



Projects at the ROM to meet the new AODA Customer Service Standards

DAVE HOLLANDS Royal Ontario Museum

DAVE HOLLANDS: Thank you. This is what we call, as I understand it, the establishment shot [image of birds-eye view of ROM] – just in case you don't know who we are. Actually, for the past month and a half we've had the pretty interesting problem of many visitors wandering around the lobby asking us how to get to see the King Tut. So just so that you have the right cultural institution.

Museums by their nature are in the access business. If you think about it, we have artifacts and narratives about them that we have visitors come in and engage with. And really, it's an old idea but we have to think about it in a new way, the evolution of exhibition design has been on a long, evolving path that allows people better access to those narratives and those experiences. This little piece here, [phrases from ROM Access Policy] it's a distillation of a policy. As you can imagine the ROM is a somewhat bureaucratized institution and in deciding that we would make access for people with physical, learning or cognitive disabilities, we actually had to write a piece of policy and a series of practices all the way up to approval at the board level. So this is a sense of what this thing says. It's actually a many, many page document and we are still revising today because we're constantly analyzing what does the project really mean.

And not unlike the directive we were given in the last presentation, we feel that we started early. So we wrote a series of things that are

very close to what you're seeing in the Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, which is now enacted into law. So we felt that there were things we were striving to do, that we're still learning about to this day, but they've been written up in this way. And as you may know, the AODA is compartmentalized into a series of components, the first of which, is now on the street, if you will. That's the Customer Service component and the next one is the Built Environment one which should be out between the next one or two years. This means that we have to make everything we do available through a means of different ways of offerings, so that all abilities can be used to encounter them.

[showing image of Out From Under Exhibit by Adams and Associates] I was actually meant to be before Deb Adams, sort of a warm-up act and I understand she had to leave for a meeting - but I just wanted her to feel encouraged that my slides were worse than hers. The point of including this though is that, this for the ROM, was a very landmark moment in what you might think of as a greening of our attitude about accessibility. And if you think of that spectrum as running on the one end, to a meeting that I can recall from our Renaissance ROM project where one of our senior staff asked us, in a very genuine manner, can we really offer anything to the blind in our building because there is nothing for them to see when they get there? To the other end of the spectrum, which is now we have teams working from scratch on exhibition projects with the notion of universal design, which is really that if we make things much more available for people with disabilities, we've created a product that suits all types of learning styles and multicultural and other kinds of backgrounds, and really you have a design that works for everyone.

So when this exhibit was displayed at the ROM, it really had a kind of alien presence that I think was a really amazing teaching tool, not just the subject matter, but the series of media that were employed - all the other things that were rolled out that surrounded this, that helped to make a complete accessible experience. This included

lectures and talks that included transcriptions, such as you see the captioning going on over there as well as American Sign Language... You can go to our website and download a podcast of someone who volunteered their services to give American Sign Language on absolutely all of the labels. The entire script is available on our website in both text, which can of course be read to you by a computer, as well as sign language. In addition, there were Braille notes that were provided in the exhibition. And as you can see there is a classic problem here. A lot of the artifacts were in fact “artifactual” and could not be touched, so we had demonstrators available throughout the course of the day who brought in other things that allowed you to get into a discourse with them, and feel and touch and understand the subject matter of things you could actually handle. So that represented for us a moment where we said “we better look around and look at things that benchmark these kinds of standards.” So what you’re going to see here are a couple of things that we picked from a couple of locations. This is something all designers do – you’re constantly looking around. This is a very short list of things that, for me personally, symbolize the kind of things that we could be doing. This is Ralph Applebaum and Associates’ bio-diversity display at the American Museum of Natural History. [image of animals display] So, this is a wall of objects that you can’t touch, but included a series of things that interpret the wall in the foreground and included tactile elements, including this bronze model of a frog about to catch a fly, that little kids and everybody could touch and feel and get an understanding from.

This is the Elgin Marbles Display at the British Museum of London, of course famous or notorious depending on how you look it. A display of objects taken from the gable end of the Parthenon, including series of panels from the frieze that ran around the edges. And this is a special room with tactile models and raised line imagery to help you understand – first, the nature of the forms, and secondly, where did they actually come from on the building – the origins of the artifacts

were fully explained. And this, for me, represented a really kind of great moment in understanding “well we can break out of some of the norms of what we do to help get information across about missing pieces of information when you see an object torn from its original context.” But more telling was the experience I had trying to get into this space. I was stopped at the door and told “Sir, I’m sorry, but this is only for the blind.” So I had to talk my way in here because I was a museum worker.

