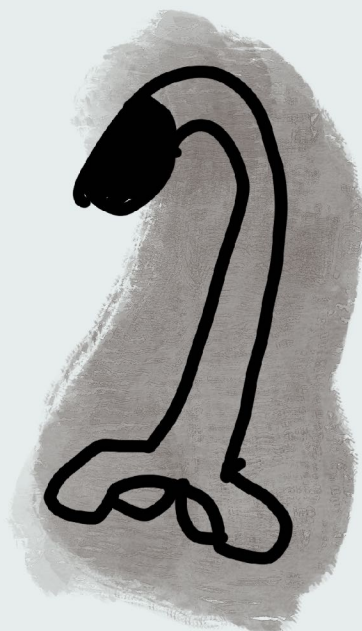


# More Than Access:

## Disability Justice in the Context of Museums

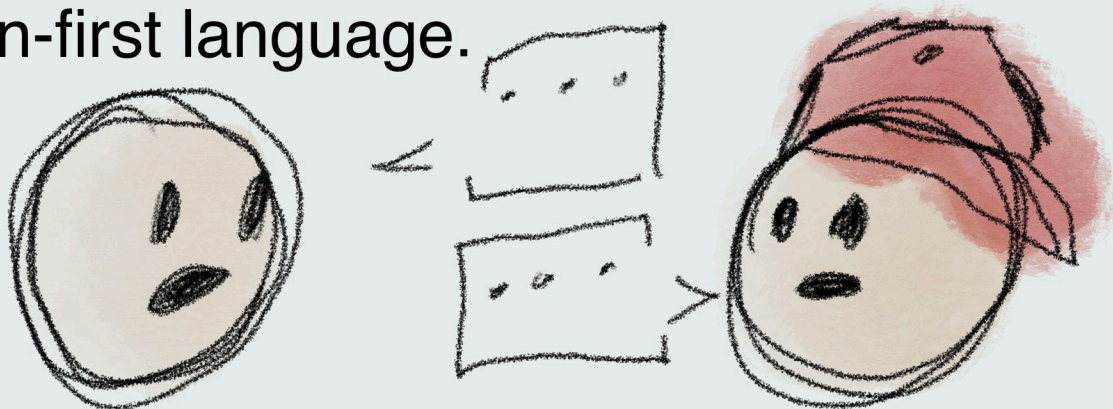
*Written and Illustrated  
by Elliot T. Archer*



# PREFACE

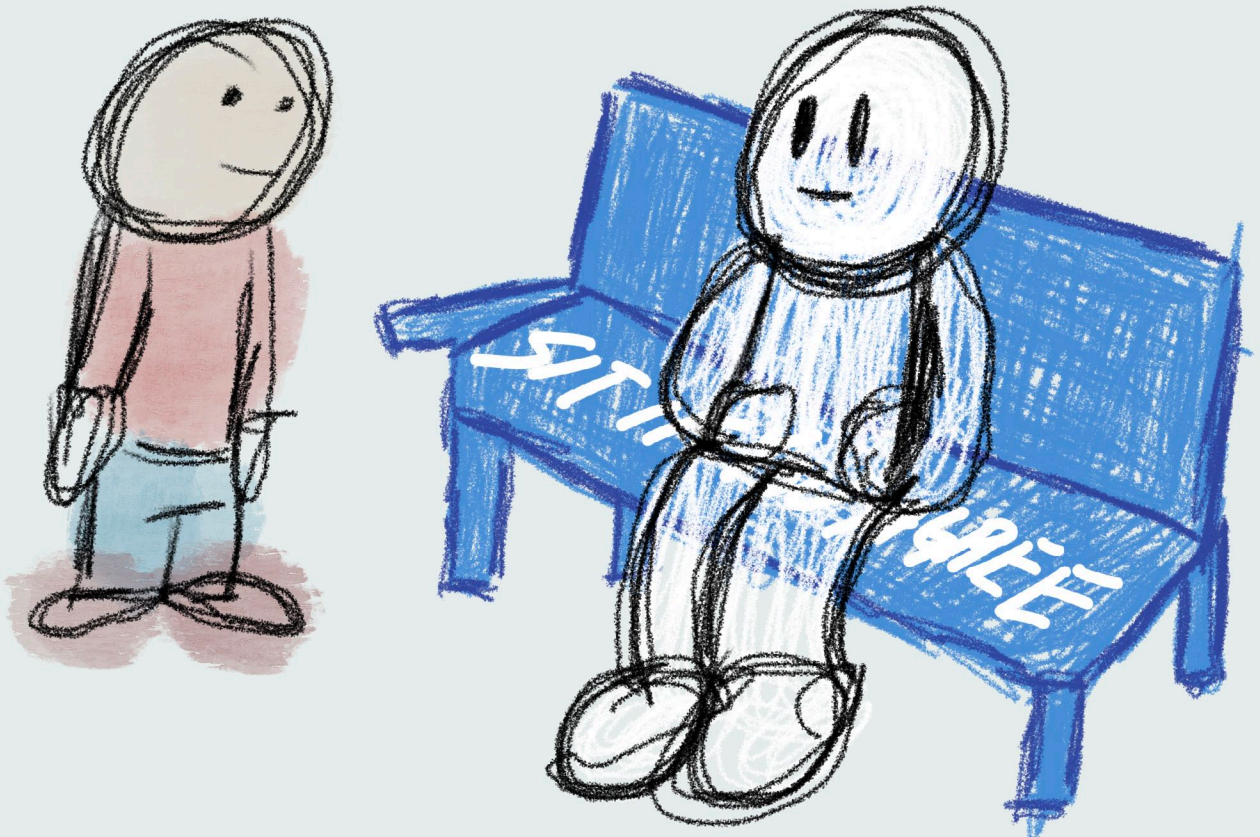
The terminology used within and about the disability community evolves frequently, especially in the context of person-first versus identity-first language. Reflecting on the author's experiences, along with critical disability theory and Marxist theories of disability, this zine will use identity-first language.

Unlike person-first language, identity-first language embraces disability as an integral part of one's identity. However, please remember to ask what language to use; some people prefer person-first language.



# INTRODUCTION

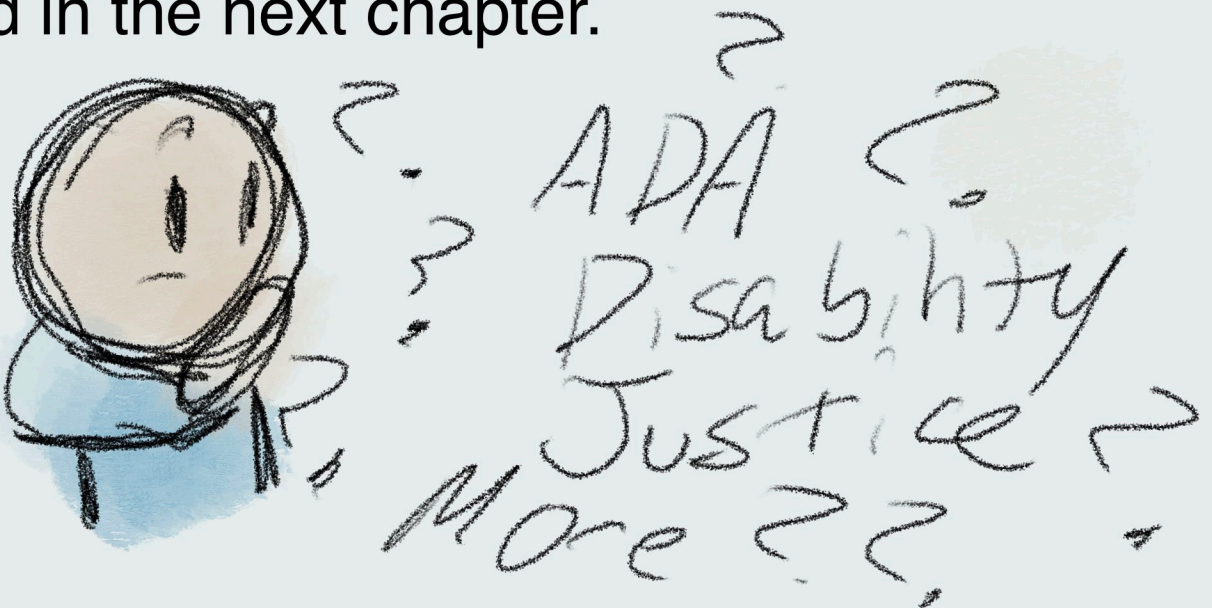
Public history is an ever-changing discipline, becoming more radical and advocacy-driven as time goes on. Advocacy surrounding museum accessibility is no different. Think about the bench exhibit at the University of Illinois's Krannert Art Museum. The blue bench, with writing in white saying "This exhibit has asked me to stand too long. Sit if you agree." poses questions to *everyone* involved in museum operations.



