

# The Architectural Intersection of Museums and Disability Policy

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## ABSTRACT

The way in which people with disabilities devise methods to move through the world and faced barriers before architectural modifications evolved based on legislation intersects with the architectural preservation of culturally significant sites, specifically museums. By excluding the disabled community in museum spaces, it perpetuates the ableist mindset of society further by limiting information, creating a disparity in cultural climate and community belonging. How do museums preserve historical significance, while also creating a space for all? In order to devise an accepting space within museums and go beyond the idea of inclusion, people within public spaces need to strive to understand the way that individuals interact with the institution, while adjusting the space in an inherent way to include access for all beyond the legal policy.

**KEYWORDS:** Museum Accessibility, Historic Preservation, Disability, Cultural Site

There is a ubiquitous struggle that people with disabilities face daily with lack of access to public spaces even after policy was designed to counter this reality, creating a perpetual contemporary fight for accessibility in America. How do cultural sites engrained within a community in America create spaces for people with disabilities since the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act? Where is the intersection of accessibility and function with historic preservation of museums and does it serve or hinder the feeling of belonging for all? Not only is a museum an area that denotes an element of personally motivated erudition, but the space itself is considered a trusted source of information with over 850 million people visiting museums in the United States each year (Pressman & Schulz, 2021). In order to elucidate the reality of this widespread battle within the disabled community for accessibility in museums that is granted to the able-bodied, it is imperative to understand the definition of disability within the scope of policy. This not only dictates the way in which the public perceives disability, but it extends to grasping the drive behind the desperate need for accessibility and the limitations, exclusions, and isolation

created in the face of a world not designed with the spectrum of difference in mind.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the definition is distinctly a legal one versus a medical clarification and serves to cover discrimination for people with mental and physical impairments that impact daily life (ADA National Network, 2023d). There was an intentional shift in the way that people attempted to define disability, as to make it more applicable to the life of every day people that viewed disability as a concept that happened to others, along with distancing the new definition away from the idea that disability is a blemish on society that needs to be corrected. This ideology seeped into the very foundation of every argument for decision-making with constructing accessible spaces because disability became a notion of distance if it was not a personal journey and modifications were conceived as extra. Similarly, this declaration made the statement that it was monetarily unattainable more believable to people in stakeholder positions. Yet, when it comes to configuring an exiting space in a museum, placing a bench in the sake of less works of art is a small price in actuality when the other alternative would be skipping an entire room due to inaccessibility. With the rebranding of terminology akin to ‘universal design’ shifting to more than just adjustments for people with disabilities, it seemed to meld further into areas of interaction with policy and aesthetics. Thinking practically, are the counters at the information booth low enough for a person to access? When it comes to accessibility within a museum, “the best height for interactives is a range between thirty-six and forty-eight inches from the floor,” as it not only allows access for adults, but also children (Pressman & Schulz, 2021, p. 136). Fundamentally, the albeit broad phrase ‘accessibility is not as hard as people make it out to be’ encompasses the veritable philosophy for adjusting cultural places for access because it narrows down to the singular driving mission behind any museum: what is your true purpose if you are not accessible for your community?

## Literature Review

It was essential from the start of researching a sense of belonging in museums to delve into the historical context of what it means to design a place for all people. The act of visiting an art museum is a cultural activity that requires interpretation through lived experiences, transfer of knowledge, and an active collaboration within the space (Christidou, 2016). The design of the space not only affects the agency of the visitor, but it also dictates the narrative interpretation of the entire experience and “people need help and incentives to interact, [to]

increase understanding and acceptance, and to form relationships that transcend generations, social backgrounds, and cultural upbringings” (Wollentz et al., 2022, p. 23). How has disability law and history interplayed with this type of design because with “accessibility and inclusion, environmental access simply means the ability to easily move through and interact with the spaces around you” (Pressman & Schulz, 2021, p. 45)? With the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) being the most prominent regulatory factor of accessibility in spaces, the enactment in 1990 meant that the narrative of accessibility was severely lacking with historical models. A quandary arises about what to do with spaces for modifications and accommodations, especially when it comes to examining places of cultural artifacts because a line is hard to decipher for structural modifications to create an accessible space. Through the research, a relationship was established amid defining laws, what it means to create a design for every single person and how that came to light, the significance of inclusion with the disability community versus an ableist framework, and what it means when the narrative shifts due to lack of information.

