

Special Considerations in Museum Cleaning

By Eric Johnson

Directors of museum facilities carry a huge weight on their shoulders. Maintenance of the facility itself is just one of your many concerns. Yet, a recent article about museum care advised, “Cleanliness sends a positive message to donors, visitors, stakeholders and supporters. A clean museum suggests a museum that values and cares for its collection.”¹

How do you keep your building spaces—both public and private—clean in a safe, efficient, and sustainable way? And if your museum has or is seeking LEED certification, what special considerations are there?

While dust is the most common problem, many other pollutants affect museum objects. People entering the building bring in dust, dirt, pollen, lint, and hair that travel throughout the facility. Museums near the coast have salt to deal with. Damp or humid environments can increase the likelihood of mold. Industrial areas or museums close to main roads may be affected by soot and pollution.²

Keeping your museum clean and chemical-free are top priorities in protecting your valuables and enhancing the visitor experience. Although you may not allow janitorial staff to touch the collections or exhibits, everything the cleaners do affects the indoor environment.

Many cleaning companies speak “green talk” without really having comprehensive green cleaning knowledge. But if you hire a company with a proven program and years of experience in sensitive environments, you can have greater confidence that the job is being done properly. An added bonus is that they will also easily

handle all of the janitorial-related LEED documentation for you.

In addition to green expertise, cleaning staff must be trusted around high-value and/or delicate assets, as well as around a museum’s diverse audience. Special training is, of course, a must. Here are some examples of how cleaning challenges can be overcome when janitors are trained to work properly in exhibition spaces and collection storage areas, as well as spaces such as the museum shop, restaurant or food court, event spaces, and private offices.

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- You may not allow janitors to clean any closer than, say, four feet from exposed museum valuables. As the janitors prove themselves, you may become more trusting and allow them to work closer to exhibits.
- Interactive displays, touchscreens, and other touchpoints require special attention in relation to cleanliness and disinfection—especially in children’s areas, and especially during flu season.
- To keep glass display cases and windows free of fingerprints,

smudges, and dust without the release of wet particles and vapors, janitors should spray green glass cleaner onto a cloth rather than on the glass itself.

- Brooms, mops, and ladders should lie safely on the floor when not in use, and should never be propped against a wall. Think of the damage a broom handle could do to a painting! Likewise, sandbags must be placed under the wheels of rolling carts or other janitorial equipment to prevent runaways.
- Many flooring materials call for special care. You may have polished, sealed concrete floors that require cleaning with solutions of a proper pH. Hardwood and stone floors require proper cleaning, preventative maintenance, and occasional restoration and sealing to preserve their value. Areas with wool carpeting need to be vacuumed with light bristles and cleaned periodically using an extraction method. Nylon carpets should be vacuumed and cleaned according to manufacturer specifications. Auditoriums require floor and seat cleaning.
- It’s important that the maintenance of your building stay true to your brand. Janitors must understand this, and become your second set of eyes. If your museum has a clean, contemporary “look and feel” with open spaces, white walls, and natural light, it’s vital that the facility be kept immaculate at all times. Every smudge and speck of dust will detract from your displays. If you’re in a historical property, or one that has lots of stone, brass, and woodwork, expertise in cleaning and preserving those surfaces is necessary. For any property type, restrooms, of course, must be kept

¹“Cleaning in Museums,” <http://community.history.sa.gov.au/how-do-i/cleaning-museums>
²Ibid.

pristine: 90% of people surveyed believe that the restroom reflects on the overall cleanliness of an establishment.³

- You probably do not want cleaning done in the public eye, except for restroom maintenance. But emergency cleanups will be necessary, so janitors must know how to do this quickly with as little disruption as possible. If a visitor becomes ill in an exhibit area, the accident will require hazardous waste disposal.
- Specialized environments such as aquariums necessitate cleaning schedules adapted to the schedules of animals, and may require janitors to wear headlamps during night cleaning in areas dimmed to respect circadian rhythms.
- Because labor accounts for 55–65% of janitorial costs, it's wise to practice the art of efficient processes by training cleaning staff to reduce the number of motions it takes to perform tasks. For example, the proper positioning of cleaning materials and supplies will reduce frequent returns to the cleaning cart. A “one-pass” cleaning approach prevents backtracking when cleaning an area.