Of course, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act covers museums and cultural spaces, requiring that institutions provide equal access to all. However, what if I told you that legally-mandated accessibility isn't enough for disabled visitors?

You may be wondering, what do you mean? You might also be thinking, too, haven't you already gotten enough? The answer to the latter is, in short, absolutely not.

Disabled people, like many marginalized communities, are continually denied access to spaces, whether for themselves, their mobility aids, their caregivers, and their other needs. This is why we need disability justice in museums, which will be explained in the next chapter.



My name is Elliot Thomas Archer. I am an emerging museum professional, graduating from the University of Missouri - St. Louis in May 2024.

In September 2023, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune condition affecting my joints. Because of my diagnosis, I have significant pain most days all over my body, but especially in my lower body. This causes challenges doing my daily tasks, mitigated by using a cane.

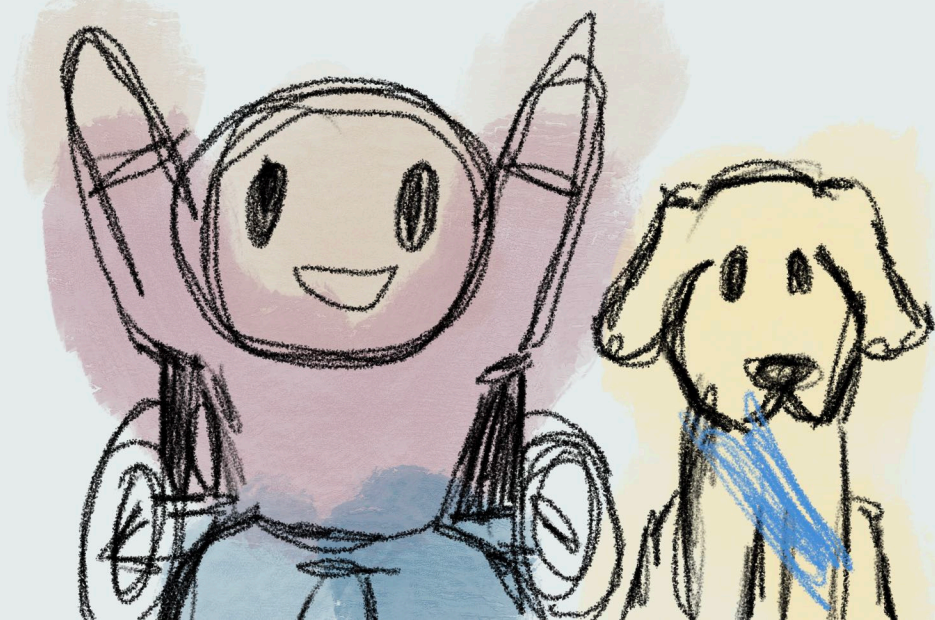
After getting my diagnosis, I had the idea of incorporating this into my exit project somehow, leading to the creation of this zine. This process not only helps me cope with my diagnosis, but is also integral as disabled people continue their advocacy for themselves in these spaces outside of simple accessibility.



I organized this zine as a primer on what disability justice and anti-ableism are and why we need them as models in museums, along with accessibility case studies of museums and cultural sites in the St. Louis area.

Before each case study, there is a general chapter on the kind of museum I will be studying and basic context on what accessibility may look like in these spaces. These chapters help readers of all kinds, especially those less familiar with different kinds of institutions and how these spaces work. Finally, the zine ends with a reframing of the conversation on disability justice from access to collective liberation.

Throughout this zine, you'll hear from myself and other disability activists. These appear as small callout spaces on the top of the page.



# CHAPTER 1: WHY DISABILITY JUSTICE?



As answered before, accessibility isn't enough in today's context of museums. While it is a great stepping stone, it is not a means to an end. It is an ever-evolving conversation museum staff must have with their boards, community and visitors, and disability rights activists.

I should clarify a few models and how they view disability. This zine may primarily use critical disability theory and Marxist models of disability, but it is important to understand the context of each model since they influence both the words we use and the attitudes people may have surrounding disability.





The medical and social models of disability are two of the most prominent lenses used by society when understanding disability and disabled people.

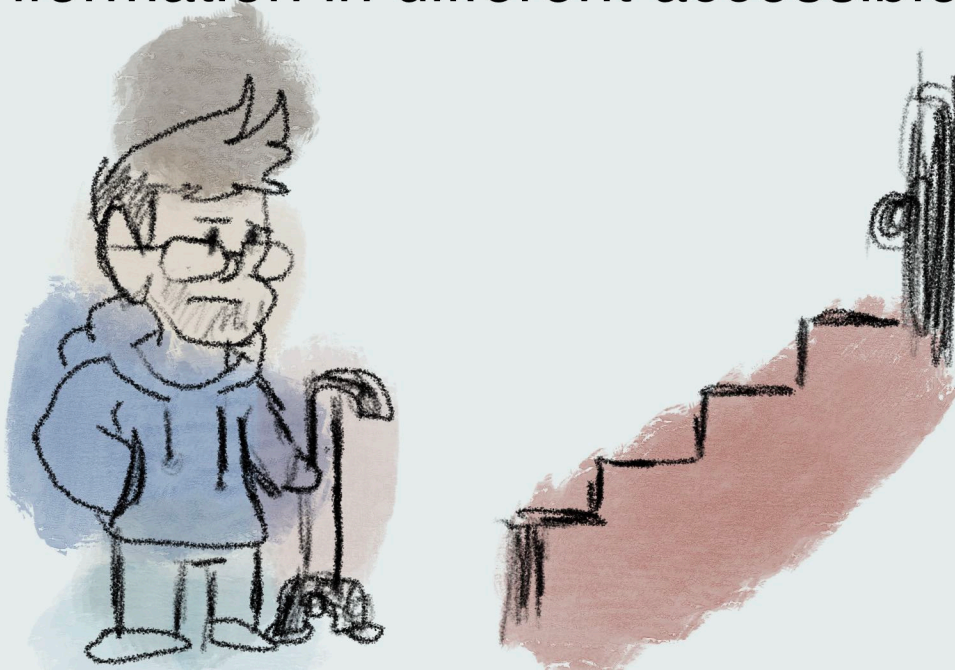
The medical model of disability frames disability as an “impairment” that must be cured by doctors or medical staff. The goals of this model are bringing this individual or community back to a definition of “normal.” My hope is you see the problem with this model, as it looks consistently on what is “wrong” with this person, leading them to lose confidence and agency in their lives.



The social model of disability distinguishes itself from the medical model, viewing society, values, norms, and attitudes as the cause of disability, specifically looking into how we can remove barriers to access.

Developed by disabled people and activists during the 1960s-70s, the social model of disability identifies challenges that disable the person, known as attitudinal barriers, physical barriers, and communication barriers.

Attitudinal barriers are assumptions that justify and perpetuate prejudice. Physical barriers are inaccessible parts of the physical and built environment, like steps or narrow corridors. Communication barriers include a lack of access to an interpreter for d/Deaf or hard of hearing people or lack of information in different accessible formats.





I NOTICE MUSEUMS MEET THE LETTER OF THE LAW, BUT THIS ISN'T ENOUGH. COMPLIANCE ISN'T EQUITY.

Ableism and segregation embeds itself within accessible programming and initiatives, meaning that accommodations, including museums, must move past providing the essential “special accommodations” as defined by Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990).

