the world that shouldn’t be accessible too easily. You shouldn’t be able to drive a car there;
you shouldn’t even have a path for a wheelchair.”77 The disabled population would agree.

I said that I had wanted to cling to my vision of museums as bad guys who did not want their premises cluttered up with white canes. There is some truth in that vision. There are those who see the white cane of the blind and vision-impaired as being obstructive. This tool, this necessary adjutant of the vision-impaired often makes the sighted uncomfortable. In a museum, or any other enclosed space, it seems as though that red tipped white cane grows to enormous proportions and takes up an inordinate amount of space. I suppose it does. So does a baby in a stroller, so does a wheelchair, so does a hearing aid, so does a senior citizen, or those who are developmentally challenged, or, or, or . . .

The truth is that as a rule, museums do not mean to exclude the vision-impaired; they just simply do not think of them as museum visitors and so they are not prepared to entertain them. This ignoring of the vision-impaired is a form of discrimination, but more, it is a form of ignorance. It is closing their eyes to the fact that making their facility accessible, physically and emotionally, for the disabled makes it more accessible for everyone. For instance, ramps and elevators are not just a great convenience for the vision impaired, wheelchairs, the elderly, and people with leg or back problems; they are also a great convenience for mothers with babies in strollers. Viewing windows that go from floor to ceiling not only accommodate wheelchair bound visitors, children, and babies in strollers, but also seniors on scooters. Wheelchair accessible drinking fountains are comfortably accessible and lend dignity to children who want a drink without needing to be lifted. Dignity for all visitors is a constant theme that runs through the two books produced by the American Association of Museums that I read: The Accessible Museum and Everyone’s Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums.

If the disabled are seen as problems, it is partly because after years, centuries, of neglect we are rushing to make up. It is much easier and less expensive to create a welcoming environment for all museum visitors if accessibility is incorporated into the planning of the physical building from its inception. “As a rule of thumb to design a building to accommodate persons with special needs adds one percent to the cost of new construction . . . Once these things are in place, the cost of maintenance is very slight.”8
Unfortunately, museums, along with the majority of other public buildings, chose to disregard the “approximately 43 million disabled persons in the United States” when they erected their edifices.

I keep trying to forget that museums are, of necessity, big business. I usually think of them as facilities that provide a service. But—they have built a very expensive facility (often well into the two digit millions of dollars), and it has to be filled with wonder-inspiring artifacts, maintained, and staffed. Even if it is a state facility, on donated land, without state property and sales taxes, just staying alive is difficult. This was brought home to me with a vengeance when I called eighteen of the museums listed in Access to art: A Museum Directory for Blind and Visually Impaired People that was compiled by Irma Shore and Beatrice Jacinto and released in 1989. By the time I called, in 2004, over half of those eighteen museums no longer existed. None of them, including the University of Washington’s Henry Art Museum in Seattle, Washington, still had replicas or tactile exhibits available to the vision-impaired. Creating different, exciting presentations is also a funding challenge; a case in point is the award winning History Lab at the Washington State History Museum. According to Patricia Tobiason, the History Lab teetered on the verge of not being, and it remained in the planning stage far longer than strictly necessary because of funding problems. Additionally, buildings that were built without consideration of disability access now face an expensive challenge adapting these buildings to fulfill the letter of the ADA; however, the ADA exempts designated historic buildings from modifications that would change their character.

How can museums realistically provide the previously mentioned 43 million disabled people with the opportunity of equal access to all of the museum’s richness, wonder, excitement, and education that is available to the ‘normal’ visitor?

That question brings me to the purpose of this paper, a single recommendation, a suggestion of how this challenge can be resolved. I do not believe that museums are deliberately blind to the needs of the blind; they just need someone like me to give them a nudge in the right direction. I have one recommendation that all museums can use to increase their accessibility for all visitors. My recommendation is one word: TRAINING.

Train all personnel and volunteers (hereafter referred to as personnel).
Train them to be flexible and comfortable with those with disabilities. This training is largely a matter of using common sense. Take a page or two from the Bainbridge Island, Washington, Bloedel Reserve's handbook for staff and volunteers. It contains practical advice such as, “Speak directly to the person . . . identify yourself . . . tell the person when you are approaching or leaving . . . give those with speech problems extra time to express themselves.” Use common sense and common courtesy.

Train museum personnel to recognize that those with disabilities are people; they are people who are unable to do certain things. They are not their cane, their speech impediment, their hearing aid, or their wheelchair; they are people. Make them feel like welcome guests. Train museum personnel to be politely attentive, even offering to guide, but not to feel rejected if someone expresses a preference to go it alone. Do not hover. Although the disabled are people who are unable to do certain things, “Museum visitors with disabilities expect the same simple civilities in a public situation as do all others. People generally like to talk with others face to face.” Train museum personnel to use such courtesies as pulling up a chair and sitting down to talk with those in a wheelchair.

Teach museum personnel the distinctions between the blind, the visually impaired, and those having low vision. Post it on the premises if it will help; reminders often help to reinforce learning. If a vision-impaired person unexpectedly drops into a museum, train museum personnel to give them the best visit possible at that time and then issue a pass for a planned future visit. Train museum personnel to suggest ways the museum can best provide an enjoyable and rewarding visit for the vision impaired such as the following simple suggestions: 1) Give the museum a two week lead time before the visit. 2) Plan to come to the museum for a visit before or after normal visiting hours.

