

U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division
Disability Rights Section



Expanding Your Market

Maintaining Accessibility in Museums



Introduction

According to the Institute for Museum and Library Services, there are about 17,500 museums across the United States that care for more than 750 million objects and live specimens in order to engage the public in learning about everything from artists' masterworks to the composition of an atom to the history of barbed wire. ^(1,2) These museums - a term used broadly to include zoos, historic sites, botanical gardens, aquariums, planetariums, children's museums, and science and technology centers -- range in size from a small historic house to a large art museum with a related range in annual budgets from a few thousand to several hundred million dollars. ⁽²⁾

Regardless of size or income, most museums have legal obligations to provide and maintain accessibility for visitors with disabilities: Privately operated museums are covered as public accommodations under title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); museums operated by state or local governments are covered by the ADA's title II; and museums that receive Federal funding - whether they are covered by title II or title III -- are also covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Museum Investments in Access

Since the 1970s, numerous museums across the country have initiated efforts to improve the accessibility of their buildings and programs for visitors with disabilities. Today, museums that invest time and money to remove barriers from their facilities, design accessible exhibitions, and provide effective communication for their programs can potentially attract to their doors more than 50 million Americans with disabilities, more than 20 million families

Characteristics of an Accreditable Museum

"The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities to diverse participation."

American Association of
Museums
January 1, 2005

Code of Ethics for Museums

"Thus the museum ensures that:
... programs are accessible and

encourage participation of the widest possible audience consistent with its mission and resources . . . programs represent pluralistic values, traditions, and concerns . . .

American Association of
Museums
November 12, 1993

with members who have disabilities, and millions of graying Baby Boomers. (3,4) Elements such as entrances without stairs, exhibit labels that can be read by visitors who are seated or standing, large-print exhibition brochures, and captioned multimedia programs help museums reach this huge and growing audience.

The key to protecting these investments is maintaining the accessibility that has been put into place -- both the general features of a public accommodation and features and programs that particularly define a museum experience. When accessibility programs and services are discontinued or accessible building features are blocked by temporary exhibitions or removed during renovations, the loss of invested time and money can be substantial.

Maintaining Accessible Features in Museum Buildings



**Photo courtesy of the
Smithsonian Institution**

Museum buildings are often city landmarks and as much a part of the museum experience as the exhibitions and programs within them. The following are examples of typical museum building accessibility maintenance issues:

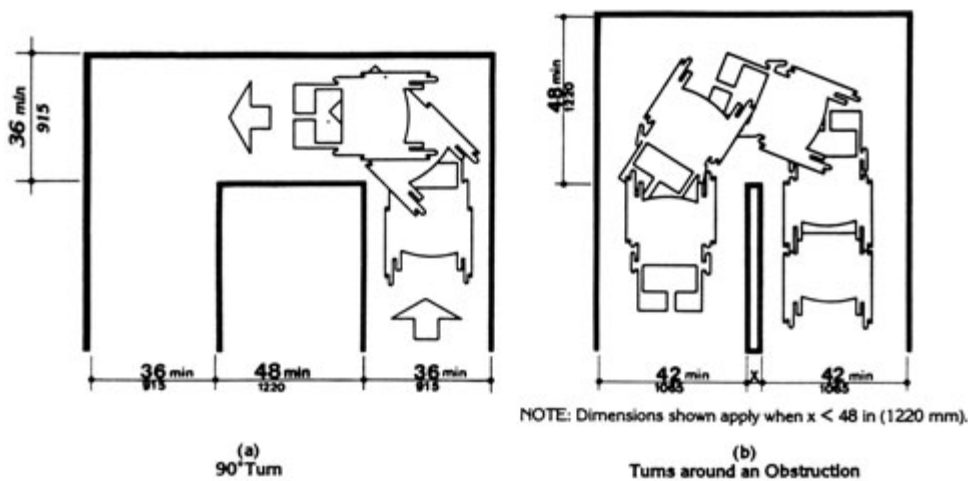
Accessible Entrances

- If the museum's accessible entrance is not the main entrance (allowable only when the main entrance cannot be made accessible), the alternate entrance and any gates along the route to it must be unlocked whenever the building is open for visitors, special events, docent training, and behind-the-scenes appointments. Signage must be provided at all inaccessible entrances to direct people to the accessible entrances.
- The route to all accessible entrances must remain clear of snow, leaves, and debris. It also must be checked regularly to ensure it is not blocked by outdoor furniture, landscaping equipment, or other barriers.
- Entry doors with power operators should remain powered during all hours that the museum is open to the public. If they must be shut off for any reason, the museum should have staff available to open the doors for people who cannot do so themselves.