One key concept of disability justice is intersectionality. Alongside racism, ableism operates under the umbrella of white supremacy. Critical disability theory brings us towards the understanding of disability through the work of social justice. Because disability doesn't discriminate by age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other aspects of one's identity, the struggles of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC people), queer/ LGBTQIA+ people, women, and other marginalized people are intertwined with struggles of disabled people. DisCrit (Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies), in the words of Subini Annamma and their colleagues, privileges marginalized voices and requires resistance.

Roddy Slorach's *A Very Capitalist Condition* bridges gaps between Marxism and critical disability theory by arguing that capitalism and class are also intertwined with disability and marginalized struggles. He critically engages with the social model of disability and asserts that while lands and economic production were usurped and many people needed to work under the system for corporate profit, disabled people were broadly categorized as "unemployable."

They were cast aside, subject to widespread homelessness, mass incarceration, and poverty. This still exists today, even after 34 years of ADA codified into law. Capitalism, as with all forms of discrimination, produces oppression of all kinds, like ableism and racism, for profit.



Disability justice and critical disability theory intertwine with the works and theories of radical public history. Many radical public historians, like Lara Kelland and Denise Meringolo, pushed towards new waves of political and social consciousness thinking about the activism of civil rights, women's rights, Indigenous rights, queer rights, and disability rights.

Museum staff must develop a collaborative, compassionate, politically conscious culture with disabled staff and community members, using self reflection and creativity towards fostering safe, engaging learning and advocacy spaces for disabled people.



**CHAPTER 2: HISTORIC  
HOMES -  
PRESERVATION  
DOESN'T MEAN  
INACCESSIBLE**



**Missouri State  
Parks**

The 1966 National Historic Preservation Act established the National Register and created a process for adding properties, administered the National Park Service (NPS). Since its inception, more than 90,000 properties have been listed in the Register. In Missouri alone, there are 36 historic sites designated by Missouri State Parks.

Unfortunately, federal accessibility laws didn't come into play until 1968, when the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) passed, which declared that all buildings constructed, altered, and designed by the United States government must be accessible for all. While some assume there is a grandfather clause in the ABA and the ADA, this isn't true, and every building regardless of when constructed, must be accessible.



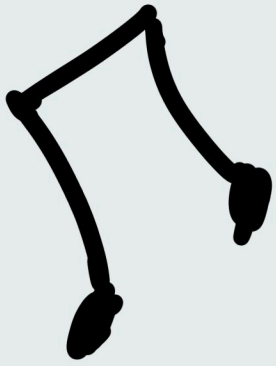
The ADA requires historic properties meet the following minimum standards:

1. A minimum of one accessible route to an accessible entrance;
2. At least one accessible entrance
3. At least one accessible route to restrooms;
4. An accessible route to all public spaces at the level of entry, and;
5. Displays and written information must be viewable by a seated person, including horizontal displays at a maximum of 44 inches.

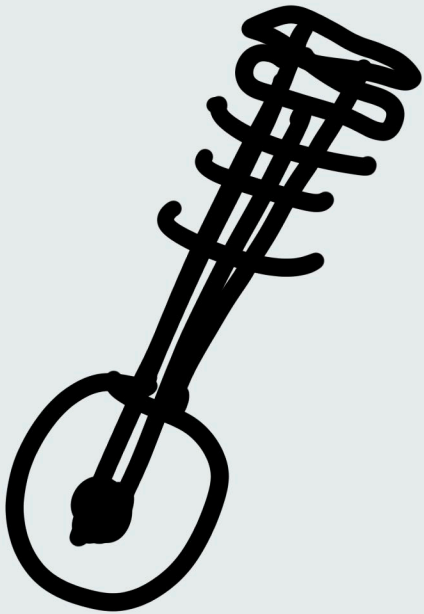
No matter how challenging it can be to balance historic preservation and accessibility, we can still be creative when providing access while maintaining the character of these properties. This access must be in line with disability justice and anti-ableism, not just guidance from the minimum requirements of the ADA.







**CASE STUDY I:  
SCOTT JOPLIN  
HISTORIC HOME**



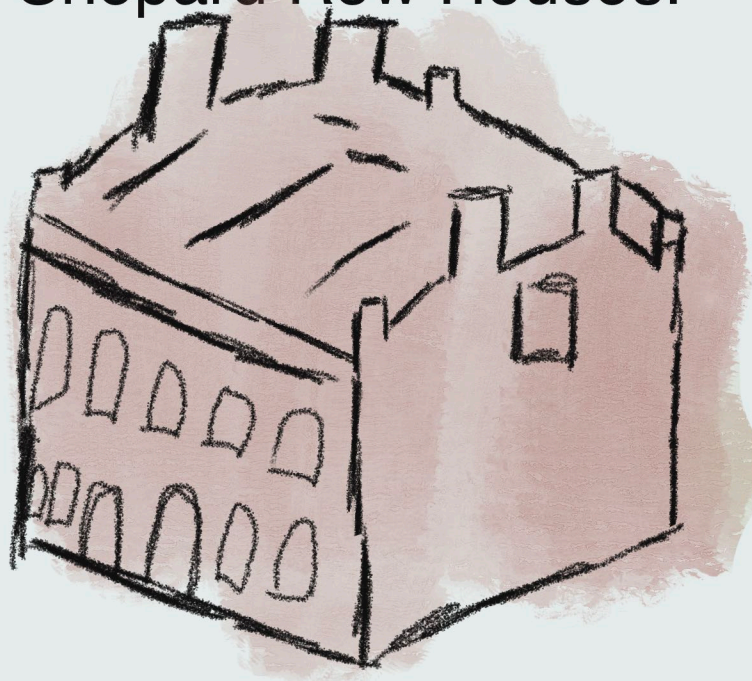


As mentioned previously in the zine, I conducted case studies of three kinds of institutions: a historic site, a national park, and an art museum. I chose these three variations because I wanted to see how three different systems saw accessibility and their disabled visitors through the lens of their work. Each case study involved interviews and participant observations. Each case study is preceded by larger context of how these systems originated and implement accessibility.



In response to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the Missouri State Park fund opened on April 9th, 1917, using revenue from the fish and game department. By 1937, the park management separated from the fish and game management and became the Missouri State Park Board. In 1974, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR) assumed the state park board's responsibilities.

The Missouri State Park system oversees 57 state parks and 36 historic sites, including the Scott Joplin Historic Site on 2658 Delmar Blvd in the City of St. Louis. Interpreting the role of Scott Joplin in the development of American music and racial constraints in St. Louis for musicians, the Scott Joplin House preserves Joplin's legacy with his residence and two sets of historic row houses: the Delmar Row Houses and the Shepard Row Houses.



Ashley Canner, my peer and a tour guide at the Scott Joplin House offered to give me a tour and answer my questions. She opened our discussion up by mentioning accessibility initiatives pursued by the Historic House's staff. Noting the challenges of making these spaces more accessible while maintaining the site's character and appearance, the site has found ways of meeting minimum ADA standards.

The site constructed an elevator and a deck connecting the Rosebud, a recreation of the original bar on Market Street in Saint Louis, allowing mobility-impaired visitors an entrance into the House. Inside the Scott Joplin House, we viewed a video with closed captioning explaining Joplin's life and his residence. There are also interpretive panels around the walls of the first floor, along with photos.



Canner mentioned that they give tours in one-on-one interpretive groups when visitors either reserve time or walk into the House. The staff use the interpretive panels to an extent, but when I asked Ashley how she and other staff integrated different stories, she said each tour guide gives a different interpretation of Joplin's legacy. While she said this made the House tours accessible, I never got extensive information on what makes them more accessible than other models.

However, she argued the House is improving accessibility measures for those who can't use stairs to see the second floor. The House will be receiving iPads before May 2024 to provide 360 degree virtual tours of the rooms upstairs. Staff will also be recreating the panels and videos on the first floor, confronting the challenging histories as a Black American historic site in Missouri *and* surrounding Joplin's story.