And in fact there was a separate room for those of us who could see, that had fly-throughs with computer-generated models that helped explain the very same set of information. And were you to look at this, to this day, from a universal design point of view, you would offer both rooms to both sets of people – visually impaired and sighted, because of the different learning styles. There are different ways you can actually “get it.”

This is an artifact, a period model, of the Albert Memorial at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. And of course its quite fragile and nobody is allowed to touch it, but it includes graphics around the edges that are for all people. And so it includes fairly large point-size text, some of it is raised and in fact, this diagram is a raised-line diagram so you can feel the shapes and understand the basics of gothic styling of this piece and the highlights are pointed out, and what you can’t see, or just barely, is that all the labels are also there in Braille.

This is from the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum and it’s a section on craft, British craft, and the making of tiles. And so this is, deliberately, a hands-on component. They clearly make a distinction between the things that are non-touchable and things you’re allowed to touch and learn more from by actually handling them and this little yellow hand symbol is an indicator that that’s what it is. And then the thing in the foreground, there is a tab that pulls out and all of the texts are available there in Braille on that tab.

Of course one of our classic problems when incorporating Braille into some of our labeling is the notion, that all graphic designers wrestle with constantly, which is the idea of available real estate. Of course the problem is that we're a fully bilingual organization and now we're adding Braille and we're considering, for example, in our Warrior Emperor Exhibition coming up this summer, Chinese as well.

These are booklets that you can actually pick up made of durable materials that you put very closely to your eyes if you have visual impairments. They include as well binders you can pick up that are labeled in large text. You wouldn't believe the numbers of instances I've seen where I was pointed to something that's large text using smaller text. We came here [the CNIB building] and had a look at their way-finding system and it included a series of elements that were raised text, and Braille. We learned that it's possible to actually layer Braille over top of readable English texts - depending on point size, without that being a problem. That gives ideas of how to handle real estate [the space available for different kinds of labelling.]

So, on to a number of ROM projects that are about to be launched. So I've just shown you the sources of inspiration. This is a tactile tour that will be launched with about a dozen objects from each theme. So we'll have a dinosaur tour, and this one is for a Chinese architecture tour. A raised line diagram of a Ming period General and in fact the tumulus of the big tomb that's presented in our gallery is of a general from the Ming period. And this woman here is shown carrying around a booklet of raised line diagrams that will be used as part of the tour. So for the objects that are not allowed to be handled, there will be diagrams available that are fully portable. And it's the portability that's one of the important elements because people really then can deal with it physically as it suits them individually. As well we'll be conducting 'glove tours' where a certain number of our collections being identified as something that can be handled but with gloves on. And we have another category called 'teaching collections'. These are things for which we may have

many, many examples of a type and it can afford to be worn out, if you will, over the course of time – or may not be considered of A-class status of artifacts that have to be hidden in display cases, that is hidden from touch.

We're in the middle of re-vamping one of our iconic experiences, which is the bat cave on our nature floor. And this is a piece designed by Forrec International. It shows some of the introductory teachings about the world of bats. It includes, among other things, a few tactile elements. Kids will be able, for example, to reach in and understand the skeletal make up of a bat, in order to understand what it takes to make it bird-like and fly-able. This is going to be kind of a creepy thing that you can reach your hand into and feel the wing, a kind of fabric where you'll be able to feel the bone structure through it. On the right here you see an eco-location display where there will be a bronze model of scaled up bat's head – and a bronze model with a scaled-up flower and the graphic that indicates [the sound waves] what goes on in between.

These are a roll out of the very first part of what we're calling an e-labeling project, which is going back into galleries and adding electronic labeling which gives us lots of opportunity to add layers of the same kind of information but portrayed in new ways. It worked in this instance in the dinosaur gallery with a company in Toronto called Overdrive who created, very deliberately at our request, a series of redundancies on the screen so that different people could use it different ways. It's not surprising that the young people that gravitate to these things instantly, who likely already understand the iTouch or iPad type interface and work with it in that manner, but on top of that we have a series of very standardized menus that help you find all the same information. And we're finding our older demographic is using them in a much more deliberate way in that sense.

