



The Ultimate Accessibility Challenge: Designing and Exhibition about Disability, History and Activism

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2:30 – 3:30 PM

DEBBIE ADAMS: Good Afternoon. In some ways this project is kind of grandmother of them all for accessibility because the subject matter is actually disability. So, of any project I've had the requirements for ensuring accessibility on this project were tantamount because they needed to, as I said, set an example for what should happen in situations of accessibility projects. It's an exhibition, and it's called Out from Under: Disability, History and Things to Remember.

It was a moving and powerful exhibit and it explored Canadian disability activism in history. The exhibit consisted of 13 diverse objects and they really revealed a rich and incredibly nuanced history that paid tribute to the resilience and creativity of Canadians with disabilities. It's the first exhibit of its kind in Canada and it was produced in collaboration with students, scholars and alumni from Ryerson University. It was a thirteen-project installation and it premiered in October 2007 at a ten day Abilities Arts Festival in Toronto. It was very successful there and it garnered financial support from the president of Ryerson and attention from the ROM, and a more complete and designed version of that exhibition moved to the ROM for a two month run from April 17th to July 13th 2008. And now that exhibit is heading to Vancouver for two weeks for the Paralympics. So it's continued to grow and gain attention and I think it has done what my clients imagined it might.

It was curated by the faculty members from the Ryerson University School of Disability Studies. This curatorial team launched a special topic seminar designed to uncover the hidden history of disability. I'm just sort of showing you images from the ROM installation and I'll talk to you about the design as we go through them and I'm going to also apologize at this point for the quality of images. The system we used was a terrific system to experience in person but a photographer's nightmare in that the internal lighting system completely bleached out in the photographs and makes it very difficult, which of course is ironic considering I'm talking about accessibility. But in person the system functioned very well but, you might wonder why there are these hot spots everywhere and cameras just can't seem to record this design system very accurately so, I just thought I'd get that out of the way so you don't sit there going, 'well she's talking about accessibility but here she is showing things that I cannot read on the wall.'

So the way the exhibition worked was that students were invited to identify an object that represented a particular era or moment in Canadian Disability History and then explore its significance. And it became basically as an assignment and a discussion among Ryerson students and faculty and evolved into a very powerful and compelling exhibit.

We, as a design firm, were approached by co-curator and associate professor, Catherine Church to consult with Ryerson to turn the student projects into a professionally designed traveling exhibition. Catherine explained to me that she really felt the objects that the students had selected were extremely resonant and that the exhibit had the potential to travel across Canada. The professors were really, really excited about the content the students had come forward with, and I will go over that a little later in this. She said to me, "I don't want this to end up looking like a high school science project. We really feel the design is an important factor in the success of the exhibit." Students had been designing their displays themselves and

I think she was a little alarmed at the amazing quality of the content and the dismaying quality of their skill set for putting them together, obviously they weren't designers. We consulted with the curators right from the beginning of the process to try and turn this into an exhibition so it was a little unusual for us. We talked to them about the process of writing and writing simply enough so that it could speak to many audiences. We talked about organizing artifacts to create narrative as well and it was a very steep learning curve for them. I think equally challenging for us was addressing the criteria of making this a benchmark of accessibility so we also had a learning curve to overcome in terms of really understanding how to make this exhibit as accessible as it could possibly be.

For the design of the exhibit, we used a flexible display system called Click. It's designed by a German company and it utilizes a system of aluminum rods and magnetic connectors to create a sort of grid support system and then translucent graphic panels, aluminum panels, glass and lighting are all attached and suspended in the structures and it can be really configured to do whatever it is you want it to do, so it was a perfect system for this particular exhibition. It also knocks down into a very small amount of space for storage and it could be assembled by students and faculty so it was very simple and easy to put together and that was the criteria for them.

