

Ellen Snyder-Grenier
Editor

Letter from the Editor

In honor of the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Exhibitionist takes Universal Design as its theme.

When signed into law on July 26, 1990, the ADA—which prohibits discrimination against those with disabilities—became one of the most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation in the United States. “Universal Design” (a phrase coined in the 1980s by the architect, product designer, and educator Ronald Mace) would take it one step further. As Boston’s Institute for Human Centered Design writes, it is “a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication and policy that focuses on the user, on the widest range of people operating in the widest range of situations without special or separate design.”

Universal Design encourages us to put ourselves in another’s shoes. Our times demand this call to empathy: people are living longer than ever; medical and technological advances are enabling people to survive injuries and illnesses as never before; autism diagnoses are on the rise. Each of us—if we have not already experienced disability—will almost certainly do so at some point in our lives.

Taken individually, the articles in this issue feature a variety of usable techniques (such as how to create accessible touchscreens), institutional approaches (including how to foster a museum-wide culture of accessibility), reflections on the history of accessibility, and more. Taken as a whole, they convey a simple but potent message: Universal Design enhances everyone’s experience.

The issue embraces the terminology used by advocacy groups. We use National Association of the Deaf terms (“hard of hearing” and “d/Deaf,” with “Deaf” to describe people who share a culture and tend to primarily speak Sign Language, and “deaf” for those who have hearing loss but do not necessarily identify with Deaf culture) and those used by the American Federation for the Blind (blind and low vision). For helpful general links on accessibility, be sure to check our Nuts and Bolts feature, where authors Rebecca Bradley and Barbara Berry close their article with a useful list of online resources.

There is a certain, wonderful collegiality among exhibition practitioners, and I have felt it more than ever while working on this issue. I would like to thank in particular Valerie Fletcher and Jan Majewski at the Institute for Human Centered Design and Michele Hartley of the National Park Service for their help and advice. As always, thanks to the Exhibitionist editorial advisory board, the NAME board, managing editor Liza Rawson, Newline editor Paul Orselli, and designer Bill Dambrova.

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