Accessibility of museums in Chicago for people with visual impairments

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Capstone Project:
Accessibility of Museums in Chicago for People with Visual Impairments

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According to the Rockford Center website, "approximately 1 in 30 Americans are blind or visually impaired" (vision services, 2010). The startling fact is that in a city the size of Chicago, that equates to approximately 100,000 people. With the diverse cultural population of the area, it is no surprise that there are 229 museums in Chicago proper. Given the number of museums, how many are able to open their doors and provide a meaningful experience for people with vision impairments.


The starting point for this research is to check for universal accessibility. Universal accessibility, asserted by Joffe and Siller (1997), is making information available in more than one medium that conveys perceptible, understandable, and meaningful presentations, which are multidimensional (p.8-9). There are guidelines developed and monitored by The Access Board for the adaptation of public spaces. The Access Board is the government agency that was founded to help implement change in federally funded facilities after the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) was passed in 1968. In 1990, the American Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed, requiring public areas to be available to all Americans regardless of disability. With the passage and implementation of these two acts of congress, The Access Board established the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) as the minimum requirements to meet the standards for equal public access. The guidelines include information regarding lighting,
bathroom facilities, entry, and egress, as well as passageway recommendations. Entering the building is the beginning of a meaningful experience for every person.

For people with vision impairments universal accessibility becomes most important and apparent after they enter a building. Once inside of a museum, people with vision impairments encounter the true necessity of universal design. Two basic questions come to mind, what is the general floor layout and how are people expected to navigate from one exhibit to another? In the ADAAG and espoused by Joffe and Siller (1997), recommendations include such simple ideas as "rectilinear design, even lighting (no shadows created by lighting), clear contrasting large type signs, multimedia and interactive technologies and training of personnel in the use of descriptive and precise language for providing directions as well as docent tours" (p. 6). Guidelines are being update and changed as our society becomes better versed in how to include all people, not just a select few. The new guidelines are effective starting March 15, 2012 and are currently available on the ADA Standards homepage.

In *Art Beyond Sight and Sound*, authors Axel and Levent take a holistic approach to the idea that art be accessible to people with vision and hearing impairments. Axel and Levent (2003) have created a foundation (Art Education for the Blind) to encourage the dissemination of the availability of art for all in New York City museums and throughout the country. This volume highlighted many simple, creative ways to share my enjoyment of art and history with others. As an educator it is important to give my students and their families as many community based experiences as possible in order to expand their cultural, historical exposure and concepts. Museums and schools are some of the best locations for creating these open environments that expand knowledge and experience for everyone, not just people with visual or hearing impairments. *Art Beyond Sight and Sound* (2003) has articles from a variety of authors in order to feature multiple views of the importance of art education for all students. It underlines the idea that art in it myriad forms is what makes us human. Scott Nelson, the curator for Delta Gamma Foundation’s Art of the Eye: Exhibition on Vision noted, "I had second thoughts about the
'perspectives' of many of history's greatest artists who were known to have visual impairments.... I wondered if their visual impairments could be said to have enhanced their perspectives." (p. 28). Nelson's insight came when he was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa as an adult in his late twenties. Whether a child has limited vision or no vision, art education helps children develop the use of their senses to express their thoughts of the world around them.

*AccessWorld* distributed by American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) has a review of the New York Hall of Science in Corona Park, New York. Jay Leventhal(2003) comments, "Museums have not traditionally been friendly, accessible places for people who are blind or have low vision." (para. 1). Leventhal speaks from personal experience over many years. The New York Hall of Science paved the way for new technology to be used to make exhibits more readily available. The museum offers an audio tour on special phone devices that correspond to labels (in braille and large print) at each exhibit. They are trying a cell-phone-based system called Ping to help patrons navigate between exhibits. The advantage of the Ping system is no new equipment to learn. The disadvantage is ambient sound in the room can mask the sound signal between exhibits. There are still some concerns with the system, but the New York Hall of Science is dedicated to encouraging the exploration of science and technology for all patrons. In addition, Superville (2010) reported in the Chicago Tribune that President Obama signed the Senate bill 3304 making smart phones more accessible to people with hearing and vision impairments. This bill will promote the development of programs similar to the Ping system for museums, as they will be able to use existing technology.

Every museum in Chicago had an education department that discussed existing accommodations to exhibits that allow people with vision impairments to be included in the museum experience. In general terms, the larger museums with greater funding or those specifically geared towards children were able to offer a better, more interactive, multidimensional experience to their patrons than smaller museums. Most of the museums that had few adaptations wanted to explore how to
increase inclusion of people with vision impairments. Several museums listed are in the process of updating their exhibits to serve a wider population. Many museums offered docent tours of the facilities, but required anywhere from two week to one month prior notice. If a family or a group of students wanted to attend a museum, the best policy was to call in advance.

Listed below are the sixteen museums with addresses, basic information, and available accommodations. Most of the museums have websites with an education tab that gives more information about programs each offer. Using the website and the telephone in advance of your trip will greatly enhance the enjoyment of everyone.

The Art Institute of Chicago
111 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois, 60603-6404
312-899-5100
http://www.artic.edu

The Art Institute of Chicago was founded in 1879. It was started as both a school and a museum to execute learning programs. They offer a variety of learning opportunities inside the museum as well as in the classroom. For people with vision impairments the museum offers audio tours as well as docent-guided tours with advance notice. There is a tactual display room in the basement with the children's exhibits. Signage is in large print but no braille labels are included outside of the elevator.

Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art
2320 West Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL, 60622
773-227-5522
http://www.brama.com/uima

The Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art was founded in 1971 as a way for Ukrainian emigres to display their work and share their culture with others. The museum has no special accommodations at this time for people with
vision impairments. It is possible to contact the museum in advance for a guided tour.