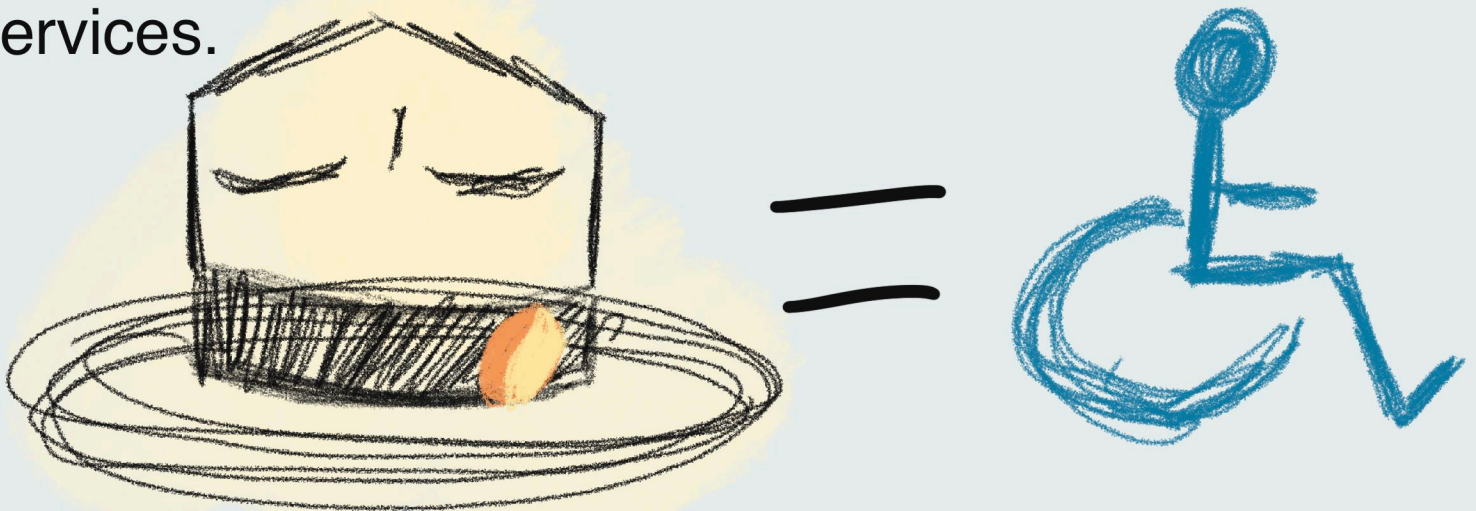


**CHAPTER 3:  
EXPLORING THE  
NATIONAL PARKS  
WITHOUT  
BARRIERS**



On August 25, 1916, United States President Woodrow Wilson passed the National Organic Act, establishing an agency in the Department of the Interior preserving the national parks across the country, known as the National Park Service (NPS). After many pieces of legislation and declarations by Congress and the President, the NPS now manages over 400 areas within its jurisdiction, spanning more than 84 million acres in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five territories.

Since the early 1900s, camps and outdoor activities have been available around the country. In 1979, the Agency announced its intentional approaching accessibility at a national level, rather than on a site by site basis. In 2000, the NPS released “Director’s Order #42: Accessibility for Visitors with Disabilities in National Park Programs and Services,” explaining why accessibility is integral for the NPS and demanding universal design across facilities, programs, and services.



The National Park Service's *All In! Accessibility in the National Park Service (2015-2020)* report, done by the Accessibility Taskforce, established an objective of continually breaking down barriers in the parks. It notes that there are visitor centers without accessible restrooms, water fountains, and entrances; programs without alternative formats like audio and tactile elements; and some ill-equipped staff without skills for communicating with disabled visitors. Decreased government spending limits the budget towards addressing these barriers significantly.

However, the Accessibility Taskforce offered strategies and goals for the entire agency. These include:

1. Create a welcoming environment by increasing the NPS's ability to serve disabled visitors and staff
2. Ensure new facilities and programs are inclusive and accessible
3. Upgrade existing facilities, programs, and services for accessibility





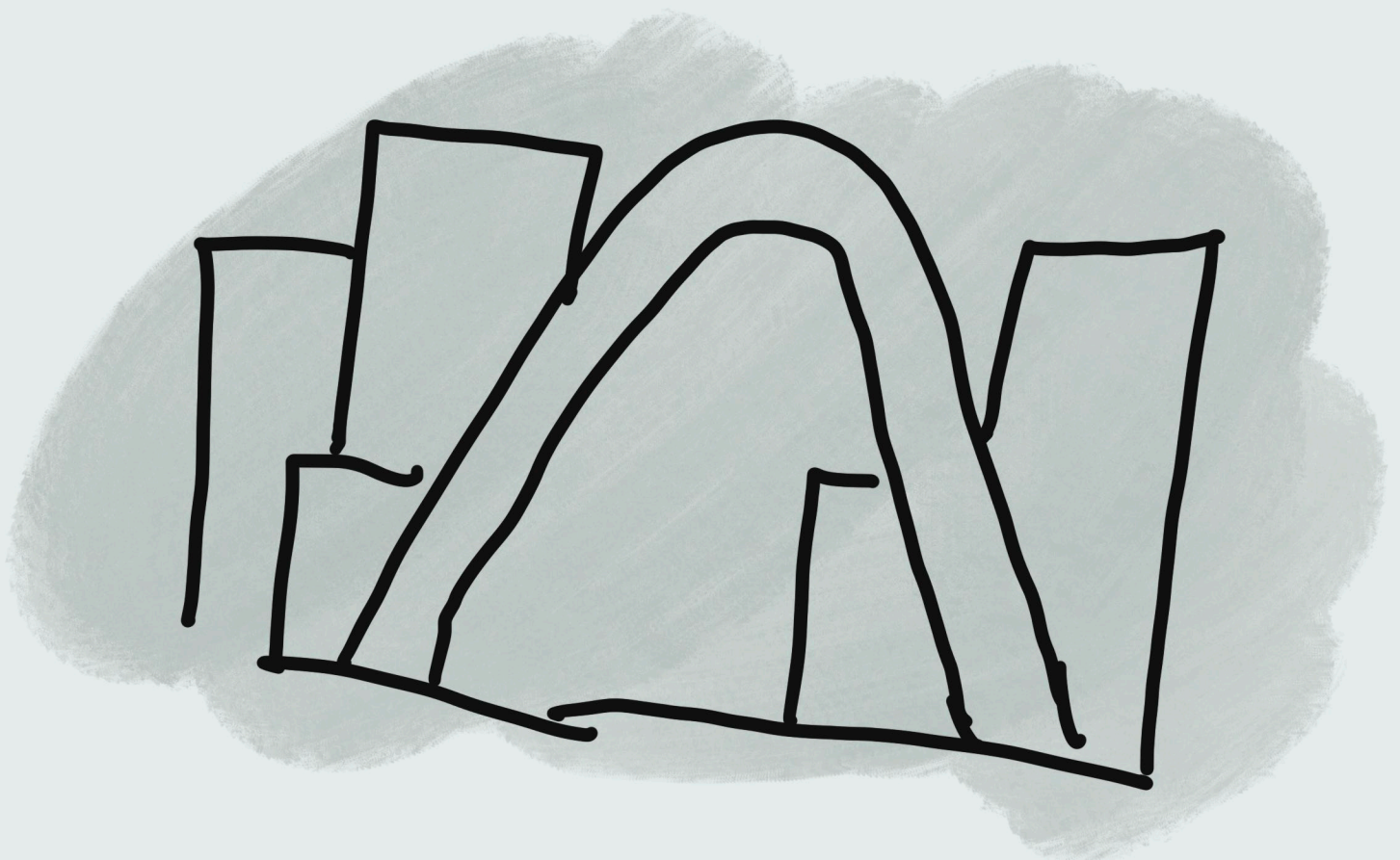


AWARENESS OF THE INTERSECTING PROCESSES OF ABLEISM AND RACIALIZATION IS CRITICAL OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE. IN CURATING STORIES BOTH IN PERSON AND VIRTUALLY DUE TO THE PANDEMIC, THE AGENCY MUST ATTEND TO SUCH PROCESSES AS THEY CONSTRUCT NARRATIVES FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION.

