

Book Review

The Art of Access: A Practical Guide for Museum Accessibility

By Heather Pressman and Danielle Schulz
(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield,
2021), 232 pp.

Reviewed by Meredith Peruzzi

In *The Art of Access*, authors Heather Pressman and Danielle Schulz provide an outstanding introduction to basic concepts of accessibility for museums and cultural heritage sites. The book is comprehensive and should be read as a whole, not looked through for specific advice, as wisdom is found throughout the text. It is a primer, not a guidebook; while readers will find some checklists and specific examples, there is no in-depth explanation of everything needed to make a museum accessible. The book focuses, instead, on guiding the reader toward a mindset of accessibility.

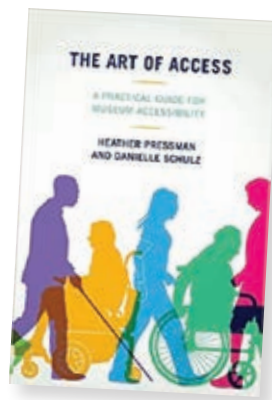
Many manuals for museum accessibility focus on satisfying the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, but Pressman and Schulz go beyond this to offer advice not commonly seen in books like this. Disabled people are frequently underemployed or on government assistance, so *The Art of Access* addresses the financial aspects of museum accessibility. Cognitive disabilities and sensory sensitivities, also frequently overlooked in this field, are each given their own chapter.

Where the book falls short is in presenting information without a disability justice lens. The authors are able-bodied themselves, and while they frequently mention accessibility work should be done with disabled consultants, they do not mention hiring disabled staff or letting efforts be led by disabled people—their participation is suggested to be in the form of advisory boards or focus groups. There is also considerable emphasis on avoiding lawsuits and bringing disabled dollars into the museum, with the statement “it is the right thing to do” showing up only as the book’s last line.

High praise is owed, though, for respecting the variety of budgets museums have. Throughout the book, when a suggestion is made that seems like it would be expensive, the authors give

options for how museums with less funding can still achieve the goal. This comes not just in the form of “get a grant,” although that is mentioned, but also in ideas for finding free training for employees or using lower-cost options for accessibility. Tips for training colleagues emphasize not only low costs, but complete buy-in—indeed, the authors describe this as essential for success.

As Pressman and Schulz were writing the book when COVID-19 began to impact museums globally, they have included a few notes about maintaining access despite museum closures or restrictions. This comes chiefly in the form of advice on making websites and digital media accessible but does not address the accessibility needs of disabled people visiting museums in person in a pandemic-focused world.

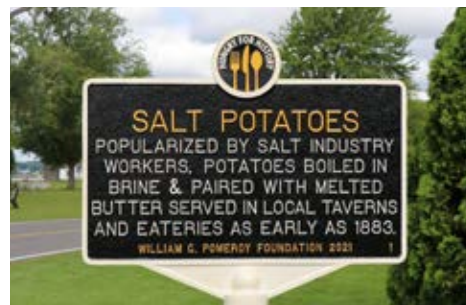


The Art of Access is best suited to those who are interested in making their museum, historic house, or heritage site more accessible, and who will be the primary person working on this project. Those interested in taking on this work full-time would do well to start here, read the works cited throughout the text, and seek out disability studies readings. The appendices provide recommendations useful to designers, curators, and other members of staff, but the book is holistic and therefore makes a good first point of reference for beginning accessible museum practice.



Meredith Peruzzi is Director of the National Deaf Life Museum at Gallaudet University in

Washington, D.C. She is a frequent consultant on accessibility issues, and is conducting doctoral research at the University of Leicester, focused on crafting deaf-friendly exhibitions and programming. Contact Meredith at meredith.peruzzi@gallaudet.edu.



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