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Introducing MCC's New Universal Design Initiative

By Anita Walker, Executive Director

Mass Cultural Council is developing an initiative to change the conversation about access to the arts and culture. Recognizing that barriers to access affect many more people than those labeled "disabled," Mass Cultural Council and its partners at VSA Arts Massachusetts and the Institute for Human Centered Design will celebrate efforts to create programming, exhibits, and facilities that are welcoming to all. Similar to the LEED certification that recognizes "green design," this program will recognize universal design strategies in facilities and programming and certify levels of achievement. Mass Cultural Council aims to launch this new initiative later in FY14.

Dr. Lisa Wong, a member of Mass Cultural Council 's Board, was part of a September study tour of cultural venues in London to examine universal design practices as part. At a recent VSA gathering at the State House, she discussed the tour and how its findings will inform this effort:

A few weeks ago, a cohort of 18 of us traveled to London for five days to think about universal design in cultural facilities. It was a learning tour, and we were charged to think about how we might apply our new knowledge to a new Universal Design initiative for cultural institutions here in Massachusetts.

The trip was led by Anita Walker, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Valerie Fletcher from the Institute for Human Centered Design here in Boston, and Charlie Washburn of Very Special Arts.

Even before we reached London I knew that the learning curve was going to be very steep. Everyone in our small group brought a unique perspective and high level of expertise to the table – My tour mates came from the world of universal design and accessibility on the City, State and National level as well as: architects; educators; museum directors; accessibility research scholars; physicians; and artists. In addition, we were parents, grandparents or children with family members living with varying abilities.

Why London? When London won the summer Olympics and the Paralympics, they realized it was an opportunity and imperative to renovate and innovate their City. This has led to a flurry of creative design over the past 5-8 years. While there is always more to be done, especially in an old City like London, we came away with a sense that what has really changed most is the heightened universal awareness of universal design and how it helps the entire community.

In planning for the upcoming changes in their museums, on their streets and in their subways, we heard time and again about the importance of bringing everyone to the table: not just the designer, the educator, and the museum director but the community leaders, wheelchair users and caregivers.

For example: Given the need for accessible sidewalks, the City Planners and designers worked together with wheelchair users in planning. The renovated sidewalks were smooth, but with patterns suggestive of the old London cobblestones. The new walks are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and strollers.

The Royal Portrait Gallery raised its ceiling, brought in natural light and improved its audio guides so everyone could see and enjoy the art more clearly.

The Natural History Museum engaged an artist who could create bronze tactile models of fossils so everyone could touch and feel the contours of the trilobite and Nautilus.

Students at the Royal College of Art’s “Age and Ability Research Lab” spent time interviewing patients, residents and staff in health care facilities to learn about their needs before designing artful solutions for life challenges.

We are blessed to be in such a rich and knowledgeable community here in Massachusetts. We have learned a lot and know there is still much to learn as we design an initiative that seeks ways to broaden the conversation about accessibility and universal design in our community – to make this a universal conversation.

This isn’t just for the person you know who is a wheelchair user, the friend who is visually impaired, or the child who wears a cochlear implant for his congenital deafness. It’s for the mother with a baby on her back and a sleeping toddler in a stroller; it’s for the all-star athlete who is in a straight-legged brace for his torn ACL; and it’s for the father-in-law who cannot hear in restaurants or navigate the halls in low lighting.

In London, we found that gentle public humor went a long way, such as the sign I saw on the elevator of The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields which read:

5 reasons for taking the stairs:

* Only 22 shallow steps
* Good exercise
* It's much quicker
* Saves Energy
* Those who really need to use the lift would appreciate you doing so!

Designs that make our Commonwealth and our cultural institutions more accessible to some will make them more accessible to ALL.