In addition to this report, the National Park Service uses its primary purpose - interpretation - for bringing awareness towards disability narratives within the parks and their histories. While not officially mandated by the NPS, there are several articles on the website interpreting disability history across multiple sites.

In 2023, Ph.D. candidate Perri Meldon announced with the National Council on Public History the creation of the *NPS Disability History Handbook*, a multi-authored anthology coming in late 2024. Each chapter is a point of entry into methods of disability history that might inform public history. This handbook will support staff working in public history spaces as they integrate disability histories into their interpretive and educational programs.

# CASE STUDY 2: GATEWAY ARCH NATIONAL PARK



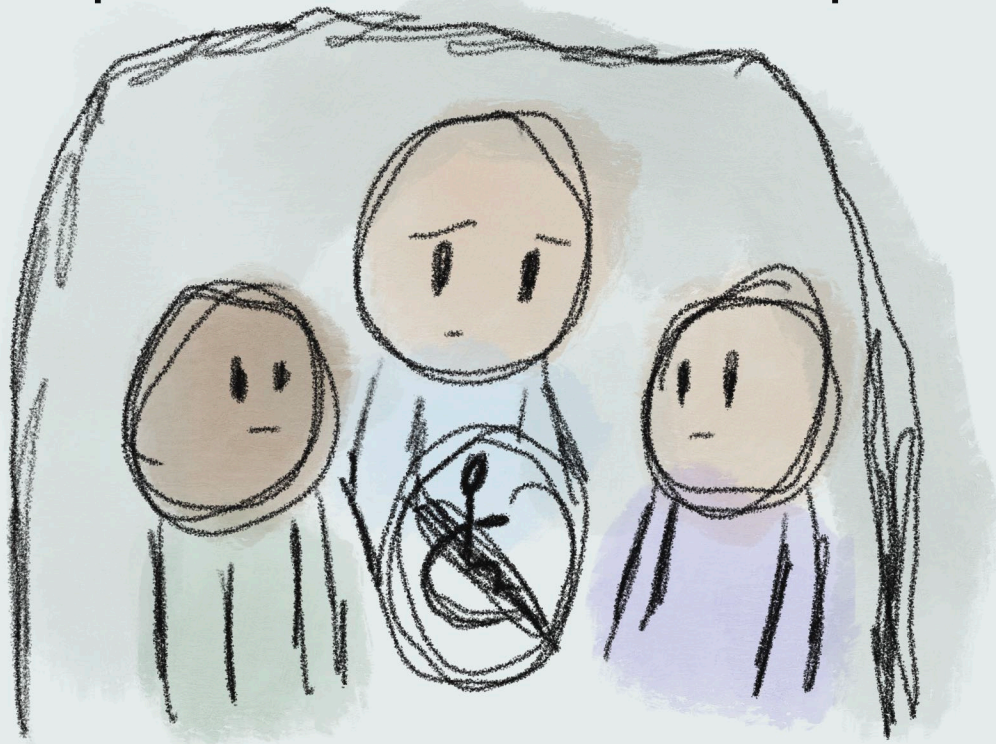
The Gateway Arch National Park, underneath the monument itself, offers many accessibility initiatives and measures for their disabled visitors. Since the museum was updated in accordance with the NPS Accessibility Taskforce, the Gateway Arch Museum features audio and tactile elements, like interactive computers and hands-on exhibits, allowing disabled visitors of all kinds to experience the museum.

The museum also offers large-print documents, written in bold, black sans-serif text on an off-white laminated file, assisted listening and captioning devices at the front desk, and a new device dedicated to non-speaking visitors where they can type for conversations with companions, park rangers or guides, and other museum staff.



Unfortunately, the Gateway Arch is not fully accessible. While the museum promotes universal design, the Tram Ride to the top of the Arch isn't fully accessible to disabled visitors; visitors must manage climbing 96 steps, separated into six flights of stairs, and you may need to stand for 30-60 minutes. No wheelchairs, scooters, or strollers are allowed on the observation deck, and there is no seating or restrooms at the top.

It is, alas, quite difficult to make the tram ride more accessible, considering the structure of the Arch itself. Similar to the Scott Joplin House, parks like the Arch were constructed differently since pre-504 and ADA standards were weaker. The Arch gets thinner as visitors move up the tram towards the top.





WHEN WALKING INTO THE ARCH, GOING THROUGH SECURITY GAVE ME A PLEASANT SURPRISE. WHEN I HANDED MY CANE TO SECURITY, THE STAFF GAVE ME A CANE TO GET THROUGH THE METAL DETECTOR. I IMMEDIATELY KNEW THAT ACCESSIBILITY WAS HIGH ON THEIR LIST OF PRIORITIES.

While exploring the museum and its interactive computers with my partner, an education intern at the Arch, we noticed features for those using a wired headset, where once plugged in the user navigates the activity with buttons and listen to text-to-speech with image and text descriptions. Not every one of these computers functioned properly; some didn't have button functionality or audio, or both. One even played audio outside of the headset when it was plugged in.

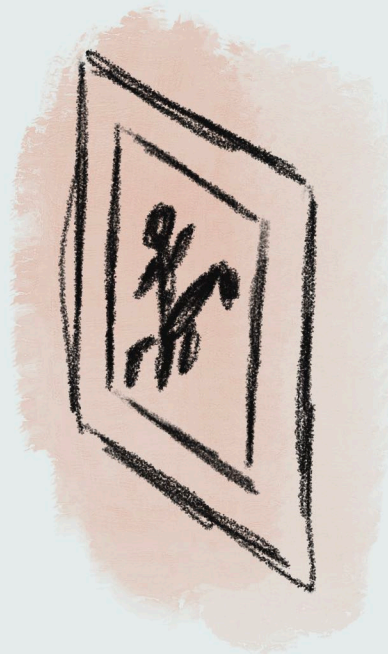
Technology like this makes exhibits more equitable for disabled visitors, but it must go under consistent maintenance to remain welcoming for all visitors.

# CHAPTER 3: MUSEUMS - EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION FOR ALL



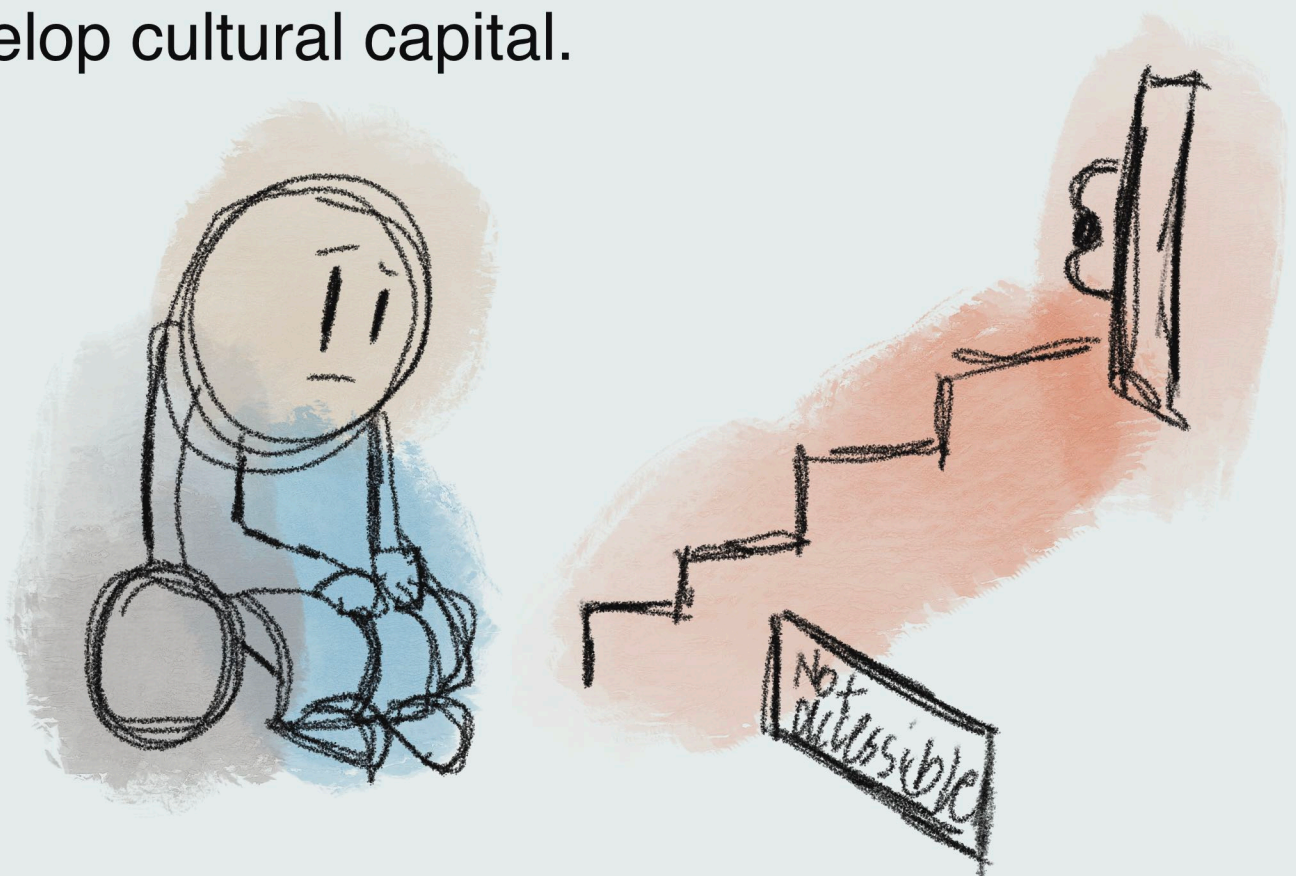
There are museums covering all kinds of subjects across the globe. In the United States alone, museums engage nearly 900 million visitors each year. The existence of museums spans back to ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and Ancient Rome. Early museums in the eighteenth century primarily served as private collections of interesting objects. However, the purpose of museums changed throughout history, becoming spaces of knowledge and discussion.

