

ACCESS – International Practice and Inspirational Examples

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1. Introduction

Arts Access Australia is the national arts and disability organisation with members in every State and Territory including Accessible Arts in NSW. As the national body we try to keep abreast of what is happening Internationally and last year I was able to get over to the UK. Then in October this year I was in America at the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability or LEAD conference.

One of the interesting things about the LEAD conference is that the second day was held in the brand spanking new Mesa Arts Centre in Scottsdale Arizona. More than \$50 million had been spent creating a fully accessible arts centre that included performing arts and gallery spaces.

The accessible design brief for the architects was driven by a combination of civic pride and responding to an ageing population moving to the desert to retire in the sun bringing money and high expectation for accessible services with them.

As part of the LEAD conference the 150 disability arts advocates attending were invited to tour the centre and test it out. This was all

done with tremendous good humour and literally involved people on their hands and knees with tape measures checking clearances and gradients.

What we found included:

- * doors that were difficult for one person to open easily though I've no doubt they would stop a fire.
- * We found ramps without handrails – which is not really ok even if you do use a wheelchair. Then think about the risk of elderly people or kids falling off the side.
- * And my personal favourite, in the performing arts centre, was wheelchair accessible seating that had no view of the stage due to the impressive 'safety barriers' erected around the viewing platform.

So even the experts can get it wrong.

And let's think about what expertise means here – if only the Arts Centre had involved people with disabilities earlier in the design stage.

Even without involvement in the design stage what allowed the good humour on the day was the welcoming attitude of the Arts Centre management and staff inviting people with disabilities to contribute their expertise with a willingness to listen and improve access.

2. International examples

So let's now turn to some other International examples of access.

The Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, is well worth mentioning. The Kennedy Centre, quite apart from offering an extensive range of access services for its patrons, also takes a leadership role in advocating for access. They do this through;

- coordinating the national LEAD conference that I attended
- producing the Opening Stages newsletter for people with disabilities who want to have a career in the performing arts
- coordinating a national forum on careers in the performing arts for people with disabilities.
- moderating an online discussion and advice forum for access coordinators across the country
- having a dedicated access coordinator Betty Siegal on staff

In the museums and galleries area **The Smithsonian Institute** is another amazing place. The Smithsonian is a sprawling museum and gallery complex of heritage and new buildings and they offer:

- visitor maps, access information and guidelines for accessible exhibition design. All are available online and in hardcopy
- they have recently curated an exhibition 'whatever happened to polio' that includes a pair of President Franklin D Roosevelt's leg braces and the sub-exhibition 'Got ramps' with educational activities on changes in access and architectural styles over the last 50 years
- a dedicated access coordinator Beth Ziebarth on staff

Both of these US examples are from major institutions with significant financial resources backing them.

I'd now like to turn briefly to UK examples of a different kind from the Arts Council of England. One is called 'Action for access – a practical resource for arts organisations'. This resource describes different levels of engagement with access from low or no cost do now strategies through to larger scale and long term improvements to infrastructure. It is definitely worth looking at and is included in the resource list provided.

Secondly the Arts Council of England's New Audiences program has a wealth of online reports and examples from organisations of different sizes implementing access strategies for people with various disabilities. The reports are a useful source of issues and advice that could inform your own access strategies.

3. Comparisons

In drawing your attention to US and UK examples and resources it may be useful to provide some context and make comparisons with access practices in Australia.

The US and UK disability legislation is broadly equivalent to our own Disability Discrimination Act. If there is one thing that immediately struck me in both the US and UK it is how the legislation is promoted and the leadership taken by government in encouraging cultural organisations to be accessible. In the UK the government set a deadline of October 2004 for all cultural organisations to take reasonable steps to be accessible and this generated a lot of activity. In the US responsibility for access follows the money trail so that whoever or wherever you are if your organisation receives Federal money then you must meet Federal accessibility requirements. These requirements include organisations with more than 15 staff identifying an access coordinator.