### **Environmental Access means Universal Design**

Thinking back to a phenomenological mindset, in order to create a place for people to enjoy, all people need to be able to move around in it to experience every aspect. Prior to the enactment of ADA, there were few examples of what redesigning architecture for people with disabilities in mind was like due to lack of enforcement of previous laws, irregular timelines, and unclear government regulations (Williamson, 2020). The belief moving forward from the application of ADA is centered around the design that is geared to starting with an inclusive strategy, eliminating the need to devise solutions to access as time moves forward. Nevertheless, an issue emerged as one of problematic visions that did not restructure to include building design and construction as a fundamental element of civil rights for people with disabilities, which coincided with disability narrative in the public being used solely as a form of ‘inspiration’. Before the 1990s, the presence of access like ramps and concrete to more easily transfer over was considered an afterthought and not included in the original proposal of the buildings, making it visually unappealing to the public and perceived as a more expensive addition (Williamson, 2020).

At first mention, this concept of construction was called “accessible design,” but was renamed “universal design” by architect and wheelchair user Ronald Mace in 1985 as a way of rebranding the idea to the general public as a solution for every person; in conjunction,

it showcased that inventing areas for people with disabilities should not be considered ‘other’ because it was not vastly dissimilar than constructing for all (Pressman & Schulz, 2021; Williamson, 2020). By 1997, Mace had collaborated with nine other architects to establish seven defining characteristics of the ideal universal design called Principles of Universal Design: “equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use” (Pressman & Schulz, 2021, p. 56). The defining theme that interlocks these cornerstones of creating an accessible building is entrenching the idea of access for all within every decision, meaning that it becomes a unified approach engrained in design because not just people with disabilities will utilize the space. By intentionally removing the barriers to accessibility in public spaces, it “provides more choice, equality, control, and independence, and this includes visiting museums and other cultural organizations” (Pressman & Schulz, 2021, p. 3).

### **Inclusivity in Decision-Making: Limited Access Creates Limited Information**

The idea of inclusivity in decision-making unfolded in a two-pronged problem as it stemmed from lack of voice and choice from people within the disabled community, constructing a deficiency of communication towards the advancement of accessible places and absence of access to knowledge for people with disabilities. When addressing approachability within a museum, the question on what qualifies as accessible for organizations arises from best practices for access through the lens of policy, most specifically shaped through ADA. However, who is initially asking those questions within the organization looking to accommodate and who is, in-turn, answering them? Moreover, what schema is shaping the answers and results? If public places go beyond the perspective of what should be considered the bare minimum of following the law to start questioning how their source of knowledge on disability and access intersects, then it would allow for a socially responsive environment that extends access through personal narrative and lived experiences (Richardson & Kletchka, 2022). Without the voice of individuals within the community of people with disabilities, the chronicle of design is limited, incomplete, and follows the historical pattern of creating a space for disabilities as an after-thought, as opposed to seamlessly amalgamating into the architecture of the space.

Conjunctively, this creates access through an ableist framework that limits the type of information presented to people with disabilities, along