This is a tactile way-finding map from a company called iCatch, down East, and we're working with them on just such a thing for

our entrance experience in our lobby in order to do a very simplified way of finding out what the layout of the building is. And any of you who've had that experience know the building is complicated enough and the project is to simplify the graphic to something that is readily understood using what are becoming more generalizable and more internationally recognized series of symbols and textures. So we're working with Gottschalk & Ash in Toronto to develop a series of these. The first of which will be for the main floor and you can see it here. So we did incorporate English, French and Braille. And a colour coding of galleries, and then a path that shows you the main routes to get from one room to the next. And then we're leveraging this asset, if you will, into a series of other formats. This will be a portable version of the map we're making available in large print as well as Braille. And that's really a theme that we're looking at throughout all the kinds of offerings at the ROM. If you imagine if you arrived with a disability at the ROM and you need to find out about something, you really have a right to ask for it in a medium of your choosing.

Just a note on standards [to design for access] , there's lots of this kind of stuff out there, this is a publication for museums you can get through the American Association of Museums. The City of Toronto has a set of standards, there's also a set of CSA standards. It's almost endless what you can find in terms of ergonomic, graphically-oriented information that it helps you understand the kind of components and where to put them in terms of sizes and so on. But, boy, the learning is so much greater when you can move beyond this and do things with actual mock-ups. So just because this is an adult shown [in an ergonomic reach diagram] in a wheel chair, don't forget that people who use wheel chairs may be slumped in the chair, they may be child-age, there are all kinds of other factors that effect the ergonomics of someone who uses such a mobility device. So it's now our new standard to work with an advisory group that represents a broad spectrum of people. In fact one of the important

requirements of the AODA is that we report annually on the findings of what we're doing in terms of our projects and the results of working with such a group. So it's now a formalized part of our work plan.

I'd like to finish with a project that is a series of tactiles that will be scale models or full size models, depending on what they are depicting, a series of objects taken from collections. And this is a full-size prototype of a stand that shows both the French and English labeling in a kind of well beyond - that doesn't have the object in it yet - in this case it would be a little Cypriot figurine. This went through a series of generations of design the way all things ought to. One of the pieces of feedback we got on the early prototype was that right now you've made something that you can roll up to and get your knees under with a wheel chair but now you don't have any ability to cane detect - if you're approaching this with a cane - to know that there is something that might be poking out. So we've added this tactile element at the base that is actually what we're using as part of the fixing mechanism to get this thing attached to the floor. We're rolling out the first set. There were few enough of them that we can learn from it before we go whole - hog throughout the rest of the institution. This represents one of the first that arrived just a couple days ago. In fact I have a few of these labels with me if anyone's interested in feeling it and seeing what they're actually like. But they do use the idea of overlaying the Braille, you can just barely see it here, it's actually over-laid over the large text, which is underneath the plastic. And the Braille repeats precisely what you read in the full size type. In this case it's about 32 point, a lot smaller and we wouldn't be able to make that Braille match up. We've also introduced a symbol just to show the fact that we have descriptive audio to go along with this. All of our new audio guides have two kinds of modes where there's the basic audio tour and there's a more descriptive version of the very same series of stops so that it really takes into account that there are a number of

things we can't really count on – people seeing an object to hear about it at the same time.

I'll end with just some pictures here to show you we really want to get the ergonomics of this right. In the case of the dinosaur interactive, we actually built in a flexible mount. We were so close to opening that we decided that rather than prototype this, we would put it out on the floor and deal with the absolute “sweet spot”, where that angle needed to be, by making sure we could adjust the final piece. And in this case we were building full mock ups of these and they'll be tested with some of our community advisors.

Just to finish, this is a whole other realm if you think about what we'll be doing for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. [images of hand-held audio device] So this is the particular piece of hardware we selected for our walk-around audio guides. It has a number of features that we really like, including the fact that it has a lanyard you can use, or option not to use, that allows you to have hands free. People come often in social groupings or couples, they want to talk to each other and they don't necessarily want to put a headset on, so you can also use this device the way you would listen to a cell phone or you can put the headset on. It also has radio frequency broadcast to your own hearing aid if you prefer your own devices you bring with you. We are also moving to podcast with American Sign Language content and all of our tours and lectures will soon have to be made available under our new regulations with the same kind of captioning and sign language presentations made available.

And that's it. It's one of many, many projects that we're considering rolling out and we're happy to get feedback from visitors. One of the key components of our commitment to the AODA is that we have to readily provide for feedback from our visitors in order to learn. So there will be a whole series of new visitor comment boxes and comment cards – so come on down, we'd like to hear from you. “If it ain't working”, let us know.