Chemicals, Supplies and Equipment

Green cleaning products are now considered cost-neutral for many reasons. For example, some products are so concentrated that, although they cost more initially, they last longer and go further than traditional chemicals, eliminating the cost differential.”⁴

³Buzzback Washroom Study 2013

⁴“Dispelling Myths about Green Cleaning,” Robert Kravitz, <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/33035-dispelling-myths-about-green-cleaning>, 04/15/2013

⁵Tork Products, <http://www.torkusa.com/Resources/news/News/SCA-Launches-New-Tork-Coreless-High-Capacity-Bath-Tissue-Dispensing-System-in-North-America/>

⁶“Successful Visitor Experience—Getting it right,” Association of Independent Museums, 2017, <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Successful-Visitor-Experience-2017.pdf>

A janitorial expert will know which products are best for your facility.

In restrooms and breakrooms, coreless paper and dispensers save on maintenance by reducing service calls for refills. The system also prevents run-out, minimizes waste, and can eliminate 95% of packaging waste for standard paper products.⁵

Lightweight, powerful hip and backpack vacuum cleaners improve a janitor's mobility. Designed for comfort and maneuverability, these vacuums have an airtight canister that reduces the amount of dust in the air, along with a multi-level filtration system that maximizes their capacity to pick up dust and dirt.

Microfiber mops, cloths, and telescoping dusting wands are the tools of choice, because they quickly capture and lock in dirt rather than just moving it around. The “miracle” material is lint-free, durable and soft, so it does not scratch surfaces. It also absorbs up to seven times its weight in water, and can reduce bacteria levels by more than 96%.

Microfiber is environmentally friendly, minimizing the use of chemicals and paper towels. In addition, the cloths and mops can be color-coded for different areas of your museum (such as lobbies, exhibit areas, eating places, restrooms) to control cross-contamination: the spreading of bacteria among people, surfaces, and/or equipment. The mops can also eliminate the use of buckets (and therefore, spills).

Day Porters and Maintenance Staff

Maintenance employees should be chosen for their high-level accountability, ability to interact with the public, and capability to be trained in customer-service excellence. If your security program does not allow the building to be cleaned at night, cleaning can be done by day porters within a window of time before the museum opens.

The day porters onsite during visiting hours must look neat and professional. They should wear uniforms and serve as museum ambassadors, answering visitors' questions about the building,

the collection, etc. They should remain in constant communication with one another, and with your staff and volunteers.

Day porters should be trained in relation to the museum's mission and collection to help them better understand the significance of their surroundings. If they're proud to work there and are considered part of the operational team, day porters will become an asset to the museum and the visitor experience.

You may even consider inviting selected day porters to participate in an apprentice program one or more days a week. This could involve them assisting your collection preparatory staff in handling exhibit items: moving, crating, loading, unloading, storing, hanging, etc. This gives a day porter even more pride in a job well done, helps instill appreciation of the special needs of your facility and its assets, and provides a career path within the museum.

A full-service facility service provider should be able to provide additional staff for your special events and seasonal crowds. Their team can also handle repairs, painting or touch-ups, exterior pressure-washing, recycling, grounds maintenance, and parking services. They can send in trained engineers who understand the sophisticated HVAC systems that are crucial to art and artifact preservation.

“Your visitors will not enjoy their experience, however excellent your displays, if they are too hot or cold; if they can't find the loo—or if the loos are tired and messy.”

So says Victoria Wallace, Chief Executive of Leeds Castle in the UK.⁶ Specialized facility services for museums and other sensitive environments is an art. With the right facility maintenance plan and staff, you can concentrate on the many other concerns of your job, knowing the museum will look its best, while providing an impeccable experience for everyone who walks through the door. 🏛️

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