with the even more controlled idea that it regulates the information that people with disabilities can interpret due to barriers beyond their control. As museums serve as a meeting place of social and cultural relevancy that “have a role in reducing loneliness and alienation in society by creating and facilitating meaningful social activities,” the exclusion through the design of space leads to an inability to exchange meaning through art reflexivity that comes with interpreting material collectively (Wollentz et al., 2022, p. 24). Pressman and Schulz (2021) hypothesized describing an artwork to a person who was visually impaired, creating a scenario that limited personal interpretation and cultural significance by unintentionally not providing certain aspects about the artwork that would actually drastically alter the meaning; “we have limited your access to the meaning of this artwork by controlling the information you receive” (p. xi). Further, every community has a definable culture that permeates the mindset of those within and ‘disability culture’ has always been ever-present, yet suspiciously missing in historical context from within narratives in research and limited to create a very eugenic characteristic. There is physical evidence of disability throughout time that serves to highlight that disability is human nature, such as “canes, splints, eye patches,” but the genuine experiences of these people will always be what molds the culture of community (Williamson, 2020, pp. 5, 189). Access should serve to broaden the conceptual lens to life and bolster belonging, as information historically reachable to the disabled community has been squandered by societal construct in a way that narrowed the scope of knowledge on the disabled community (Lajoie, 2022).

## Historical Context

While the idea of access to spaces has evolved in America to become a distinct ideology that revolves around civil rights, Congress passed one of the first federal mandates for accessibility in a government facility with the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, with several iterations of laws following before the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 (Williamson, 2020). With the knowledge that ADA applies to every single public place, regardless of historical status, it dictates that existing cultural spaces prior to January 26, 1993 cannot be modified in the name of accessibility that threatens the historical nuance, unless it is “readily achievable;” it became increasingly clear that where the lines were drawn on spaces is related to federally funded institutions, detailing private and public entities (Salmen, 1998, p. 27). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 dictates that every person who wishes to participate in a program organized with the aid of federal funding cannot be excluded through the grounds of discrimination; then, this

is coupled with the Americans with Disabilities Act, which proclaims that all museums are required to remove all barriers to participation for visitors with disabilities, regardless of federal funding (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration & Management, 2023; ADA National Network, 2023a). When it comes to state or locally-funded institutions, Title II of the ADA dictates that they are responsible for conducting an audit that leads to self-evaluation on accessibility to the facility. Yet, private entities that fall under Title III: Public Accommodations and Services Operated by Private Entities, like museums, are not required under the law to perform a self-assessment and this is where disconnect occurs between building inclusivity in functional design, aesthetics, and historical spaces. It was worthy of note that the definition set forth within Title III on public spaces is any place that “operations have an effect on commerce, will be regarded as public accommodations,” and can fall under the description of discrimination (O’Connor, 2019, p. 29). Another inherent pitfall with checking for accessibility is the transition plan that follows, which is required for Title II establishments, but not for Title III spaces.

There is a checklist through the ADA Standard for Accessible Design website that was constructed along with the Institute for Human Centered Design and the New England ADA Center that is free to the public and lists several categories for accessibility that align with ADA Title III. On the page, it outlines four main areas as priorities for accessibility in public spaces, which are presence of an accessible “approach and entrance, access to goods and services, access to public restrooms, and access to other facilities” (New England ADA Center, 2016). Within those categories, the phrase that kept appearing as a vital component for the success of the checklist was that there was access to spaces and occasions *without* assistance. Can the door be opened with one limb, free of tight gripping or grasping, while also using no more than five pounds of force to open (ADA National Network, 2023c)? In a newly built structure, are at minimum 60% of the public entrances accessible to people with mobility issues? One pressing obstacle is the enforcement of accommodation within a world defined by the ADA legislation because “the primary means of enforcement for access regulations has been individual or class action lawsuits” (Williamson, 2020, p. 190).

Another legislation that impacts historical preservation that came into light in 1966 is called the National Historic Preservation Act, as it was enacted to “modernize the American Landscape” with the precursor being the Antiquities Act enacted in 1906 (Walker, 2019; O’Connor, 2019, p. 28). In summation, there is a lengthy process that a historic site must

undertake if there is a desire to alter the property in any way under Section 106 of the Act; Title III is where this law coincides with ADA and the intention is that this acts as a series of checks and balances for preserving the cultural integrity of the museum as a historical artifact. With these two laws intersecting to reconstruct a level of accessibility that is “readily achievable to the maximum extent feasible,” there is a disconnect between how to achieve those goals and which law prevails for accessibility and preservation. This is due to the fact that terminology was not defined within ADA as who carried “the burden of proof” in terms of “readily achievable,” along with noting that “undue burden” should be demonstrated by businesses as a reason for not altering exclusionary issues and should not “threaten or destroy” historical substance (O’Connor, 2019, pp. 30-32). There is some legal precedent on what this etymology within the law constitutes in terms of who it falls to, but there is still a disparity in how to create a balance between the two issues when fashioning a public space accessible to all because they both originate from differing intentions and goals.

