Consider needs of deaf people in space design

By Joan Hope, Ph.D., Editor

Deaf people exist in an environment built largely for and by hearing people. The DeafSpace Institute at Gallaudet University was founded to find ways to create spaces that meet the needs of deaf individuals. Its mission is "to serve as a center for the discovery, application and dissemination of knowledge about the essential ways deaf people inhabit space to enhance the quality of life for people of all abilities through design, research, education, and policy," according to its website.

The term "DeafSpace" refers to the ways deaf people alter their surroundings to fit their needs. For example, groups of deaf people often adjust lighting and rearrange furniture to enable sightlines to allow for visual communication and reduce eyestrain that it can cause.

DeafSpace practices are an important part of deaf culture, but they had never been formally studied until Hansel Bauman established the DeafSpace Project at Galludet. The project developed the DeafSpace Guidelines, which catalog more than 150 DeafSpace architectural design elements that "address the five major touch points between deaf experiences and the built environment":

1 **Sensory reach.** "Deaf people 'read' the activities in their surroundings that may not be immediately apparent to many hearing people through an acute sensitivity of visual and tactile cues such as the movement of shadows, vibrations, or even the reading of subtle shifts in the expression/position of others around them," according to information provided by the institute. The built environment can be designed to facilitate this spatial awareness.

2 **Space and proximity.** The distance signers maintain between themselves is typically greater than that of individuals in a spoken conversation so that they have a clear view of one another. The larger the group, the greater the space needed between individuals to allow visual connection for everyone in the group. The need for space between people impacts building design and arrangement of furnishings.

3 **Mobility and proximity.** When signers walk together, they need to maintain space for visual conversation. They must monitor their surroundings as they sign and walk. Good design enables them to move through space together.

4 **Light and color.** Eye fatigue that can cause loss of concentration or physical exhaustion can be caused by poor lighting. Light conditions that interrupt visual communication include glare, shadow patterns, and backlighting. Soft, diffused light helps with visual conversation. And colors can contrast skin tone to highlight sign language and assist with wayfinding.

5 **Acoustics.** Sound can be distracting to many deaf individuals, especially those with assistive hearing devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants. Spaces should be designed to reduce background noise.

Researchers use the Gallaudet campus to try out DeafSpace ideas. They share the results through conference sessions and publications.

Learn more at http://www.gallaudet.edu/american-sign-language-and-deaf-studies/deafspace-institute.html *and* http://www.gallaudet.edu/campus-design/deafspace.html. ■

BEYOND ACCOMMODATION

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Participating in study abroad can present challenges for some students with disabilities. Resources available through Mobility International USA could help make travel possible or easier. The organization administers free services and resources made possible by the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, a project sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State.

MIUSA provides tips and strategies for international study, work, volunteer, teaching, and cultural programs. For example, planning resources include tips on being prepared to charge a wheelchair battery abroad and to take a guide dog overseas.

MIUSA also hosts an online library devoted to travel abroad for individuals with disabilities.

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