In the case of the museum studied later in this zine, art museums are usually public or private collections used not only as a space for viewing art, but also as a space for cultural and creative events involving different art mediums, histories, and collective memory.




While many art museums do have an elitist history serving white supremacy, some of these institutions are attempting to hold themselves accountable for the history of their spaces. Karl Marx and other Marxist theorists use the concept of “cultural capital” to describe museums and other cultural institutions. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that the wealthy didn’t just garner money; they also garner cultural assets.

Because cultural capital is dependent on social mobility and preferences of cultural products like music and television depend on one’s class, art museums according to Bourdieu excludes social classes that have little time, and in this case ability, to develop cultural capital.





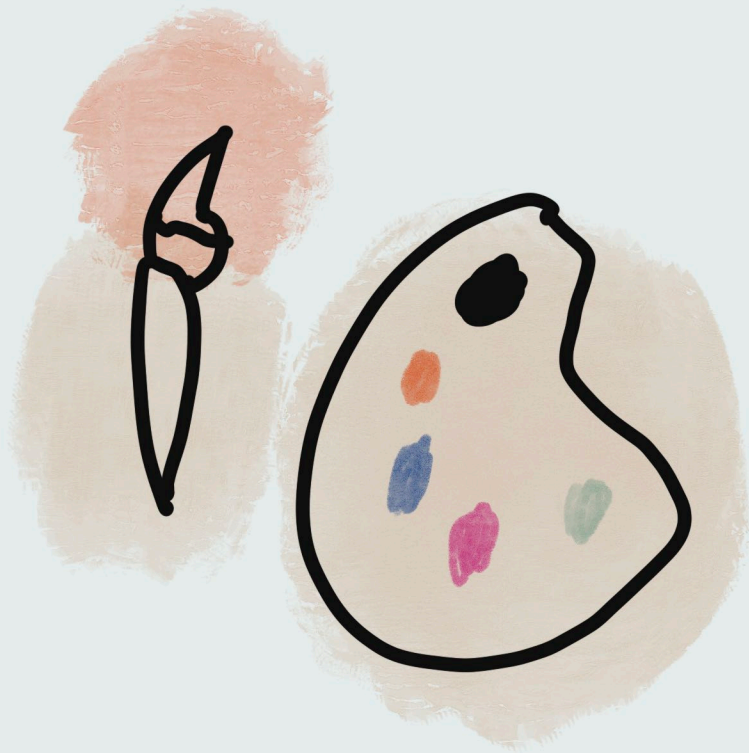


DISABILITIES ARE NOT TO BE  
FEARED, NOR DO THEY MARK THE  
END OF NORMALITY. SO, HOW CAN  
MUSEUMS NORMALIZE THE  
INCLUSION OF BODIES?

*The Miniature Exhibition Project*, created by a disabled museum educator and an art education doctoral student, revealed ableist structures within accessibility programming and initiatives. Multi-stop tours especially cause problems as it requires visitors to move at a certain pace, while also meeting time constraints.

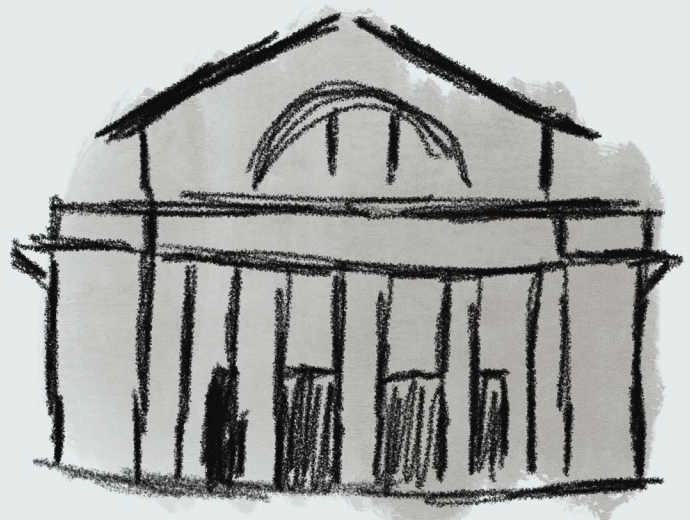
This can be harmful for disabled visitors, and the MEP advocated for disability justice in programming, such as stationary, open-ended drop-in experiences, prioritizing flexibility for all visitors.

# CASE STUDY 3: THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM



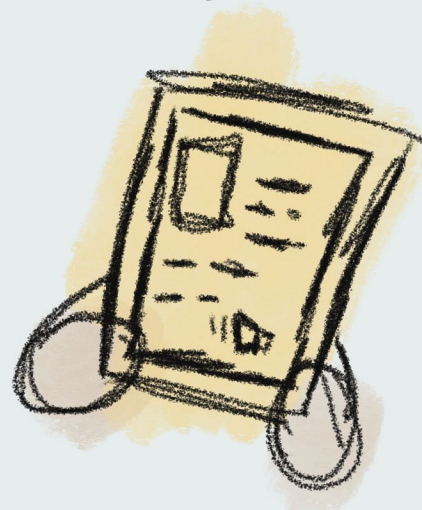
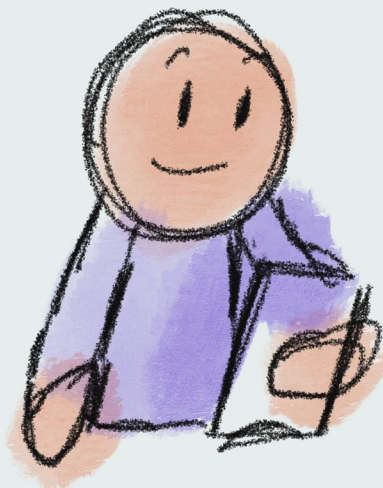
In St. Louis, many attractions reside in Forest Park, making up the St. Louis Metropolitan Zoological Park and Museum District. This includes the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM).

Founded in 1879, the Saint Louis Art Museum was originally the *Saint Louis School and Museum of Fine Arts*, originally associated with Washington University. School director Halsey Ives advocated for an art tax supporting the maintenance of the museum after moving to Forest Park. After some legal turmoil with the City Controller, the museum and school separated into three different institutions in 1909: A public city art museum that would become SLAM, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University, and the Saint Louis School of Fine Arts, which would merge with Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts. By the 1950s, SLAM extended with a new auditorium, and in 2013 new gallery spaces opened.