So it did take a lot of issues of accessibility into consideration. Traffic flow was key and we needed to account for the rotation radius of a wheelchair within the space and that was in the space between the various banks of exhibits. We also couldn't have less space than two wheelchairs passing each other in terms of moving through passageways. We were also very careful to ensure that no electrical cables or any other components were on the floor to impede movement as well. In addition, artifact display heights and table heights were established at accessible reading levels for people in wheelchairs. One of the curators was indeed a paraplegic woman

who was a professor at Ryerson, so she was great for first hand information about what needed to happen with accessibility as far as people in wheelchairs went. In addition, the writing style was very succinct and used very plain language which was also key so, messaging was as important as how the messaging was conveyed. Legibility for sight-impaired viewers was addressed with a very clean humanist sans serif font, which is Whitney, you are probably familiar with it, and it was laid out in high contrast dark gray on a white background with the title panels as white on bright orange-red. Special attention was paid to font size and several sight-impaired students were recruited to provide feedback on the proposed font choices and sizes. So, everything we did was bedded with people directly who would be in a position to speak accurately about whether we were moving forward in a correct way. It was a challenging thing as a designer because of our inclination of course to make typography as teeny tiny as possible so, it was interesting to have limitations of font scale that, in a way, influenced the way the exhibit looked and that in a sense gave us sort of opened us on accessibility in itself. We also used very generous leading and letter spacing was very open. With the exhibit there was a 60-page catalogue and we used the CNIB clear print guidelines as a sort of baseline to apply those theories to both the catalogue and the exhibition. These are a few double-page spreads from the exhibition. Each project included an image from the first insulation of the show and that included the main text from the exhibition, also contributor statement and images from the exhibit and I think 14 point was about the smallest type size in the catalogue. So these are some spreads from the catalogue. And again, I apologize if they're unclear.

So here is a brief description of the thirteen projects. The first one was digging and it explores a three-part shovel as a symbol for disability issues. The shovel was a combination of a very battered old shovel, a shovel with special accessibility handles and then a shovel

with a Canadian sort of ribbon tied on it. It was to symbolize a combination of the shovel used in many ways that relate to disability issues: the first being a hard labour that patients for institutions had to undertake in those institutions, the second part was showcasing a tool invented by a disabled man that enabled him to shovel his own snow from a wheelchair and the third was used in a ground turning ceremony where politicians shoveled the first fade of dirt for a new independent living facility that was replacing the more traditional institutional facilities that had existed for many years in Canada.

The second project drew attention to the unpaid labours of three women inmates in Toronto at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane during the early 1900's. Often women were institutionalized for being single, unwed mothers and destitute and they were brought into the institutions to actually work for free. With this there were the stories of the three women and also reproductions of the archive lists of the unpaid labour that they had produced over the course of their lifetime.

Another project was Naming. It explored the tendency towards labeling the mentally disabled. Labels and categories legitimized acts of forced confinement and bodily harm. On display is a poster that was part of a public education exhibit produced by the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in 1924 in the zeal to build brighter futures and healthy communities untold numbers of Canadians, like the young women featured on the poster, were labeled with disorders with labels like idiocy, Mongolian imbecility, imbecility and moron and in brackets on the poster a moron was a high-grade, feeble-minded person. And typically they were labeled and institutionalized and then segregated and sterilized as well. A lot of the early exhibits in this project were really dealing with the history and how incredibly difficult, emotionally, it is to understand what's going on in our past.

Dressing features: sixteen identical grey sweat suits that were typi-

cally worn by inmates in Ontario in sixteen residential institutions. And it brings attention to the thousands of Canadians with intellectual disabilities currently living in conditions equally drought and formless. It points attention to the idea of the uniform where individual expression is discouraged and conformity is the norm.

Measuring brings into question the increasingly complex methods used to diagnose, categorize and place people by measuring certain kinds of intelligence. It displays the standard and controversial Stanford Binet IQ test and discusses the impact these test have on the eugenics movement and disability history. And this is a detail of the kit, which has a kind of innocence to it that I think kind of betrays its foreboding function. So we created a simulation of a testing room in this particular exhibit with a child's desk and a tester's chair. Fixing explored the curing claims of an old Shriners hospital brochure and investigates of fixing or proving physical deformity through surgery. This brochure is a very strange of juxtaposition circus imagery, institutional images and deformed children. And that's our close up of the artifact, which was the cover from the Shriner's Hospital brochure.