Chicago Cultural Center
Randolph Street Lobby
78 East Washington Street
Chicago, IL 60601,
312-744-6630
www.cityofchicago.org

The Chicago Cultural Center offers a variety of events. There are musical concerts, art exhibits, films, lectures, and other theater related shows. It was built as the original location of the Chicago Public Library and a Civil War memorial with Carrara marble and two stain glass domes. The building is a magnificent work of art that also hosts a number of cultural affairs. The building conforms to the standards of accessibility. There are building tours offered three days a week, but it is best to arrange in advance for people with vision impairments.

The Chicago Gospel Heritage Museum
adjoining the Metropolitan Apostolic Community Church
4108 S. King Drive.
Mark S. Allen, Project Director
773-392-0165

The Chicago Gospel Heritage Museum was scheduled to open its doors in October of this year. This is a new project and museum for the Chicago area. Reverend Stanley Keeble is the mind behind the idea. He is the current CEO of the project to establish a permanent location for the recognition of the gospel music legends that have originated in Chicago. There are currently no special accommodations as the building is not yet open to the public.

Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum
2230 North Cannon Drive
Chicago, IL, 60614
773-755-5100
http://www.chias.org
The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum is in the process of adding additional programs for people with visual impairments. The educational facilities are used by students and teachers throughout the Chicago area. They currently do not offer tours or special accommodations for people with visual impairments, but are prioritizing this as an important change to their facility in the coming year.

Field Museum
1400 S. Lake Shore Dr.
Chicago, IL, 60605
312-665-7722
http://fm1.fieldmuseum.org

The Field Museum has had changes over the years. Curators have varying priorities and patrons with visual impairments were not always at the top of the list. The permanent exhibits are labeled in large print with some tactile reproductions. Traveling exhibits do not have accessibility for people with vision impairments. There are no signs or brochures in braille. Docent tours are available with a two-week advance notice.

The Museum of Science and Industry
5th Street and Lake Shore Drive
Chicago, Illinois 60637
773-684-1414
http://www.msichicago.org

The Museum of Science and Industry is the last remaining building for the 1893 World's Columbia Exposition. The museum has many hands-on and interactive exhibits. Signs are in large print, but there are no braille labels inside the museum. They offer an audio tour as well as descriptive docent tours. Many of the exhibits include tactual models for further exploration but young patrons. They have an extensive education department to assist teachers with innovative lesson that can be completed in the classroom.

Chicago History Museum
1601 N. Clark St.
Chicago, IL 60614
312-642-4600
http://www.chicagohistory.org
The Chicago History Museum has permanent collections with braille and large print labels. The exhibits include tactile examples and reproduction where possible. The curator wants students to use the museum as a location to learn about the past, to be aware of the present, and to plan for the future. There are audio tours available as well as docent tours with prior registration.

National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum
1801 South Indiana Avenue
Chicago, IL, 60616
312-326-0270
http://www.nvvam.org

The National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum is compliant with ADAAG standards. Many of their patrons are returning veterans with disabilities. They offer large print signs, an online guided tour, and docent tours. They have not had a request from accessibility from someone with a vision impairment; however, they were interested in making their museum a memorable experience for anyone who visited.

Du Sable Museum of African American History
740 East 56th Place
Chicago, IL, 60637-1495
773-947-0600
http://www.dusablemuseum.org

The DuSable Museum is filled with photographs and visual art that tell the history of African heritage in the United States. It is a small museum with traditional print used in its displays. The staff was very helpful, but regretted that the only accommodation offered was docent tours arranged in advance for people with visual impairments.

Spertus Museum and Institute of Jewish Studies
610 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL, 60605
312-322-1700
http://www.spertus.edu
Spertus Museum was a small exhibit in the lobby of the Institute. There is no braille or large print accommodations in the museum section of the Institute. The educational facilities are compliant with ADAAG standards and make materials available in audio, braille, and enlarged print when requested. The museum portion of the Institute had changed recently due to funding issues.

Mexican Fine Arts Center
1852 West 19th Street
Chicago, IL, 60608
312-738-1503
http://www.mfacmchicago.org

The Mexican Fine Arts Center is dedicated to educational awareness through the arts. They have lesson plans available for teachers to implement in the classroom that encompass Mexican culture and holidays. They offer docent tours as the only type of accommodation that they have for people with visual impairments at this time.

Oriental Institute Museum
University of Chicago
1155 East 58th Street
Chicago, IL, 60637
773-702-9521
http://oi.uchicago.edu

The Oriental Institute is not a hands-on museum. Labeling of exhibits is done in the traditional format. If a docent tour is arranged specifying that the audience has vision impairments, they supplement the tour with reproduction artifacts.

Museum of Contemporary Photography
Columbia College
600 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605,
3126635554
www.mocp.org

Since the museum is all photographs, there is no tactual component to the exhibits. For people with vision impairments if arranged in advance they
offer a descriptive tour with a docent. There is no braille or large print signs.

Lillstreet Art Center
4401 N. Ravenswood Avenue
773.769.4226
http://www.lillstreet.com

The Lillstreet Art Center is a center of learning and a gallery to display the work of local artists. The mission of the center is to offer a meaningful art experiences for their patrons, no matter their skill level. When registering for a class or workshop it is best to inform them of any special requirements to alleviate any misunderstandings. There might be certain restrictions due to safety issues.

Children’s Museum
Chicago, Illinois
700 East Grand Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611,
312 527 1000
http://www.chichildrensmuseum.org

This museum is completely hands-on. All exhibits are touchable and meant to be experienced with all the senses. There are braille signs and brochures available. Since this museum specializes in early childhood experiences, they offer a customizable tour package for students with any disability. Their goal is to get children moving and using their sense to encounter the world around them.
Bibliography: