accessibility grows up

Industry leaders are learning—and creating—new ways to bring everyone to the big-screen experience.

BY ANNE WELSBACHER

Patrons viewing Into the Deep take advantage of Tennessee Aquarium IMAX 3D Theater’s Rear Window Captioning System.
Doors are opening wide at large-format theaters. Theater managers, film producers, sound system designers, architects, and ushers are finding new ways to define "accessible" in the large-format film industry.

"It's so encouraging to see how much people have embraced the concept in the last few years," says Bridget Shea, manager of the pending Samuel C. Johnson Imax 3D Theater at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. "And it's gratifying seeing people watch the big screen who have never been able to before."

Almost a decade has passed since accessibility laws began to appear in the United States—and now similar laws have been enacted in European countries. But, with the advent of new technologies and creative ideas, "accessibility" has moved beyond simply fulfilling minimum legal mandates. Today, theater managers and film producers are setting higher standards for themselves, offering more than they're required to provide, and reaching across time zones to share advice and resources.

Regardless of this enthusiasm, the Americans with Disabilities Act—which was passed in the United States in 1990—still contains vague definitions of what is required of builders and operators. Theaters in England face equally frustrating cloudiness in the newest phase of their country's Disability Discrimination Act, which was introduced in December 1997. Providing access continues to mean extra expenses, and payback continues to be more about goodwill than bottom-line figures. But track records are accumulating, a body of expertise is growing—and new technologies are making accessibility easier to apply.

BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL COME
A key trend in architecture is the concept of "dispersed seating." Wheelchairs once were typically placed at the back of the theater—the most feasible spot for accommodating entry and exit patterns, elevator space, and other logistical concerns. Now flat-screen theaters are building room for wheelchairs and companion seats in front and back rows—and throughout the theater as well.

Because of its location in the United States' capitol city, the theater at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum, opening in spring 1999, went through a "very thorough design process to provide access far and beyond other theaters," says Juan Stoelson, principal architect at HGA, Inc., in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Aiming to be a model for accessibility, it will include seating in front, back, and middle rows, with access to the latter requiring an additional elevator, costing $200,000 (USD). More-affordable perks being provided by theaters include removable seats, which allow the flexibility to respond to specific audience needs; far more wheelchair spaces than mandated by law (30 rather than six in a 400-seat theater, for example); and electrical outlets, which people can use to recharge their wheelchairs while they watch the show.

"After all, that much electricity isn't going to bankrupt anybody, and it's a nice courtesy for our patrons," says Bob Evans, general manager of the Omni theater at the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul, where a new theater offering all of the above extras will open in late 1999.

In general, the expense of adding ramps, elevators, and many other needed architectural elements to a theater and its employee work spaces is about four percent of the facility's overall cost. At an average cost of $5 million for a large-format 2D theater, that amount comes to about $200,000.

HEARING IS BELIEVING
Rear Window Captioning System is emerging as the most popular film captioning technology. The system includes an LED board that projects reversed captions onto adjustable Plexiglas mirrors attached to seats. It costs $20,000 to $30,000, depending on the peripherals purchased with it; at $10,000 to $12,000, the system's projector is the largest portion of the expense.

Some theaters lease captioning equipment, at about $13,000 a year; others buy it outright. The Omni Theater in Boston is funding a new system by combining a $5,000 grant with the trade of some little-used projection equipment—an example of the creative approaches many theaters are taking to provide accessibility on limited budgets.

"Different places do their own thing," says Shea, who headed an accessibility workshop for the International Space Theater Consortium (ISTC) 1997 conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. "And that's great—each institution should look at its resources and audiences."

Carson Malone, manager of the Tennessee Aquarium Imax 3D Theater in Chattanooga, waxes ecstatic about a new device for the hearing impaired, called a neck loop. "In my opinion, it's the greatest invention since the Wright brothers' airplane," he says.

Made by Williams Sound in Minneapolis, tiny receivers in the device couple, or boost, the sound signal of the film's narration from an FM system right into the hearing system of the person wearing the neck loop. Shored up with interface devices like patch cord plugs, the signal coupling system can provide sound for patrons who, because of the nature of their
theaters and films
a sampling of services

A quick, unofficial list of industry offerings.

THEATERS
These theaters offer audio description and/or Rear Window Captioning Service.

Langley Theater, National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.
Entergy Imax Theatre, Aquarium of the Americas, New Orleans

Tennessee Aquarium Imax 3D Theater, Chattanooga

Mugar Omni Theater, Museum of Science, Boston

Wortham Imax Theatre, Houston Museum of Natural Science

Laurence Phipps Theater, Denver Museum of Natural History
Luxor Imax Theatre, Luxor Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas

Gateway Arch Odyssey Theater, St. Louis

FILMS
These films are captioned.

Africa: The Serengeti
Blue Planet
Cosmic Voyage
Destiny in Space
The Dream is Alive
Into the Deep
L-5: First City in Space
Living Planet
The Living Sea
The Magic of Flight
Mission to Mir
Special Effects
Stormchasers
To Fly!

devised by the group—for fulfilling its demands, networking opportunities and seminars, publications, a newsletter, and a help line.

“With terms like ‘reasonable adjustments,’ the law explains what the results should be—but not how to get there,” says Stephanie McVor, who heads planning for Imax at the Science Museum, which will open in London in April 2000. “The forum is trying to show people how to do that.”

BOTTOM LINES
Film producers are getting into the act, too, albeit with varying levels of enthusiasm. Early on, MacGillivray Freeman Films embraced the notion of captioning its films in production. Recent Imax Corporation titles also are captioned. And, Sonics Associates, Inc., is actively seeking ways to simplify the captioning system.

But not all producers are “on board,” say many theater managers. Yet captioning can easily be built into a film budget. The key is early planning, says Shea, echoing the mantra of the United States National Science Foundation’s (NSF) Hyman Field: “Captioning is but a small part of a grant application to NSF. Accessibility needs also can be included in plans for marketing, merchandising, and other early-stage development work.”

Aside from obeying the law and modestly increasing audience attendance, there’s not much bottom-line payoff to providing access to people with disabilities, its advocates agree.

“But once you’ve seen a small child’s face light up because she’s had access—for the first time—to the big-screen experience, it makes it very worthwhile indeed,” says Malone.

“There’s no question the work pays big dividends. There is so much to all this—and so much more that can be done.”

Anne Weisbacher, former editor of The Big Frame, is based in Minneapolis and writes about science and nature, the arts, history, and other topics.

PEOPLE POWER
Malone learned about the neck loop by going right to the source. In spring 1997, he held a focus group consisting of people who are deaf and hard of hearing. The information gleaned was both enlightening—like the discovery of the neck loop technology—and prosaic. “We had FM devices and ear pieces, so we assumed we were providing accessibility,” says Malone. “But we learned that people can’t stick things in their ears if they’ve already got a hearing aid in there—so we bought headsets.

“The people in that focus group also have given us great publicity, in newsletters and through word-of-mouth,” says Malone. “Our little theater’s gotten national recognition because of them.”

In addition to conducting focus group research, at the Tennessee Aquarium Imax 3D Theater, staff members approach people with disabilities even more directly—before show time. Ushers discreetly ask visitors in line if they require services, and those who do are offered a “menu” of choices. The process allows visitors to tailor services to their own needs—and balances the theater’s efforts to be proactive with its desire to avoid being offensive.

Meanwhile, “lots of conflicting guidelines” in England’s disability act have motivated people from a broad array of businesses to band together into the Employer’s Forum on Disability. The forum offers a variety of resources, including a succinct description of the complex act and action steps—

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