

Whose Fault is it Anyway?

by Janet Kamien

Boston Children's Museum

# Whose Fault is it Anyway?

by Janet Kamien

Boston Children's Museum

Whose fault is it anyway when accessibility for disabled visitors is not achieved in museum facilities and exhibits? Although it is fashionable to blame designers and architects, others bear responsibility for insuring accessible design as well. Using examples from various projects including the project that resulted in the publication of Is There Life After 504? A Guide to Building and Program Accesibility from the Boston Children's Museum, this question will be explored.

Let me begin by stating the obvious:

1. A consumer is someone who uses a product or service. A consumer chooses among the available options, and hopes that the claims for the chosen product or service hold true. What ever consumers consume, they are generally products or services that have been designed by an expert.
2. An expert is a person who knows all the answers.
3. The expert is rarely contracted directly by the consumer. Usually a person or an institution contracts the expert on behalf of the consumer to design a product or service which will then be sold to the consumer. We will call that person or institution the client. Thus, a housing development corporation (the client) buys land and contracts architects, builders, plumbers, electricians, etc. (the experts) to produce a product which they then sell to the consumer.

It is assumed the expert or experts are not only good at what they do, but also know what the consumer wants. It is assumed that what the expert doesn't know about the consumers needs and wants, the client does, and that that information will be imposed upon the final product or service by the client. Thus, local, state, or

Page two,

federal governments (the client) will impose regulations on local schools (the experts) in the name of the protection of children and their parents (the consumers).

Lest you fall asleep in the face of this information, let me announce that the consumer/expert/client trio I want to discuss today is the disabled museum visitor, the designer of museum facilities and exhibits, and the museum. Let me also say that the question I want to ask is: When accessibility of museum products and services for disabled consumers isn't achieved, whose fault is it anyway?

I am a client. In working with designers, architects, consumers and fabricators, I have sometimes been a good client and sometimes a rotten one. A few times I have been called in as an additional expert to try and help in situations where the relationship between the client and the expert was not going well. It is one of these situations that I first want to talk about.

Once upon a time, in a state which shall remain nameless, a new outdoor museum was coming into being. A series of buildings located on large and beautiful grounds contained exhibits of an historic nature. Many of the exhibits were to be "participatory" in nature, and include in some cases such interesting collections as live animals, thus by their very nature solving at least part of the problem of inaccessibility of exhibition.

An exhibit design firm of well-deserved reputation was hired to design the interiors, the exhibits themselves, and the orientation and signage systems. An equally good fabrication firm was hired to

Page three,

build and install it. The client organization got busy doing all the many things a staff must do to open a large facility on anything like a deadline.

Everything was fine until the fabricators began to question the physical accessibility of the interiors. Not wanting to produce something they would later be sorry about, they went to the designer and asked if the plans had been thought about in terms of their architectural accessibility. The answer was yes, they had. Case closed.

Not being gluttons for punishment and no experts in this field themselves, but truly worried about what they saw on paper, they went to the client with their question. The client's response was that the design firm had promised them that the facility would be accessible. There were even aspects of the designs that were especially meant to serve disabled visitors. After all, this firm had successfully designed this and that and the other accessible facility. They must know what they are doing. Case closed.

As a last-ditch effort, the fabricator hired a consultant who was supposed to know about such things. The consultant reviewed all the drawings and concurred with the fabricator. Yes indeed, it was going to prove quite a feat to get around many of these buildings in a wheelchair, in some areas possibly dangerous. The orientation system for blind visitors was just silly and wouldn't work at all, and by the way, who was thinking about the outdoor walkway surfaces to say nothing about the interior sightlines? Were there places to

sit down and rest indoors or outdoors? And speaking of that, blah, blah, blah...

The consultant's information was undoubtedly useful, for some changes were made. But in the face of a recalcitrant design firm, a recalcitrant client and an impossible production schedule, how much could really be done? The consultant's information was too much, too late, and from the wrong source.

There are a number of aspects of this parable that bear noting.

1. The design firm apparently didn't know beans about accessibility of even the most rudimentary wheelchair traffic patterns and safety issues, never mind orientation strategies for blind visitors. Yet they said they did. Adamantly. Did they sense that the client didn't really care about this aspect of the design? Or worse yet, did they really believe that they had designed an accessible facility?
2. The client didn't know beans about accessibility either, but then after all, they had hired experts to take care of everything for them. Accessibility probably seemed the least of their concerns in the face of all the other pressing issues that must be dealt with when opening a new facility. They were paying top dollar to a design firm of good repute. If you can't trust the experts, whom can you trust? Besides, what would happen if they crossed a design firm that was famous and to whom they had already committed a sizable chunk of money? It may be that they were simply afraid to call their expert's opinion into question.

3. The fabricators had the most to lose and the least to gain by sticking their necks out over this issue. I still haven't the foggiest idea why they did--reputation? principles? But thank heavens someone did.
4. The client apparently had no one on their staff whose responsibility it was to look after and advocate for accessibility. It goes without saying that they had no consumer advisers to help them. Maybe they weren't receiving federal dollars and didn't see any need for it. Maybe the message from the current federal administration informed them they weren't going to be asked to have seen a need for it. Maybe they simply didn't care about this audience and thought they could get away with it -- and maybe they can.
5. Speaking of consumers, there isn't a single one appearing in this story at all. The consultant whom the fabricators hired is the closest we get to an advocate for their needs. This will perhaps sound Bolshevik, but one wonders, where were the groups who complain so vehemently about inaccessibility after the damage has already been done? The fact that a new facility was under construction was known to the general public. Why didn't someone call and say, "I've heard your new project is underway. It sounds exciting and I know I'll want to visit. I'm disabled. Tell me, will the facility be accessible?" The response to the fabricators' query might then have been very different. Why go to court later when you can go to the yellow pages sooner? Of course, it must also be said that the whole scenario would probably have been significantly different if the client had

had even one disabled staff person.

