ACCESS BASICS

A Supplement to Heritage BC's Accessibility for Historic Places

A fundamental goal of heritage conservation is to ensure access for future generations and people of all ages and abilities.

Heritage sites, as they were originally designed, present barriers that disable people. But with awareness and thoughtfulness, improved accessibility is possible even for the smallest of heritage organizations.

This brief introduction to accessibility will not provide all the answers, but it will help you in identifying the questions and will support you as you improve access to your historic site.

Access Basics is a supplement to *Accessibility for Historic Places* series.

The series includes:

Accessibility and Historic Places in **pdf format** and **Word format**

Websites and Accessibility in **pdf format** and **Word format**

Webinar On-Demand: Accessibility and Historic Places
(free to Heritage BC members)

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Barriers

Traditional rope barriers can be inaccessible to people with vision impairments who use a cane, as the cane will not detect the rope barrier. As a result, the person could run into or trip over the barrier.

Ideally, barriers should extend to the floor to be detectable and fully visible. Barriers should also be low enough that a person who is seated can see over the barrier. When using glass, be sure that the barrier is still visible with design features such as tracery or beveling, or applying stickers or signs to the glass.

Mats and Carpets

Mats and carpets can pose trip hazards through turned up corners, wrinkles, high and soft piles, or by moving underfoot. They can also pose obstacles to wheelchair users by getting caught in the wheels or not providing enough traction. If a mat or carpet is necessary, it needs to have a low pile and anti-skid backing. Mats or carpets with corners that are starting to turn up or are developing wrinkles need to be replaced promptly.

Signage

Wording on signs should be concise and to the point. Directional guidance should be limited to one directive per sign to avoid confusion. Directional arrows and other symbols should be crisp and simple. Text should be sans serif with a stroke width to height ratio of 1:6 to 1:10 and a character width to height ratio of 3:5 to 1:1. Use Arabic numerals only. Ensure the surface of the signage is glare-free and that the colours used are of high contrast.