Along with ADA came a rebranding of sorts for people with disabilities to what the masses viewed as a right ingrained within American values for success and economic contribution, coinciding with the American Dream dogma. The negative connotation of restricting information seeped into every corner of research, including the historical precedent that by providing accessible places it would create a level of autonomy for people with disabilities and result in a “threat to individualism” (Williamson, 2020, p. 4). Once ADA was put into place and the fidelity of implementation was under scrutiny, disability progressed “from the margins of acceptable discussion to a category of legal protections and a political and cultural identity that challenges core American beliefs about individual autonomy” (Williamson, 2020, p. 16). Currently, institutions still struggle with implementing ADA with dependability and use the guise of money and design challenges in mature places, under the framework of ableism, as a means to circumvent accessibility. Barring the philosophy that the law strictly governs the design of a business whether clarity is rampant or circumstantial, the overarching responsibility extends to the institution itself, as it must decide the core beliefs of the organization to be able to answer what it holds more valuable with access or historic preservation.

## **Current Challenges and Potential Policy**

In 2024, the American Alliance of Museums estimated that “more people visit art museums, science centers, historic houses or sites, zoos, or aquariums than attend professional sporting events” and



the American public registers museums “a more reliable source of historical information than books, teachers, or even personal accounts by relatives” (American Alliance of Museums, 2024). Yet, there are still more impediments to accessibility in museums than at first glance, such as physical, sensory, communicative, financial, cerebral, and attitudinal barriers (Pressman & Schulz, 2021). There is a stigma present within creating spaces for people with disabilities that accommodations are only limited to people with physical disabilities, specifically people who use wheelchairs, as they were the most visible during the movement towards enacting legislations. This thought-process transcends to redesigning a building and contemporary architecture, serving to “undercut the complexity of disability inclusion by creating the perception that access was ‘done’ when ramps were built” (Williamson, 2020, p. 11). As so aptly stated by Richardson and Kletchka (2022), accessibility to museums for people with disabilities is “often conceptualized as making accommodations for their visitors,” which translates to a limited vantage point of checking ramp access or providing closed-captioning for videos (p. 139). With the enactment of ADA, it removed humanity in recognizing that access was meant for experience and fostered an immediate sense of compliance by designing a limited checklist. Furthering this marginalizing nature of accommodation within museum spaces is the internalized problem that most spaces offer only “professional development on accessibility [that] amounts to an etiquette course that offers lists of special actions to check off as they are completed” (Richardson & Kletchka, 2022, p. 140). Being a truly culturally responsive museum means that the definition of disability is not limited to physical barriers and begins to delve into the spectrum of disabilities by breaking from the ableist ideology with inclusion of the actual community; access should be more than just checking a box for an organization.

As stated within *The Art of Access: A Practical Guide For Museum Accessibility*, there are times where the changing of designs for accessibility can be an easy component to alter, like the shifting of a chair off center for more space or swapping a meeting location to a more open room (Pressman & Schulz, 2021). There are more pressing challenges in evolving a space for universal access and creating realistic outcomes of addressing the problem in an equitable manner. This interlocks in a way with the main problem of redesigning a space, money. This is also why it is necessary to include community partners and the entirety of the organization in addressing identified problems, as they possess a level of commitment in the organization to ensure the success of the business. One of the prevailing arguments in the case of modifying a museum to include accessibility has been that it would be



too costly to eradicate barriers in spaces; “yet, the government’s own statistics show that the costs of removing barriers are relatively low” (Davis, 2000, p. 203).