Secondly, in the US and UK, there is clearly a critical mass of people, including people with disabilities, and a concentration of resources around larger cities like London, New York and Washington DC. This in turn influences the provision of access services and the level of arts development for people with disabilities. It makes touring arts and disability work much more likely and results in the development of quite specialised access providers like the UK's Dog Rose Trust who develop multi-sensory design environments for people with low or impaired vision. They have been doing it now for 30 years and are very good at it.

In Australia, as the population ages, I think we'll reach a point where our own Government realises that it cannot be solely responsible for access and takes a stronger stance in reminding organisations of their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Here in Australia we do access quite well - when we do it – and many of these models of good practice are involved in today's seminar.

For Arts Access Australia were interested in promoting good work, identifying gaps and working with cultural organisations to develop

joint strategies to improve access. This is the subject of our current Audience Development research project and our project researcher Cheryle Yin-Lo is in the audience and is happy to talk to each of you further about the work we are doing. Results of the initial survey based research into performing arts and museums and galleries will be available from early next year.

Arts Access Australia is also interested in gauging interest in online access forums and where and how people want to find out about access. For example the launch of our publication 'Making the Journey: arts and disability in Australia' is being supported by a fuel4arts feature on access for December and January. The level of response will be useful for us to assess what role we can most effectively play in promoting and supporting access.

4. Research – from examples to learning, what we already know

I'm aware that pointing out inspiration examples and resources to you can sometimes just contribute to a sense of overload - more material you don't have time to read, let alone act on. This is one of the many reasons Accessible Arts and Arts Access Australia exist - to assist you in finding what is useful and relevant and then to adapt it for your own needs.

So from the research and resources that exist lets have a look at what we already know:

The Australia Council did some research in 1995 that included some specially commissioned Australian Bureau of Statistics figures demonstrating that people with disabilities have lower rates of cultural participation than the general population.

Focus groups and surveys of people with disabilities, conducted around the 2000 Para-lympic Arts Festival, show that the majority hold a positive view of the arts and they encourage people to attend events with them.

Barriers to accessing the arts identified by people with disabilities commonly include 1) physical barriers, 2) the attitude of staff, 3) information on access and 4) ticket prices.

For people with disabilities the first point of contact with your organisation is most likely to be your website and marketing material. Including access symbols and information in both and a number, person or email to contact will be all most people need.

We know that ticket prices are an identified barrier to attending cultural events and that most events don't sell out. A resulting strategy for your organisation could be a discount ticket scheme for people with disabilities as they are a new audience that can be attracted to your events without undercutting existing audiences. The EASE ticketing service in Victoria is an interesting example of a discount service that also offers comprehensive information on event access.

There is little point in being accessible if you don't promote yourself to people with disabilities. Promotion to people with disabilities can start as niche marketing 101 and end with the realisation that providing accessible services can send a powerful welcome message to all your visitors and patrons.

One of the most common barriers cited by people with disabilities is attitudinal. How many of you regularly conduct staff awareness training on disability issues and language use? How many of you have people with disabilities as members of staff or on boards and committees?

There is precious little research into the experiences of people with disabilities attending performing arts and visiting museums and galleries. Two studies I have seen are:

Very Special Arts in Florida USA conducted research in late 2004 into the perceptions of people with disabilities regarding attendance at performing arts centres. The study found that people with disabilities placed a very high value on attending the performing arts and made recommendations that looked at ticketing prices, seating arrangements so that people could sit with friends and family, transport, staff awareness training and promotions that included people with disabilities. Is that sounding familiar? Across first world countries the barriers to the arts are very similar.

One of the most recent studies into the experiences of people with disabilities in museums and galleries was conducted locally by Accessible Arts. The full report runs to some 70 pages which makes me think we should be asking people with disabilities what they want more often. The findings do confirm what we already know and highlight a few other issues:

- People with disabilities have a strong preference for being able to access Museums independently with implications for marketing strategies, access information and signage
- Carers and companions of people with disabilities need to be involved in research and can offer valuable insights
- Multi-sensory experiences are enjoyed by all. This makes perfect sense to me – who doesn't want to touch the exhibits?
- There is a desire to see disability themes integrated into exhibitions

If you ask the Smithsonian Institute in Washington they will tell you the same thing.