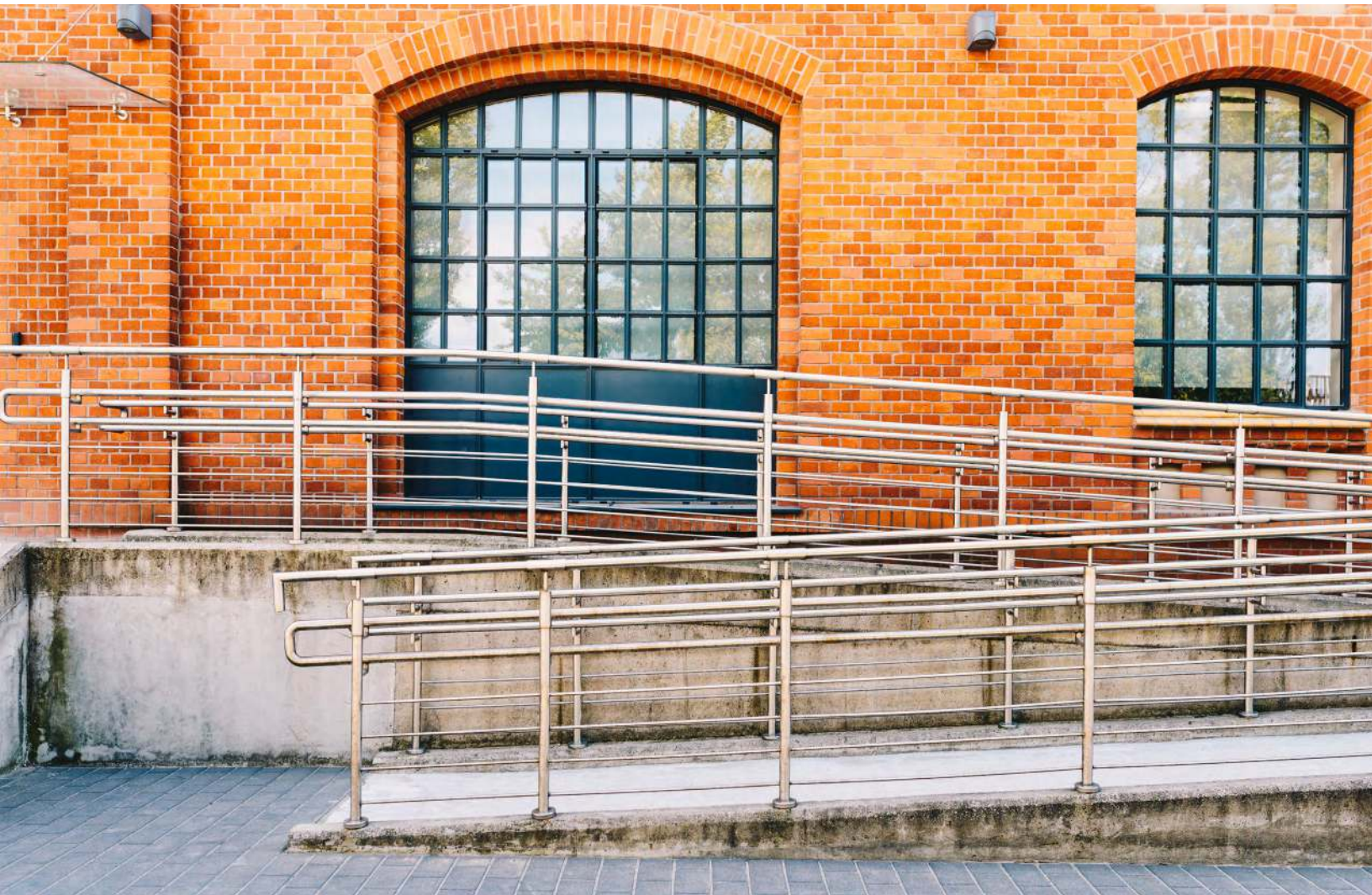
It is good to offer braille alternatives to important or vital signage, however, not all individuals with vision impairments read braille, so raised text alternatives are also necessary for accessibility. However, signs with raised text should use the minimum number of characters necessary to convey the message as it can take an individual some time to read by touch. Because of this, interpretive signage, audio alternatives and ‘touch tours’ are a good way to increase accessibility as well.

Ramps, Stairs and Handrails

Ramps should not replace stairs, as they can be more difficult to navigate for some individuals than stairs. Instead, both should be offered in tandem for full accessibility.

Gradients should be no more than 1:12 for ramps up to 6m in length, as steeper gradients are too difficult for most wheelchair users to navigate. Ramps with a slope of 1:16 to 1:12 must have a landing every 9m and ramps with a slope of 1:20 to 1:16 must have landings every 12m. Ramps with a drop to the side of more than 75mm need to have curbs of at least 75mm in height. Ensure the ramps are composed of slip-resistant material and are kept clear of debris and obstacles at all times.

All stairs and steps should have a closed face and, in the case of systems with multiple steps, be of an even rise and depth. Steps should also be easy to see, using contrasting colours and in the case of areas with low light levels or unexpected changes in level, identified with a bright and/or reflective strip on the edge of the step. Ensure steps are not slick or slippery and keep them and landings/approaches clear of debris and obstacles at all times.



Stair systems including two or more steps and ramps must have handrails on at least one side. Both sides are preferable. The handrails should be either breadloaf or ladies-waist style so that they can be easily gripped. The handrails should be between 865mm and 965mm high, and 920mm is preferred. In stair or ramp systems with more than one flight, at least one handrail should be continuous so that individuals with vision impairments can infer that the stairs or ramps are continuing past the landing.

Obstacles

All circulation spaces, such as aisles and landings, need to be kept clear at all times. Potential obstacles can include: boxes or other forms of storage, equipment or tools, and furniture. Circulation spaces should be at least 1.5m wide. This is to ensure that wheelchair users have enough room to move through the space and to turn around if necessary. It is also to eliminate as many trip and impact hazards for individuals with vision impairments as possible. Evaluate the space and ensure nothing protrudes into this area, including chair legs, cords, or the edges of furniture.