With the idea of incorporating the Principles of Universal Design, constructing museum spaces for all people should be a process with open decision-making and not used as solely all-encompassing (Pressman & Schulz, 2021). Aligning with the ideology of Ronald Mace, he famously provided several examples of how designing for people with disabilities is not intended to instill a sense of dread in added costs to a facility, but more towards how small adjustments that are cost effective and less expensive can make a world of difference in creating a welcoming space for all. He went so far as to note aspects such as “lever-shaped door handles, which were easier for people with manual impairments, but were not visually or conceptually associated with disability” because the idea was for these adjustments to become fully integrated into the way buildings are made moving forward (Williamson, 2020, p. 148). By constructing an environment that answers the question of accessibility for whom and intentionality for all, it cognizes the way bodies move through space and intersects in a way that creates a sense of belonging (Lajoie, 2022).

Another pressing barrier to devising accessible spaces was the mindset of the community structured around disability and accessibility. In direct opposition to pessimism, the Laurent House in Rockford, Illinois built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1955 is an impeccable example of what can be constructed without the pressing belief of limitations placed on architecture when universal design is considered from the beginning without an ableist framework. Kenneth Laurent was a World War II veteran who used the aid of mobility devices and implored the famed architect to design a house accessible to a person who used a wheelchair, to which Wright designed an open concept with the height of tables lower to allow for every person to be on the same eye level, the hinges in cabinets opened differently, and the doorways were wider, just to name a few design features. This accommodating way of thinking permeated other areas of his builds later on, as evident in the shallow incline of the Guggenheim Museum and all took place forty years prior to ADA; accessibility in design is not challenging when it becomes an innate methodology to promote systemic change (Ahmer, 2021).

Ultimately, how do museums as cultural institutions address accessibility while preserving historical facets in a way that follows ADA without sacrificing significance? Initially, it is imperative to the preservation of any culturally significant space to define what actually

makes it relevant through articulating appearance and structure before engaging in an audit of accessibility. Thus, allowing for the dictation and outline of a plan to implement feasibility of evolving a museum space. By comparing problems in accessibility along with policy to create an action plan, integrating appropriate solutions that prohibit breaking the cultural structure seems more attainable. The idea of modifying a museum space does not have to mean creating access to everything if it compromises the integrity, but be creative in devising a plan that satisfies a welcoming aura that extends to every single visitor. There is an example of this system in the restructuring of the Molly Brown House Museum where the goal was to maintain the historical properties of the home by not only installing a lift to some levels, but also opening up another section of the house not previously viewed because other areas were not able to be reached by elevator; these modifications were coupled with including a tactile experience of the fabrics from areas of the house that are still unreachable (Pressman, 2020). Intriguingly, there was a concept founded within the research that by solely focusing on the restructuring of a space by connoting disability as a “technical problem” that it negates “an integral aspect of the monument’s histories;” preservation of cultural sites should be defined as an essential issue for the maintenance of a city and for the populace (Gissen, 2019, pp. v, vi).

Moreover, with the increased knowledge in technology there is access more than ever designable through digital format. This leads into other fields of alterations such as replications and reproductions of spaces that allows for duplication of the experience holistically. Thinking creatively on how to solve a problem that presents modifications is endless when given the time to ruminate on how people with disabilities move through the world using all senses. The most obvious disabilities tend to be the type that people can easily identify and are the most thought of amendment. What about extending consideration beyond sight and touch to other aspects of life, like olfactory senses? There are 17 different manufactured smells that Disney uses in the park system to bolster the immersion of the experience and denote a specific feeling; this same principle of design could also be integrated into museums with accommodations, as it also serves to produce a more all-encompassing experience for visitors (Spence, 2021). Further, this is supported within the ideology of universal design as it interplays with aesthetics as a means of obliging the minimum requirements for access, as “aesthetic experience of the built environment involves all our senses: the sight of color, and form; the echo in a room; the smell of wood; the touch of handrails; the refreshing cool air on the skin, and so on” (Ahmer, 2021, p. 41). For a deeper definition and unmitigated

clarity, accessibility means delving deeper than an answer to access for people with visible or physical disabilities, and a move towards one that speaks to the verity of the holistic human experience.