5. Conclusion

So, in conclusion, look to the International examples for inspiration but don't be overawed by them.

Access is generally seen as a compliance issue and a potentially expensive one at that. The feeling I want to leave you with is one of opportunity. If one in five Australians have a disability then who here can afford to ignore 20% of their potential visitors or audience? This is especially true for those cultural institutions in receipt of taxpayer money and with an ageing population access will become harder to ignore.

When approaching access try to look at what you can do rather than looking at what you can't do and doing nothing. I call this the 'looking beyond the ramp' approach. If you don't have one then that won't stop you attracting people with vision or hearing impairments to your venue.

If you do one thing then build a relationship with people with disabilities. Ask people with disabilities what they think and want and do some staff awareness training.

Then get involved – a cultural program like the 'Accessing the Arts' event run by Accessible Arts is a great opportunity to get involved in a low risk event supported by an established arts and disability organisation that could lead to ongoing and independent relationships with visitors and patrons with disabilities.

Looking at the International examples – where access strategies are working is where people with disabilities are involved and have a relationship with the cultural organisation.

As with the Mesa Arts Centre in Arizona it is never too late to involve people with disabilities. Being welcoming and acknowledging barriers to access while addressing what you can is building a relationship with your patrons and visitors that is less likely to result in complaints and more likely to increase visitor and patron numbers.

So have a look at the handout and contact me or Accessible Arts if you wish to follow up on anything said here.

Thank you.

Top Access Resources on 7 December 2005

Australia

Making The Journey - fuel4arts

Is available in hardcopy and online from Arts Access Australia, Accessible Arts and the Australia Council. The launch of Making The Journey is being supported by a fuel4arts feature on access through December and January. www.fuel4arts.com

Accessing the Arts Kit

This information resource, developed by Accessible Arts, is divided into the following sections:

- * Ticketing and Seating Checklist
- * Print and Publication Guidelines
- * Marketing to the Arts Community checklist
- * Disability Awareness Information
- * Exhibition Design
- * Disability Media Information
- * Access Audit

<http://www.artsaccessaustralia.org/accessingkit.htm>

Disability Fact Pack for Arts and Cultural Organisations

The fact pack covers access, attitude, employment and discrimination. It also provides an overview of the Disability Discrimination Act.

http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/disability_fact_pack_for_arts_and_cultural_organisations/

Web Access Guidelines

Websites are the first point of contact people with disabilities generally look to for information and these guidelines tell you how to maximise access to your site.

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/standards/www_3/www_3.html

Access Audits Australia

Australian accredited access professionals

<http://www.accessauditsaustralia.com.au/>

EASE Ticketing

<http://www.artsaccess.com.au/attend/>

UK

Action for Access – A practical Resource for Arts Organisations

A practical resource from the Arts Council of England that includes low to no cost strategies for immediate action.

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/information/publication_detail.php?browse=title&id=412

New Audiences

Enter 'disability' as a search term to see online access related projects and resources.

<http://www.newaudiences.org.uk/>

Arts Council of England

Enter 'disability' as a search term to see online access related projects and resources

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>

Dog Rose Trust

Features the publication 'Another Eyesight Multi-Sensory Design in Context'

<http://www.dogrose-trust.org.uk/>

USA

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

Information on access services

<http://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/>

Cultural Arts Access list serve

Part of the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) network coordinated by the Kennedy Center

To Subscribe: culturalartsaccess-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

The Smithsonian Institute

Online access guide, visitor maps and accessible exhibition design guidelines

<http://www.si.edu/opa/accessibility/start.htm>

'Whatever happened to polio' exhibition

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibition.cfm?key=38&exkey=352>

National Endowment for the Arts

Listing of access related resources including studies on access and older people.

www.arts.gov/pub/access_pub.html

Very Special Arts

List of access related resources with a focus on young people and education.

www.vsarts.org/x414.xml

Universal Access Symbols

The twelve symbols may be used to promote and publicise accessibility of places, programs and other activities for people with various disabilities.

<http://www.gag.org/resources/das.php>

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