Doors and Hardware

Doorways must be at least 800mm wide to allow for users of large wheelchairs to pass. On the opening side of the door there must be at least 300mm to the side and 1100mm to the front for wheelchair users to be able to open the door and for the door to clear the footplate of the wheelchair, as well as for the individual to manoeuvre through the door.

Heavy doors or doors with closing mechanisms can be difficult to operate. Consider installing an automatic opening mechanism. If the mechanism is button operated, ensure the button is clearly visible and located in an easy to reach place, not far from the door itself. If the mechanism is motion activated, ensure it can be activated from both a standing and seated position. Closing mechanisms should have a delay to allow the user to fully clear the door and should operate at a slow rate of closure.

Thresholds should be no higher than 13mm. If the threshold is higher, it should be ramped. This ramp can be as simple as a board or gentle rise in a concrete path.

Door hardware should be easily reachable from both standing and seated positions. It should also be easy to operate for individuals with dexterity

disabilities. Lever handles are ideal. Also ensure that doors and, by extension, entrances, and exits are straightforward to operate and use and have a high tolerance for user error. For example, it should be clear where the door hardware is, how to operate it, and which direction the door opens. Users should not be locked out or trapped in a vestibule, for example, if they do not operate the door or hardware in a certain way.

Washroom fixtures

Washroom doors and circulation spaces should follow the parameters laid out above. In addition, all fittings should be easy to grasp and operate, including door hardware, faucets, and dispensers. At least one sink and related fittings (soap, faucet, paper towels) should be easily reached and operated from a seated position, with 250mm minimum of room underneath the sink/counter. The accessible stall/washroom, of which there should be at least one needs to be large enough for a wheelchair user to manoeuvre.

Ideally, the stall should be large enough to allow for multiple approaches to the toilet, facilitated by grip bars placed to the side and behind the toilet. All fittings, including toilet paper dispensers and sanitary product disposal bins, should be easily reached from the toilet and easily operated. This stall should be clearly identified with signage using the International Symbol of Access. Ensure the floor is not slippery and that all spills and puddles of water are cleaned up promptly. Also ensure that the washroom is fully accessible, including an obstruction-free path to it.

Sensory Features

Always have alternatives to any audiovisual material. Audio should have print alternatives, subtitles and ideally American Sign Language translation. Visual materials should have raised text alternatives, as well as braille (not all people with visual impairments read braille) and audio where it makes sense to do so. Models, touch features and raised maps are also important features for increasing access for people with vision impairments. Drastic changes in light levels such as going from a dark hallway to a sunlit room can also be a barrier and light levels should be as consistent as possible throughout indoor spaces.

Loud music, bright or flashing lights and loud noises can all contribute to sensory overload for individuals with cognitive disabilities and therefore create a barrier to using spaces and services. Evaluate the noise and light levels and turn down levels where doing so will not compromise accessibility for individuals with vision or hearing loss. Consider hosting 'turned down' or 'sensory friendly' events on a regular or recurring basis. Ensure maintenance issues such as squealing hinges are addressed promptly. If noise is outside of your control, such as trains, provide that information to people and consider offering noise canceling headphones for use while in the space.

Other Considerations

Describe the state of accessibility for all types of disabilities on the site or organizations website in an easy to find location, such as “plan your visit,” “FAQs,” or “location.” Keep this information up to date. Also, make sure that your website is accessible by running all pages through an accessibility checker such as wave.webaim.org. The checker will provide a report outlining website code changes that need to be fixed in order to be accessible for people who use reading software or text only formats, for example.

Train all staff on the accessibility features of the space, how to use them if applicable, accessible emergency and evacuation procedures such as refuge areas, and how to interact with guests and visitors with varying needs and abilities. Renew this training often and include it with onboarding for new employees.

Look at how the space is used. For example, can someone who is seated easily reach things on counters or pay for merchandise? Are there elements or design features that could be confusing, such as drapes across doorways instead of doors that could be misinterpreted to be windows? Essentially are there design elements that emulate or could be confused for something else and therefore pose a barrier. In the drape example, this could be mitigated by tying back the drapes so the doorway is clear, or by using signage to indicate the location of the door.

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