

**THE ACCESSIBLE MUSEUM:  
SITE AND INSIGHT***by William Kirby***A Personal View: Dependence And Independence**

A couple of years ago I visited Prague for the first time. I went as the only blind member of a group with the Hampshire Sculpture Trust. Beforehand I had arranged for two Czech guides; I was sent some raised maps of the city and images of the Castle and Cathedral, together with some background information on tape. All I could see was the occasional peripheral glimpse of light reflected on the tramlines or through railings, or what I took to be the shape of a window in a dark interior. Nevertheless, I now have a very full perception of that historic and beautiful site, and a memorable insight into the nature of works of art in the National Gallery and the Cubist Museum. I cannot forget the large assembly of sculptures in between the street musicians and performers on the Charles Bridge and my vivid impressions of the architecture and design in the capital of the Czech Republic. It would take another talk to describe many other sensory experiences.

True, I was dependent on a range of assistance, but I was offered a wide spectrum of choices from which I could make my independent judgements.

**Many Ways Of Seeing**

All my work is based on the fact that, although I can see next to nothing, I can still gain a good perception of displays and objects in museums and galleries. I would not do the work if this were not so. As in Prague, sometimes I can arrive at these perceptions or insights independently, and sometimes I need external help. It is the nature of the help for visitors with disabilities, and how it can be offered in such a way as to safeguard the greatest degree of independence, that I wish to discuss.

**Many Kinds Of People**

Although 'Site and Insight' might suggest a punning concentration on the needs and wishes of people with a sight impairment. I hope that I can imply, and that you can infer that many of the principles I shall propose can be applied to visitors with other physical, sensory and intellectual impairments. In ten minutes I cannot begin to tell the whole story, and so shall concentrate on the

one that I know best: visual impairment - that is to say partial sight and blindness.

**Consultation And Awareness-Training**

These are the two keys to open the doors of access for all today you can consult with the blind person you see before you. I shall say a word about training later. Your difficult task will be to ask yourselves what are the implications of what is being said about sight loss for visitors with a hearing loss, cerebral palsy, dyslexia, intellectual impairment, multiple disabilities or other impairments. My hand-list gives addresses and sources of information where one can reach those who know some of the answers to these and other questions.

**Professional And Voluntary Responsibilities**

Many of the issues are, or should be, the concern of the directors and professional staff of museums, but it is vital that anyone who can be called 'front of house' personnel or those who meet the public, should be aware of the issues and prepared to meet them. It is highly appropriate that Friends and Voluntary Guides should consider these matters, as they are, or can be part of the consultative process and, I hope, involved in the front-of-house training.

**Opportunities And Challenges**

Estimates of the numbers of disabled people vary between 1 in 10 and 1 in 8 members of our population, and if one includes carers and families, the proportion can be higher. The signs are, thanks to the opportunities which should be created by the access criteria for the National Lottery and the Disability Discrimination Act, that more and more people with disabilities will visit museums and galleries, and take part in their workshops and activities.

**MAGDA: Barrier Free**

The museum world has changed since MAGDA, the Museums and Galleries Disability Association was set up some twelve years ago. Now every museum is aware of what should be done, if only thanks to the Lottery and DDA, but there is still a need for MAGDA's work with its publications, seminars and conferences. I know of only one museum - the British Museum - which has a full-time access co-ordinator. When directors and Boards of museums fully meet what are now their legal

responsibilities, MAGDA will fade away. Until then, there is still a need for the information and pressure being produced in its newly named newsletter 'Barrier Free'.

What are the Barriers facing disabled people in museums?

They are not medical, but social or institutional obstacles unwittingly facing visitors with disabilities. If I describe some of them, I hope the implications for training are implicit.

The barrier of physical access: steps, inadequate ramps and handrails, unsympathetic floor-surfaces, unconsidered lighting and inappropriate decorative schemes, unnecessary or unmarked obstacles and hazards, and poor signage and a lack of way-finding devices such as tactile plans. All these create unnecessary obstacles.

The barrier of poor access information: a good access information brochure, in print, large print, on tape or disk or in braille is invaluable both to disabled people and to their companions, especially if it is also available in advance of a visit.

The barrier of uninformed attitudes and unbiased assumptions: training can do much to reveal what it is necessary to know about the needs and wishes of disabled people, and how to achieve the greatest degree of independence coupled with the kinds of appropriate, non-patronising, help. For instance, it is important to realise that 90% of visually impaired people can see something, can benefit from large print and good lighting, and regularly follow television. If those meeting visually impaired visitors can think about how to speak to them and learn a few simple guiding techniques, they will be well on the way to regarding blind or partially sighted people as 'normal' human beings who do not see very well.

The barrier of poor marketing and inadequately targeted information. One of the worst symptoms of being socially disabled is that one does not know what is available. This is principally the museum's responsibility. But much can be done by word of mouth, and making sure that the information, in the appropriate format, gets to the disabled people themselves or their self-help groups, and not only to the sighted voluntary organisers who assume that museum-going is only about sighted experience.

The barrier of inaccessible displays and exhibitions: legible labelling, good lighting and contrasting backgrounds, clear interpretative material, audio-guides and tactile images, and handling facilities and touch tours all play their part in removing this obstruction.

The barrier of non-consultation: a number of museums now have well-established advisory groups and representation of disabled people at their management and board meetings, in addition to informal contacts with disabled individuals.

### **Friendship**

The Friends network is well named, and its members are in a good position to ensure that museums are not only universally accessible, but are so in the friendliest way possible.

### **Useful names, addresses and resources in the Arts, Heritage and Visual Impairment**

Marcus Weisen  
Leisure Officer (Arts)  
The RNIB  
224 Great Portland Street  
London W1N 6AA  
Tel: 0171 388 1266 ext 3539

'Disability Resource Directory for Museums - 1994', with a supplement in 1997, obtainable from:  
The Museums and Galleries Commission  
16 Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1H 9AA  
Tel: 0171 233 4200

Free (but please send £6 for postage), for museums eligible for MG Registration, and for recognised support organisations. For others, the cost, including postage, is £24, and for countries outside the EEC, £30.

'In Through the Front Door' - Disabled People and the Visual Arts: Examples of Good Practice by Jayne Earnscliffe. The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1992: £9.95.  
Also available on tape from AIRS, Gateshead Central Library.

'The Big Foot: Museums and Children with Learning Difficulties' by Anne Pearson and Chitra Aloysius, £5.95 plus £1 p&p. From:  
British Museum Publications  
46 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3TQ

'Sharing the Wisdom of Age: Museums and Older People' 1995. Managing Editor Jane Tittley: Age Concern, England and MAGDA.  
Obtainable from:  
Age Concern, England  
1268 London Road  
London SW16 4ER  
Tel: 0181 679 8000.

Price £6 or £3.50 to MAGDA and Age Concern members, plus £1.00 postage and packing.

'Designing Exhibitions to Include People with Disabilities: A Practical Guide'. Written and Illustrated by Gail Nolan for The National Museums of Scotland (NMS), 1997: Price, including p&p: £10.00 (£5.00 to MAGDA members). Obtainable from:  
The Department of Public Affairs  
National Museums of Scotland  
Chambers Street  
Edinburgh EH1 1JF  
Tel: 0131 247 4435  
Fax: 0131 220 4819  
Email: [clt@nms.ac.uk](mailto:clt@nms.ac.uk)

The guide is also available on cassette from the NMS.

Museums and Galleries Disability Association  
(MAGDA UK)  
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