By creating an intersection on meeting ADA requirements and aesthetic choices, engaging people with disabilities is the next step in devising an inclusive museum space that welcomes all people. Thus, creating an integrated level of decision-making that allows for going beyond what is considered ADA priority to address every potential barrier wholly; “access is a process that takes time, energy, and skill, and sharing authority around decision-making with people who are impacted by such decision is good inclusive practice” (Pressman & Schulz, 2021, p. 34). By incorporating perspectives from within the disability community into active administrative roles, it produces diversity in thought and personal narrative, builds strong community relations through representation, and ultimately impacts the outcome of the visitors to museums; no decision should be made for a community without them present in the room. With the absence of this philosophy, it creates an imbalance where the museum is thinking of what they can do *for* people with disabilities, instead of *alongside* them.

## Methods Forward

With clarity, preservation and contemporary architecture of museums should be structured around the idea of shifting values to create a sense of human capacity for empathy in a way that honors the past and expounds on the future. In any museum space, past or present, it is imperative to retain who they are providing access for and be cognizant not to exclude any member of the disabled society by incorporating the change from within the community. With the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the intersection of the National Historic Preservation Act, it opened numerous doors for accessibility that had previously been closed for lived experiences within the disabled narrative, yet branched into a dichotomy of what access means to certain people within a marginalized community. Oftentimes, accessibility through policy promotes a regimented outlook towards inclusion and perpetuates the ableist standard of disability within society; “in spite of the implementation of ‘best practices’ and accommodations, and although every box has been ticked on the accessibility checklist, disabled people will *not* feel like they belong in a particular space” (Lajoie, 2022, p. 328). With every available resource on sites like The ADA National Network, there is very little material actually needed to be able to complete the bare minimum when it comes to examining the access of a museum (ADA National Network,

2023b). If inclusion is universally defined as access for every person, it stands to reason that every person involved within a museum should be held responsible for enacting the accessibility of the space and include the voice of the disabled community in decision-making. By inclusion of the designated community, it also aids in eliminating the ableist thought of designing a space for people with disabilities as an interference and defies the socially constructed normative idea that disability is a concept limited to a certain population; disability is the one community that every person will eventually become a part of, temporarily or permanently.

Design should not only be perceived as all-encompassing in terms of mobility, aesthetics, need, and purpose, but as a concept that exceeds function and serves a community within a museum space. With the unique intent fostered within a museum's purpose, "increased learning through social spaces is connected to a museum's ability to construct spaces where reflection, physical elements and activities are allowed to play important roles in facilitating learning" (Wollentz et al., 2022, p. 38). David Gissen cognized a valid point when dictating the way that museums are often defined by a social construct of a "romantic aesthetic" because they connote a perceived specific physical experience of the past as a means of garnering knowledge of the world (Gissen, 2019, p. vii). Through the narrowing of the definition of admission to one that revolves around "physical space and access," it not only diminishes the perspective of the disabled community, but it also molds change of access as a one-time fix (Lajoie, 2022, p. 319). There needs to be a push away from the fallacy of 'changing' the past towards one that includes broaching a pluralistic tactic with the representation that it has so continuously erased; thus, redefining the accessibility and function of space through multiple modalities. Pushing further when it comes to the hospitable aspect of a museum building, a spatial area can serve to be a grounding experience and provide an opportunity to "exercise our freedom and agency" when it denounces the alienated aspect of limited accessibility (Lajoie, 2022, p. 330). Over time, with more knowledge of inclusion presented to the public, the fervent hope is that museums come to the realization that engraining accessibility should be an innate quality in decisions, building belonging into the fabric of the community served by the space.

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