

Beyond the Minimum - NEA Making Universal Design Universal

Educators and artists explore engaged arts education

Imagine a time when the world goes beyond minimum “ADA standards” to actually design places and things that are accessible in every sense of the word.

Paula Terry, director of accessibility for the National Endowment for the Art’s Office for Accessibility, is working to make that future a reality. For the past several years, she has led an initiative with the Center for Universal Design and other partners to popularize Universal Design and change the way people think about accessibility.

Universal Design is defined as “the design of products and environments to be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” Universal Design benefits everyone, regardless of age or physical disability. It applies to everything, but Terry is most interested in its application to public arts venues.

For so long, being accessible for most public venues meant adhering to minimal standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Install a ramp to an existing building, and you’re finished. If you’re drawing the blueprints for a new structure, worry about the ADA specifics at the last second and slap on some revisions. Universal Design takes a decidedly more proactive and progressive approach.

“Universal Design doesn’t just focus on disabilities. It focuses on the entire public. It raises standards,” said Terry.

The heart of the cause is the Center for Universal Design (CUD) at North Carolina State University. CUD was created by the founder of Universal Design, architect Ron Mace. Mace had a physical disability, and pursued architecture in part to combat the inaccessibility and non-intuitive design he grappled with in his day-to-day life. And Mace inspired Adaptive Environments, a nonprofit organization dedicated to Universal Design, to publish *Building a World Fit for People: Designers with Disabilities at Work*, a book that encourages more people with disabilities to pursue

careers in design. For an online version of the book, visit www.AdaptiveEnvironments.org/accessdesign.

For the past several years, the NEA has funded organizations and projects that work to advance Universal Design. The NEA’s Office for Accessibility’s most recent grants went to a program in Kansas public

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Principles of Universal Design*

- 1. Equitable Use:** The design does not disadvantage or stigmatize any group of users.
- 2. Flexibility in Use:** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- 3. Simple, Intuitive Use:** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.
- 4. Perceptible Information:** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.
- 5. Tolerance for Error:** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
- 6. Low Physical Effort:** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue.
- 7. Size and Space for Approach & Use:** Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use, regardless of the user’s body size, posture, or mobility.

* Compiled by advocates of Universal Design, listed in alphabetical order: Bettye Rose Connell, Mike Jones, Ron Mace, Jim Mueller, Abir Mullick, Elaine Ostroff, Jon Sanford, Ed Steinfeld, Molly Story, and Gregg Vanderheiden.