Packing represented a trunk set with a seven-year-old boy to the Orillia asylum for idiots in the early fifties where he lived for many years before moving to an assisted living facility as an older adult. Between 1876 and 1950 almost 10,000 lives were crammed into trunks as people with intellectual disabilities were institutionalized. Reproductions of communication between an institution and a parent with visitation rules and lists of items to pack for the child along with the image of the Orillia Institution in this exhibit. And this is a close-up this truck and we actually created simulated travel labels and stuck them on the trunk, but the labels actually expressed the kind of questions and fears that the child would have had when being transferred to an institution like this.

Breathing featured a rigid fiberglass chamber used by people with

respiratory paralysis caused by polio. The chamber is known as a cuirass and it fits over the chest and has a generator that moves it in and out to simulate breathing. But it enabled a lot of mobility for its users. This particular section focused on the contributions of Reverend Roy Essex who taught himself to repair his daughter's cuirass and then traveled throughout Ontario for over 30 years repairing other people's machines. And that's a close up of that particular apparatus. Of course it replaced the iron lung, which was a piece of equipment that you were basically stationary inside of so it actually represented a huge advancement forward for people suffering from Polio.

Remembering brought back the uncomfortable story of the unsolved crib desk at the hospital for sick children in the early eighties. And it was contributed by a student, who was actually the mother of one of those children, who had been named Kristen, who died of a deliberate overdose at 18 days old. In medical slang Kristen had been designated FLK, which in the hospital was acronym for Funny Looking Kid. And a chromosome exam had been ordered for her but she was only 18 days old when she was murdered. Now the crib actually displays the 224-page range inquiry that, in the end, concluded that Kristen had been murdered but they were unable to make any determination of responsibility. So you can see the kind of emotional resonance that these displays have. It was an incredibly moving exhibition to navigate your way through. And the way it was structured was the sort of heaviest, earliest, stories was at the beginning of the exhibition and it moved towards a position of hope as the exhibitions progressed.

Trailblazing is a kind of shift into more positive stories. It features the story of May Sofia Brown who was the first deaf-blind Canadian to achieve a university degree at the U of T. In this exhibit we have artifacts that were contributed by Joan McTavish who was May's long time interpreter guide and friend. And they included a Braille reader that is sort of like a typewriter but types Braille and also

May's watch and a kind of book that had been written about her and a page of Braille.

Struggling showed a poster produced by the persons with disabilities committee of the Ontario Federation of Labour to commemorate the 2005 United Nations International Day of Disabled Persons. It kind of jostles for space in a typical crowded bulletin board in the way it's displayed. And then a quote from a catalogue that says, "Though small it holds its own, claiming a space amidst the noise of struggle that is the world of disability activism at work."

Leading is a tribute to Al Simpson. He was a behind the scenes man known and respected for his talent of persuasion and relationship building, particularly in the areas of core funding and programs for disability groups. As a gifted lobbyist, Al's face was familiar to parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and the Prime Minister himself, and took part in many, many protests on parliament hill.

The flag featured here, and this is the last of the 13 projects, last flew atop the parliamentary peace tower in June 13, 1992. And that was the day that the federal government passed Bill C 78 - an Act to amend certain acts with respect to persons with disability. This bill was in response to a groundswell of advocacy campaigning and consensus building led by the Canadian Disability Rights Council and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. Through this process new understandings of equality were taking root and people were captivated by the radical notion that something could be done about injustice and exclusion. This bill amended a very small number of Canadian laws, however, it did better respect disabled people's rights but it fell very short of a vision of comprehensive reform. This is a detail of the kinds of communiqués and paperwork around the bill.

At the end of the exhibit there was a Comments booth encouraging visitors to tell their own stories and to explain their views about the exhibition and to continue the dialogue that this exhibition generates. And I'll end this with a quote from Catherine who was one of the curators, she said "The reclaiming of history is a project of cel-

celebration and struggle of solidarity and subversion. Disabled people don't seek merely to participate in Canadian culture. We want to create it, shape it and stretch it beyond its tiny edges."

That's it. Thank you.