Forethought is a large part of training. Invite the disabled, the people who will be using the special accessibility services, to be a part of planning the facility and training the personnel. Let the disabled tell you what is right with the facility, as well as where and what improvements need to be made. As an example of the usefulness of the disabled in spotting the shortfalls of a facility, the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans utilized a committee of the disabled while they were in the building process. On a walk through the
partially completed building, one of the members on the disabled committee asked, “If you have a fire, how are you going to get the people in wheelchairs down from the second floor?” Today, almost everyone is trained to think about access, but what about egress? Training and rehearsals on egress routes can be life saving.

Have museum personnel close their eyes and do the following activities: walk through the museum. Walk through the museum with a guide escorting them to keep them from crashing into things. While being escorted, let them hear the motion activated prerecorded audio; try this with and without a museum full of schoolchildren. Walk through the museum with a guide who is knowledgeable about the exhibits and who describes them. Walk through the museum with a guide who is knowledgeable about the exhibits, describes them, and has “effective props” such as swatches of fabric samples, a shard of pottery, an arrowhead, a sliver of wood, a sample of a plant, etc., something that can be held, felt, and described. Have museum personnel rate each of these experiences.

Train museum personnel so that when escorting a vision-impaired guest they will, upon entering a room, “Provide a general orientation to the whole area, including the prevailing atmosphere, major theme, or overall ambience as well as visual details.” Teach museum personnel to understand that the sighted see things as a whole first, by looking around, and then each part individually. Have them test this on themselves. Then train personnel to be able to relate what they are seeing in a way that will make sense to the vision-impaired visitor, the room at large first and then the different parts that make up the room. Train museum personnel to be flexible, i.e. allow the visitor to interrupt the descriptive tour for fuller details. Make it a part of the training to teach museum personnel to relate colors in terms of heat (use The Federation of the Blind as a source for heat as color). Train museum personnel to be precise when describing things i.e. the door is fifteen paces to your right.

As a part of training museum personnel in the art of describing objects, have them close their eyes and relax. Have them sit in a comfortable chair if it will help them to relax. Hand them artifacts that can be touched. Tell them to take their time and become intimate with the object. Encourage them to smell the artifact. On a scale of one-to-ten have them gauge how
cold or warm the object is to the touch. Again, on a scale of one-to-ten, have them determine the hardness, solidity, or resiliency of the object. Have them identify what the object is made of: stone, wood, clay, ceramic, rubber, plastic, paper, fabric, fur, etc. Ask them if they can identify or feel any blemishes on the object. Have them guess the weight of the object and compare it to something else. Have them identify the shape of the object. Have them identify the object.

Train museum personnel to be alert in recognizing the signs of more subtle mobility impairments in visitors, such as: shortness of breath, low energy levels that create a need to rest often (disguised by leaning against a railing or wall), paleness and shakiness as a result of blood sugar problems, etc. Provide all museum personnel with basic first aid training. Museums, themselves, should be trained to provide seating throughout the facility for visitors with slight mobility impairments.

I mentioned earlier that touching artifacts leaves a history of that touch from the residue of the oils, sweat, and other chemicals on our hands and fingers and that over time, this residue can destroy the artifact. If museum personnel are trained to explain this fact to vision-impaired visitors it would help those visitors to be more appreciative of the museum’s other efforts, i.e. descriptions through prerecorded audio devices or tour guides.

Finally, use the information in *The Accessible Museum* and *What Museum Guides Need to Know*, available through the American Association of Museums Bookstore, as basic training manuals until the museum has developed one of its own that fits just right.

*The Accessible Museum* in writing about “Aquarium of the Americas”, New Orleans, LA, cites this quote on page 63. “You can have the greatest facility, the most accessible architecture in the world and if your staff is not trained . . . to have an accepting attitude, then you’re undoing what you’ve accomplished.”

Since I wrote this paper, I have had firsthand experience with just how “wheelchair accessible” actually works.
1) Two out of three doors to public restrooms are too heavy for someone trapped in a wheelchair to open. You need to have someone with you who will open the door for you to go in and again when it is time to go out.
2) Once in the restroom, the handicap stall usually has a door that is hard to shut from the chair; once you have managed to enter the stall it is impossible to reach behind yourself to close the wide open door because the chair handles constantly bump it back open, if it would have closed in the first place.

3) In nine out of ten handicap stalls, the wheelchair cannot fit completely into the stall and the door cannot be closed because of the wheelchair handles; there is insufficient room to maneuver the wheelchair to close the door (a wheelchair will spin around in a pretty small circle), nor is there room enough to position the wheelchair close to the toilet for a safe transfer using the handicap rails. So, there you are in a room too small for your wheelchair, not close enough to the toilet, you are at risk of falling as you try to get to and on the toilet, and with the door open anywhere from four or five inches to completely open, you are taking care of bodily needs in front of God and everyone.

4) The sidewalk cutouts for handicap ramps are so short and steep that a manually operated wheelchair without a pusher will tip over backward spilling its occupant unless that ramp is taken by propelling yourself blindly backward.

There ought to be a law! Oh, that’s right, there is!

End Notes

1 Oxford English Dictionary (OED), online
2 Disability History Timeline p. 1 of 6
3 The History of Reading Codes for the Blind p. 2 of 29
4 The History of Reading Codes for the Blind p. 2 of 29
5 Model White Cane Law p. 1 of 2
6 Salmen, John P.S. p. 7
7 Author Unknown p. 71
8 Author Unknown p. 62
9 Steiner, Charles K. p. 11
10 Selman, John P.S. p. 15
11 Author Unknown p. 67
12 Selman, John P.S. p. 7
13 Author Unknown p. 59
14 Groff, Gerda with Laura Gardner p. 20
15 Groff, Gerda with Laura Gardner p. 35

Works Cited