

EDITORIAL

Museum Accessibility as a Curatorial Method

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An exhibition is never only a set of objects. It is a sequence of bodily and interpretive invitations: move here, look from this angle, read at this distance, listen through this device, wait, turn, compare, and remember. When access is considered only after installation, these invitations have already assumed a visitor who can stand, see, hear, process language, tolerate sensory conditions, and navigate space in a particular way.

Accessibility is therefore not external to curating. It is part of how knowledge is organized. A label written in plain language may expose an argument that was previously hidden by jargon. Audio description requires a curator to decide which visual relationships matter. A tactile model can reveal spatial structure not apparent from a single viewpoint. Seating changes the pace at which an object can be encountered. These interventions do not merely deliver the same content through alternative channels; they can deepen the content.

Legal standards establish essential minimums, but compliance alone cannot anticipate the variety of bodies, senses, and cognitive styles among visitors. Access improves when disabled people participate as curators, artists, designers, educators, evaluators, and paid advisors. Consultation should begin before layouts and media are fixed, and contributors should have authority to influence decisions.

Hamraie's history of universal design shows that access is shaped by politics and expertise rather than arising from a neutral formula. No design works identically for everyone. Bright light may support some low-vision visitors and create difficulty for others; extensive audio may assist some visitors and overload others. The goal is not a mythical universal

solution but a range of choices, clear information, and a process for adjustment.

Co-design should also avoid treating one participant as representative of all disability. Museums need relationships with varied organizations and individuals, including people whose disabilities are not apparent. Paid testing at multiple stages can identify conflicts early.

Multimodal interpretation should be planned as a connected system. Captions, transcripts, sign-language interpretation, audio description, tactile resources, high-contrast text, easy-read materials, and quiet routes can reinforce one another. Digital content should follow accessible design standards and remain useful without requiring the newest device.

Choice matters. Visitors should be able to preview sensory conditions, route length, seating, lighting, and interactive requirements. A museum map that identifies quiet areas, rest points, step-free routes, and staff assistance supports autonomy. Staff training is equally important because a technically accessible building can remain unwelcoming if procedures are rigid or information is inconsistent.

The participatory museum model emphasizes that visitors contribute knowledge rather than only receive it. Accessible interpretation extends this principle by recognizing multiple forms of attention and expression. Feedback can include conversation, drawing, object handling, recorded response, or digital annotation rather than a single written survey.

Access and conservation are sometimes framed as opposing goals, particularly around touch, light, or proximity. Real tensions exist, but they should be addressed through creative risk management. Replicas, samples, facsimiles, 3D models, handling collections, controlled

rotation, and mediated touch can provide meaningful alternatives. The explanation of why an original cannot be touched should itself be accessible.

Curators should avoid assuming that visual access to an original is the normative experience and every alternative a lesser copy. Different modes disclose different properties. A tactile model may communicate form; audio can communicate process and context; a facsimile may allow close examination impossible in a case. The curatorial task is to explain what each mode offers and omits.

One accessible exhibition cannot compensate for inaccessible recruitment, procurement, ticketing, websites, or staff areas. Museums should assign budgets and decision authority to access work, include it in project schedules, and document lessons so that each exhibition does not start again. Procurement contracts should specify accessibility, and evaluation should include disabled users before final payment.

Access information must be accurate and current. Overpromising can be as exclusionary as silence when visitors arrive and discover that a lift, captioning system, or quiet space is unavailable. Museums should publish limitations plainly and provide alternatives where possible.

Accessibility is often described as opening an existing exhibition to more people. A stronger approach recognizes that access changes what an exhibition can know and communicate. When disabled people participate in curatorial decisions, museums encounter assumptions about value, perception, and the ideal visitor that would otherwise remain hidden. Accessibility is consequently not a technical appendix to curating. It is a rigorous method for making interpretation more plural, accountable, and responsive.