The museum's website lists accessibility measures under the Visit tab, including elevators, accessible parking and restrooms, use of wheelchairs and mobility devices, and bringing service animals. Visitors with low vision can receive magnifying glasses from Information Desks, and can access digital guides and large-print text through QR codes in the museum. Deaf/hard of hearing visitors can request tours with American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation and access transcripts of video and audio guides.

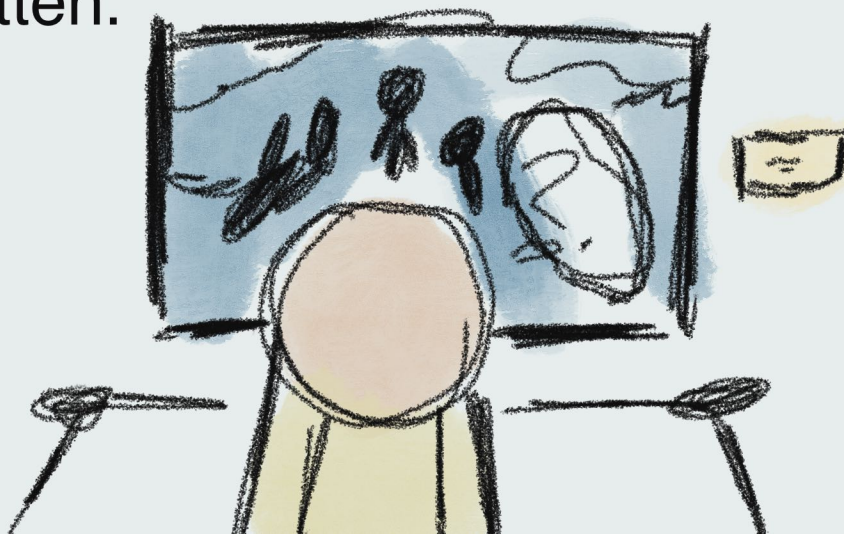
SLAM's Diversity Study Group submitted a report on August 31, 2020, discussing accessibility for exhibitions and programming. The Audience Engagement Taskforce conducted visitor research, which ultimately led to creating community boards for access, inclusion, and technology, along with new digital tours, labels, and specialized disability training for docents.



When visiting SLAM, I went alone, without much of a perspective of what to look for aside from my knowledge of their website.

Walking into the museum, the layout and way finding signage allowed me to navigate the museum easily. I also enjoyed the placement of benches throughout the galleries, which gave me opportunities for physical rest and time to reflect on the gallery's themes and artworks.

The label writing itself is generalized for multiple audiences, but the placement of labels around each gallery was questionable. Some were so small next to quite a large artifact, some required visitors needed to bend over to see a panel, and some weren't even in glass displays where they needed to be, confusing visitors as they read them on the wall next to another artwork. Label placement is just as important as how they are written.

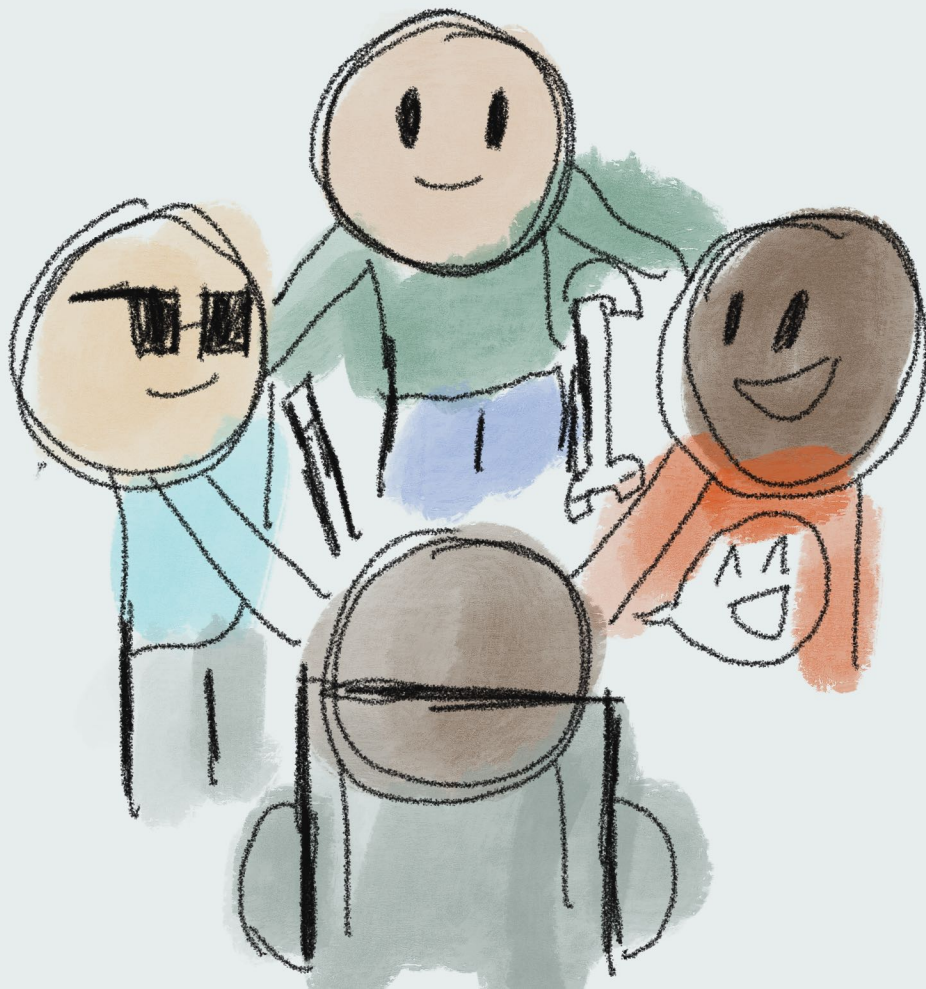


**CONCLUSION:  
REFRAMING THE  
CONVERSATION FROM  
ACCESS TO A  
COLLECTIVE  
LIBERATION**



As activists, museum professionals, and even academics, reframing the conversation from making spaces accessible to making them *collectively liberating and equitable* is important. Disabled people of color and disabled queer people, when advocating for disability justice, shift this conversation on access from legal compliance to concepts of collective liberation, intersectionality, anti-capitalism, and interdependence.

Disability and disabled people exist within a historical legacy of discrimination, violence, and eugenics. Museum staff can perpetuate this legacy rather than address it.



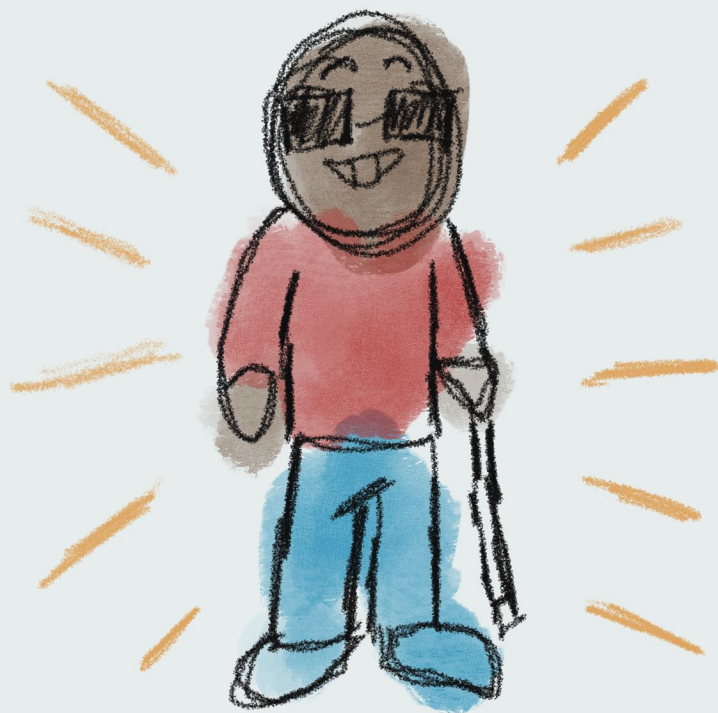
Modeling disability justice as museum professionals starts with reflection; unlearning ableism and challenging inherent racism, sexism, queerphobia, and other forms of prejudice one may hold. This can be done by following principles of critical disability theory and disability justice. Creating liberators access is always a work in progress.

