

SECTION 4: INTERACTIVE VENUES

The St. Louis City Museum

701 North 15th Street

St. Louis, MO 63103

(314) 231-2489

<http://www.citymuseum.org>

Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)

Overall Rating: 5 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 0 stars
- Docent guides upon request: 5 stars
- Well staffed and well supervised: 5 stars
- Tactile and auditory components: 5 stars

This evaluation was conducted between August 3, 2009 and August 14, 2010 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Ms. Tracy Lariccia, Group Sales Director for the St. Louis City Museum.

Although it is called a "museum," St. Louis' City Museum is a truly unique facility that has compiled a vast collection of artifacts, art, architecture, and other random pieces of history into one large interactive playground. Most museums contain displays of glass-enclosed artifacts that are accompanied by informative name plates, but the visitors to the City Museum will be able to touch, climb through, crawl over, slide down, and interactively explore its many attractions. This puts the items on "display" in a completely accessible manner for someone with little to no sight. Even though the museum is geared towards a younger generation of tourists, adults will also be fascinated by the history and origins of the items which comprise the building's attractions and décor. Furthermore, the accommodating nature of the museum staff makes the St. Louis City Museum a terrific destination for any family or group looking for a day trip or night-time activity.

The City Museum is not a venue that blind or visually impaired individuals (parent or child) should consider visiting unaccompanied. For one thing, the nearest Metro station is at the Scott Trade Center, about nine blocks away. Cabs and Metro's Call-A-Ride service will be able to drop off passengers by the main entrance to the museum, but mobility issues do not stop there.

There is no real logical layout to the museum. Furthermore, the sheer magnitude of the facility and its exhibits could easily overwhelm an unassisted blind patron. There are countless tunnels, jungle gyms, nooks, and crannies into which children are free to explore, so it is necessary to keep a close eye on them, regardless of whether or not they have vision trouble. Furthermore, the existing hallways and passages are often full of energetic youth, so sighted guide assistance is highly recommended in order to safely navigate the facility.

Ms. Lariccia, the museum's Group Sales Director, indicated that, if the museum had advanced notice, a hall staff member could be provided to serve as a guide through the museum. If the blind or visually impaired person happened to be visiting the museum on a less crowded day, the staff may even be able to accommodate the individual on the spot, but advanced notice is still recommended. If wishing to avoid the most crowded times of the year, it may be advisable for the blind or visually impaired individual to avoid visiting during periods close to holidays, the end of the school semesters, and the end of the summer break.

The museum's staff has taken great care to make the facility very safe for children, regardless of physical or mental capabilities. All children who are under seventeen are required to be accompanied by an adult. All of the tunnels are safely enclosed, and they will generally all end at central points throughout the museum. Furthermore, the tunnels and passages all have adjacent walking paths, making it easier for parents, guardians, and group members to keep an eye on the children and the other adventurous young-at-heart who are exploring the enclosed passages. The museum has also set aside special sections of the facility that are only for kids who are six years old or younger. These areas contain slides, smaller ball pits, and activities that are more appropriate for that age group. There is also a very popular arts and crafts area where young visitors can make their own museum souvenirs. Even so, it is advisable for there to be at least one if not two sighted people to each blind or visually impaired child.

As mentioned earlier, the St. Louis City Museum is not a stereotypical museum, nor is it a stereotypical playground. The museum is home to a collection of various artifacts ranging from a boat's propeller to gargoyles to the world's largest pencil. All of these items are out where the public can examine and feel them. In some cases, the artifacts have been turned into playground material. For instance, the old shoe shoot, which is left over from when the building served as a shoe factory, has been transformed into a ten-story spiral slide. An old metal cooling coil from the Anheuser Busch brewery has also been turned into one of the many elevated tunnel passages. The walls are equally as unique. They are all covered from floor to ceiling with items such as gears, steamer pans, ramparts, and safety deposit boxes. Yet, the blind or visually impaired individual would need a sighted guide to fully understand and explore the museum's many attractions, for there are no name plates or written descriptions of the items which comprise the building's displays and decor.

Not only is the City Museum a fun place for energetic and adventurous youth to visit, but blind and visually impaired students who are studying art, engineering, or architecture will find this facility to be a gold mine of hands-on resources. The entire building, including its entrance, is full of building facades, sculptures, and reliefs from various styles and periods of architecture, and there are equally as many displays that could be considered engineering feats as well as elaborate works of art. These include a jungle gym with a plane perched atop it and a stone sea serpent stair railing whose fin is comprised of old kid-painted conveyer belt rollers. Even the cave, though it is meant to resemble a realistic cave (complete with trickling streams of water),

contains rock formations and tunnels that resemble dinosaur heads and other creatures. All of these displays, items, and structural designs are completely accessible for blind or visually impaired students to touch and feel.

A full day at the City Museum can work up quite an appetite. In order to accommodate this possibility, the museum is home to a small café called Samwitches. This is set up in a standard cafeteria style, and although no Braille or large-print menus are available, the staff is prepared to help sight-impaired visitors place an order in a timely manner. The menu for this café may also be found on the museum's web site in a pdf document, making it easy for blind or visually impaired people to access through screen enlarging and screen reading software. The café staff is very accommodating and will also prepare pre-ordered lunches which can be ordered over the phone. This is especially helpful for large groups or anyone with special dietary needs.

Before visiting, be sure to consult the "Plan" (your visit) link on the museum's homepage. It contains valuable visitor information, including what to wear, driving directions, hours, admission fees, and a downloadable brochure in a pdf format. The lack of headings and the use of graphical links may make the site difficult to independently navigate for a blind individual. Low-vision individuals using screen enlarging software may need to increase the magnification in order to read the small font, but no real problems are anticipated from this perspective.

For any further questions concerning a visit to the City Museum, please contact:

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