

Accessibility Redefined

Fabien Vais

Accessibility has come a long way. Not only most public places but even many private areas now claim to be “accessible”. However, this term usually implies that a person in a wheelchair is able to get to the inside of a venue. This is not enough.

If I am using a wheelchair, I would like to be completely autonomous and move around freely. I don't want to have to go along a long dark corridor to use a service lift in order to get to another floor. Although I always appreciate it, I don't want to have to count on the generosity of passersby to help me open a door or push my wheelchair up a slope. My only wish is to blend in with other people, and enjoy life as much as anyone else.

INTRODUCTION

This article will explore personal accounts pertaining to accessibility. I have chosen five cases where *access* was confused with *accessibility*.

NOTE: Some of these stories were told to me, while others were personal experiences.

Case 1 – Trapped

I work in a large office building on one of the upper floors. I use a non-motorized wheelchair and have limited mobility. The building claims to be “fully accessible” (ramps, elevators, automatic doors, etc.). When there is a fire, elevators immediately become inoperable. I am trapped. Usually, there are people there to “help out”. However, if I were in a *motorized* wheelchair, it would usually indicate a complete lack of mobility. The only way to the building lobby would be if two people were willing to CARRY me down the staircase. What if I was working on the 20th floor? Can anyone be expected to accept this huge responsibility? What about legal liability in case someone drops me?

Possible solution: In the case of a fire or a fire drill, the elevators should be programmed go right up to the top floor, the electricity shut down, and the elevators allowed to come down floor by floor MANUALLY. Someone in the elevator would then be able to stop at each floor, picking up people who are unable to come down the stairs by themselves. There would be only ONE such elevator trip – going down. I have seen this setup in a building, and it does work. Sure beats being trapped on the 20th floor in a fire!

Case 2 – Breather

Having recently had a knee operation, I have difficulty walking. Although I can walk independently, long distances exhaust me. I find out while attending an STC conference, that the only way to get to the conference sessions from my room is to go follow a long path. It wouldn't be so bad if I could stop a few times along the way to take a breather. Unfortunately, apart from restaurants where I would need to order something, there is not a single seat along the way. So, I arrive at my sessions out of breath, exhausted, and frustrated.

Possible solution: It would be very helpful if there were benches, chairs, or ledges along the way: anything just to rest for a few minutes.

Case 3 – Slippery subject

I am in a beautiful hotel lobby. It has incredible marble floors. These are magnificent to look at and require little maintenance. However, when they get wet, they become as slippery as a skating rink.

Possible solution: As beautiful as they are, hotels should install marble floors only far away from entrances. The best type of flooring near entrances is short-haired carpet on a hard floor.

Case 4 – Cushiony job

When I was at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel (Nashville, TN) in May 2002, I saw a large area with spectacular tapestries, and rich deep-pile carpet. It looked absolutely superb, and walking on that rich and deep carpet must feel great. However, using a regular (non-motorized) wheelchair, I had a very hard time wheeling myself across that carpeted floor to get to another area of the hotel. My arms are quite powerful, yet when I got to the end of the carpeted area, I was exhausted.

Possible solution: Do not use deep-pile carpets in heavy traffic areas.

Case 5 – Sloppy slope

Again at the Gaylord Opryland, to go from one *main* section of the hotel to another *main* section, there was a breathtakingly beautiful elevated walkway overlooking waterfalls, flowers, and trees. There were no steps anywhere, and this walkway was supposedly fully “accessible”. There was a slope at each end of the walkway leading to its most elevated section. However, I found that at one end of the walkway in particular, the slope was very steep. Again, I have a very strong upper body, and although I was able to wheel myself through that walkway, I had to stop a couple of times in the middle to catch my breath. I challenge anyone to get into a non-motorized wheelchair and wheel up that slope unassisted.

Possible solution: Respect slope angles recommended by the American Disabilities Act (ADA) for ramps, etc. Also, ask someone to get into a wheelchair and TRY the slope out. The slope leading to that walkway at the Gaylord was obviously never tested by a real user.

CONCLUSION

There is a big difference between access and accessibility. When a place claims to be ADA-compliant, it is simply not enough.

Too many people are simply not aware of what we mean by accessibility. Designers have to consider accessibility and usability *together*. They should invite people with mobility restrictions (not just people who

are using a wheelchair) to test their installations, and evaluate the true accessibility of the place.

It is by keeping an open mind, and by truly wanting to help out, that barriers are going to crumble. It is everyone’s business to take the “dis” out of “disability”.

REFERENCES

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He has acted as a judge at several local and international technical publications competitions. He is one of the founding members of the STC Special Needs SIG, and its current List Administrator. He has attended six international conferences, and gave a workshop on mobility restrictions at the STC annual conferences, in Cincinnati, Orlando, Chicago, Nashville, and Dallas.