1. Disabled people and activists are your experts. Reading and highlighting disabled perspectives centers voices most impacted by discrimination.

2. Reframe the conversation and don't just consider physical and educational access. How can we consider sensory needs when designing exhibits?

3. Institutional critique is key when understanding inaccessible spaces in your museum, allowing collective care.

4. Embody disabled people as co-creators of their experiences and stories instead of centering them as participants.

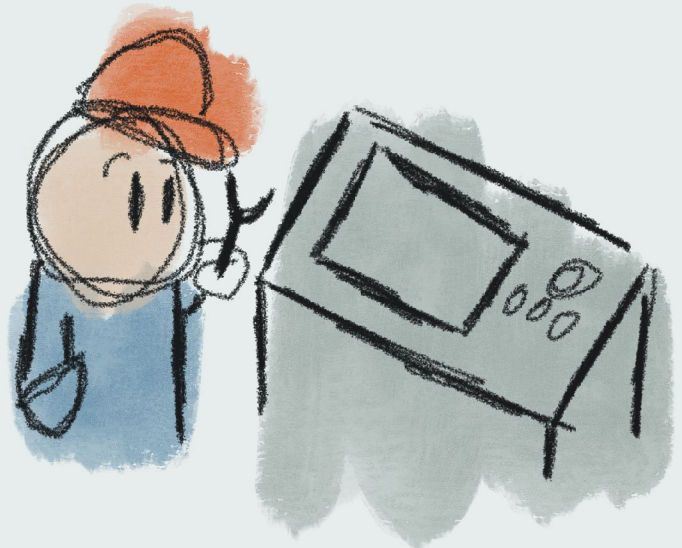




When thinking back on the case studies done in this zine, there are many ideas I have thinking about the principles on the previous page.

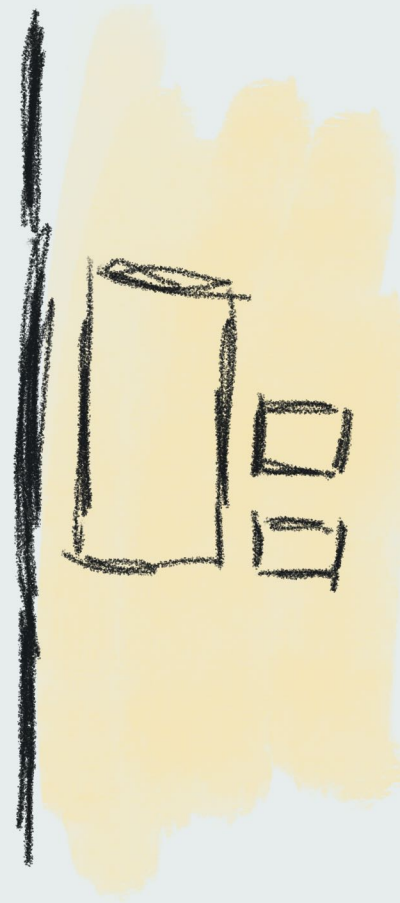
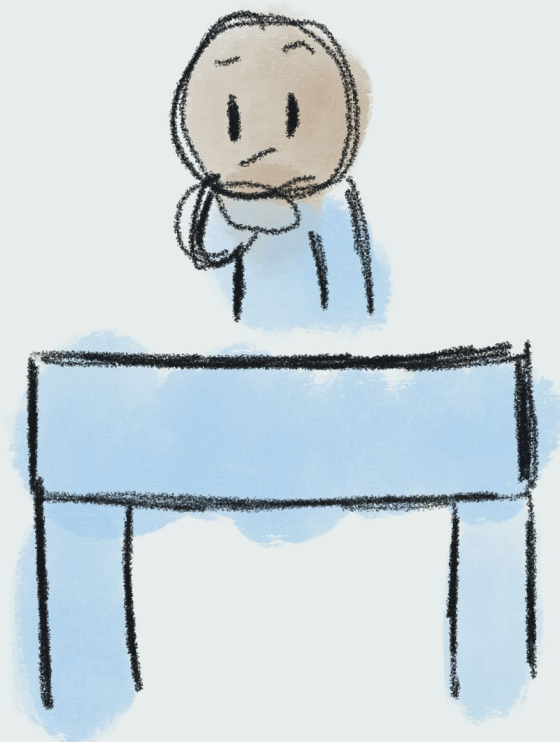
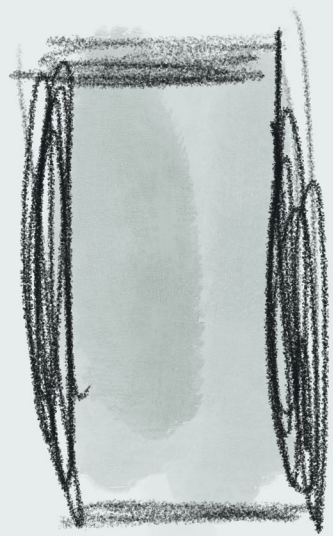
The Scott Joplin House may not be accessible for those looking to go to the second floor, but there are many opportunities for them to create interpretive, sensory-friendly experiences, both with the new virtual 360 tours on the iPads and with some disability-friendly programming. A partnership with Different Dynamics, a disability music nonprofit, is an organization I recommend partnering with.

The Gateway Arch works very well with the National Park Service's universal design principles. However, they can't have accessible space without continually maintaining their technology. Checking on the interactive computers is important, but in the coming years they can be improved with even newer accessible technology.



The Saint Louis Art Museum has some room for improvement, too. As I was visiting their ticketed exhibition, *Matisse and The Sea*, I thought so deeply about label placement and design, and how that makes for an accessible space.

SLAM has a house font they use for their graphic design. While aesthetically pleasing, it can be difficult to read, especially if the label is of a drastic size difference (label is smaller than artifact) or is misplaced from the artifact. One panel for an artifact housed in glass is on the wall next to another painting, not inside the case. This is also prevalent around the permanent galleries.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee head, Dr. Lauren Obermark, and committee member/program assistant/close friend Cass Hammerle. Their revisions and guidance helped me produce this zine in its highest quality.

Thank you to my program director, Dr. Lara Kelland, for challenging me, while also showing me grace as I have gone through my grad school journey.

Huge thank you to past and current queer, trans, and disabled activists. You all are why I am here today, taking on this important work.

Finally, thank you to my partner Blake, and my chosen family for supporting my ambitions wholeheartedly. I love you forever and always.



# FOR FURTHER READING

## Books

Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability by Robert McRuer

DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education by David J. Connor, Beth A. Ferri, and Subini Annamma

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Critical Disability Theory by Melinda C. Hall, open access here: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/disability-critical/>

A Very Capitalist Condition: A History and Politics of Disability by Roddy Slorach

In Search of a Social Model of Disability: Marxism, normality, and culture in “Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research” by Bill Armer, open access here: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Barnes-implementing-the-social-model-chapter-4.pdf>

## Articles

“Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” by Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Stanford Law Review* 43(6); 1241-1299, 1991.

“Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/Ability” by Subini Ancy Annamma, David Connor, and Beth Ferri, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 42(1): 46-71, 2013.

“Museum Crip Space, By Any Other Name” by Beth Ziebarth and Janice Majewski, *Journal of Museum Education*, 47(2), 179-191. Open access here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10598650.2022.2077068>

“The Call for Disability Justice in Museum Education: Reframing Accessibility as Anti-Ableism” by Syrus Marcus Ware, Kate Zankowicz, and Sarah Sims, *Journal of Museum Education*, 47(2), 130-137.

“Museum Education for Disability Justice and Liberatory Access” by J.T. Eisenhauer Richardson and Dana Carlisle Kletchka, *Journal of Museum Education*, 47(2), 138-149. Open access here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10598650.2022.2072155>

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