Accessible Routes Throughout the Museum

- If directional signs to accessible building features are mounted on movable pedestals, they must be monitored to ensure they are in place and continue to provide correct directions, including information about the accessible route(s) for special events.
- If accessible routes through the building are temporarily blocked when exhibitions are installed, de-installed, maintained, or roped off for special events, alternate routes must be created with proper directional signage at key route decision points. Movable exhibition seating or furniture for exhibit interactives must be monitored so that they do not block accessible routes, present tripping hazards throughout the exhibition, or prevent access to exhibit cases, interactives, or media presentations.
- Some people who are blind or have low vision use canes to detect barriers that jut into the path of travel, whether along the accessible route or any other circulation path. Objects, signage, light fixtures, and exhibitry (or tree branches and shrubs along outdoor paths) can present bumping hazards if they are between 27 and 80 inches above the ground. Care must be taken either to keep protruding objects or those with low head clearance out of the path of travel or to install cane-detectable barriers below them.
- Stanchions that define ticket lines or serve as exhibit barriers must also be cane detectable for people who are blind or have low vision.
- If people must travel between stanchions or between a wall and a stanchion, passage must be maintained at a minimum of 36 inches wide, measured from inside edge to inside edge of the stanchion bases or floor moldings, except at doors where the width may narrow to 32 inches for a maximum distance of two feet. If a person must make a turn in the route, the minimum clear passage width is shown in Figures (a) and (b) .





- Elevators serving public spaces must remain operable. If they are out of service for repair or maintenance and provide the only accessible route to an area, temporary alternate access to exhibitions and programs may be provided using photographic, video, or computer presentations.
- If a museum uses a non-public elevator to provide people with disabilities access to public floors, clear signage must be maintained at key decision points to tell visitors where they need to go and what they need to do to use that elevator.

Maintaining Accessibility in Museum Programs

Once inside the building, visitors with disabilities want to fully experience all that museums have to offer “exhibitions, programs, special events, publications, and videos. The following are examples of typical museum program maintenance issues:

- Staff and volunteers working at the information desk or answering questions by telephone should know what accessibility services are available and how to request them, including those that must be scheduled in advance.
- If the museum advertises a TTY number for information, staff and volunteers need to know how to correctly answer and use the equipment. They should also know about the telephone relay system for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech disabilities and be prepared to use it correctly.
- Signage and information in brochures about accessibility must be kept current and



available upon request.

- Alternate formats for printed brochures and program materials (e.g., Braille, CD-Rom, large print) must be kept current, in stock, and easy to find by the public. Generally they should be available to visitors on the same day that the standard print versions are available, including materials associated with traveling and other temporary exhibitions.
- Auxiliary aids and services (e.g., assistive listening devices, audio description tours, closed captioning controls in exhibitions) must remain operable except for maintenance or repair. Regular testing of equipment is essential to keep them in working order.
- If touchable objects are used to provide access to the content of exhibitions and programs for people with disabilities, care should be taken to maintain the objects' condition. If an object is removed from the tactile collection for any reason, it should be replaced with one of equal quality that conveys tactually the same information about the exhibition or program's themes.
- If the museum offers a public website about its exhibitions and programs, the information should be available to everyone, using methods such as screen-reader-accessible web design, adjustable font and color contrast, and high-contrast images. In addition, if the museum uses the website to present accessibility information or to serve as an alternate format for exhibition labels or printed materials, the information should be current and easy to find on the site.



Accessibility enables all visitors to participate in an enriched museum experience. Investing in access - and maintaining that investment - brings museums the valued rewards of inclusive programming and a new, diverse audience.

Maintaining Accessibility in Museum Shops

- Museum shops must not allow merchandise to spill into aisles and narrow the width of the

accessible route.

- Sales and ticket counters that have been lowered to provide access must be clear and unobstructed for use by people with disabilities.
- Staff should know how to assist people who need help in reaching or seeing merchandise.

For specific information about how to comply with the ADA and reach this nearly untapped audience of people with disabilities, visit the U.S. Department of Justice's ADA Business Connection site at www.ada.gov; or, call the toll-free ADA Information Line:

800-514-0301 (voice); 800-514-0383 (TTY)

www.ada.gov.

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