I hope that my rendering of this story does not sound mean-spirited. I know that today I am surrounded by people who play all the roles I have talked about and have been part of successful if not exemplary projects. But from my possibly myopic view, examples like the one I have talked about are just as common as the successes. Maybe more so. A neighbor of ours in downtown Boston, in an attempt to beautify the area, has planted saplings at irregular intervals in the middle of the sidewalk. This creates a very nice visual effect or, a very nice accident if one happens to be a person not in a position to appreciate a very nice visual effect. An award winning building, designed to be the service headquarters for a mental health cachement area has corrugated poured concrete walls that are perfect for hurting yourself on if you can't see where you are going or to abuse yourself on as some at-risk children intentionally do. The building is filled with endless long, curving corridors and cul-de-sacs, perfect for getting lost in and giving up on if you happen to be an abusive father who didn't really want to go to family therapy anyway. The entrances, difficult enough to find in broad daylight, are virtually impossible after hours when scared first-timers to A.A. or Alanon meetings are attempting to find their way, literally and figuratively. Yet, this is a beautiful building that meets the letter of the 504 regulations.

It is fashionable in these situations to blame the architect or designer. They, after all, are the experts. If I suffer from migraines, and a new migraine medication or treatment becomes avail-



able, I expect -- no, assume -- that my physician will make it available to me. And so, when new regulations or techniques for accessibility become available, I assume my designer will "take care of it," appropriately, creatively, and with no responsibility for me. As anyone who has ever suffered from migraines can tell you, this approach does not necessarily get rid of one's headache. It may even produce one.

I became so interested in this question of why architects and designers couldn't necessarily implement or easily integrate what I thought of as simple accessibility into their designs that I began to informally interview people that I know. In retrospect, one of the most coherent responses I got went something like this:

You must understand that a certain amount of residential and commercial architecture is done by formula. There are tried, true, sensible solutions for most of the design problems that repeatedly come up. It's obvious that the introduction of new criteria that make many of these formulas obsolete will meet with at least unconscious resistance. Also, who is paying for the additional time and effort involved in creating and incorporating these new solutions, for at the outset anyway, they do take more time. Additionally, the designer, like you, is not fundamentally interested in functional, possibly boring details. They are interested in the creation of an interesting and aesthetically pleasing whole. That is the real work and the real fun. It's easy for accessibility demands to be seen as an interference to this goal.

Now, I don't know how many people in the field feel that way. But, what this woman said made sense to me. And all it took was one beginning architecture course for me to see how complicated even residential design was, and how a change in the placement or size of any given aspect could domino into a hundred hair-raising and time consuming changes in the rest of the work. The conversation also made me ask myself this question: Can I seriously ask my general practitioner to become a migraine headache specialist overnight? It took me eight years to gain the rudimentary understanding of accessibility I am now pleased to call mine. Where is the source or the time to consult the source to acquire this new knowledge?

All this is not to say that designers should not be held responsible for creating accessible design, but only to point out what some of the problems are enroute to that goal. It is also to suggest that consumers and clients need to bear more responsibility than they are apt to see as theirs.

In the wake of our publication, Is There Life After 504? A Guide to Building and Program Accessibility from the Boston Children's Museum, I have come to believe that the accessibility problems that exist in our building are as much my fault as client as the designers and fabricators who planned and installed them. Each error represents a moment in which I didn't do my homework, or I made an assumption about the skill or understanding of the designer, or I didn't check thoroughly enough with a consumer, or I expected a designer to read my mind.

The outdoor museum client I spoke of earlier clearly did not take any responsibility for the work they had contracted and the staff of that museum now view the mistakes that were made as the designer's fault. There was no one on or off their staff whose role it was to look after the accessibility of the facility, to provide guidelines for the designer, or to question any decision the designer made. Whatever the reason for this, it is simply mind-boggling to realize that at this point in time new public facilities can in fact be designed and built that are not accessible in elementary ways!

Accessibility as a design criteria can still fall between the cracks:

- By lack of knowledge and experience by the exhibit or facility designer.
- By lack of easily accessed information for designers and planners to use as resources.
- By lack of knowledge, experience and chutzpah on the part of the client.
- By lack of consumer input, by invitation or otherwise in the planning stages.

I believe people who play or will play any of these roles need to develop guidelines, checkpoints and administrative systems that go into effect long before production time. We tried to provide the bare bones of such a system in Is There Life After 504? It's useful we've been told but I think it's only a beginning step.

Perhaps someone has produced or is producing such material, specific enough to really aid the designer, but written so that a client or consumer could make sense of it; material that talks not only about building requirements, but about exhibit design as well. I hope my ignorance is showing and that such a document is already here or on the way.

What I do know is that in order to get what one pays for, clients must do their homework. They must be intelligent, clear, and adamant about what they need, for they are, in the end, the only people who have any real control. The burden can not rest entirely on the "expert" of whatever variety, but must be shared by consumers and clients -- unless they intend to get lucky enough to find an expert who not only reads minds, but really does know all the answers.