P_1 A new Approach

Access for All

Safe and reliable mobility is one of the primary challenges facing cities today. In industrialized countries, ageing societies mean that growing numbers of people are finding it more difficult to move around because of physical barriers, inadequate signposting and a general lack of attention to accessibility in planning and design. The obstacles once experienced by "disabled" people only are now recognized as problems that will affect almost everyone at some point in their lifetime.

"Access for All" is a design philosophy that envisions a built environment designed with the specific and changing needs of all its inhabitants in mind, irrespective of their age, status and physical capabilities. It goes far beyond "bolt-on" measures such as improvised ramps and parking spaces reserved for special-needs drivers and instead recognizes the urban landscape as a diverse environment where everyone – children, young people, parents, workers, the elderly and people with special needs – is able to move around freely and to share and enjoy public spaces.

The Schindler Award emphasizes the special needs of disabled people because they reflect shortcomings in urban design and because an urban environment that answers the needs of the disabled will come closest to answering those of everyone else.

The vast majority of people spend years, if not lifetimes, in a single urban environment. This is especially the case for children, people with disabilities and the elderly, whose freedom of movement may be considerably restricted. For them "Access for All" means having immediate surroundings that are secure, aesthetically pleasing and stimulating to the senses, with essential amenities and facilities close by.

It concerns us all

It is estimated that approximately two-thirds of people will at some point in their lifetimes be dependent on an environment designed for people with special needs. Those of us who are not directly affected by a disability are likely to have a relative, a friend or an acquaintance whose life has been made more complicated by the structural barriers inherent in most buildings and wider urban environments.

There are four categories of disability relevant to the construction industry:

- People with a mobility disability, who may also require a wheelchair
- People with visual impairment, who may have poor vision or be totally blind
- People with a hearing impairment, who may have difficulty hearing or are deaf
- People who are socially or mentally challenged, who need easy to understand public space

It is important to understand that "disability" is a relative term. The vast majority of people will start to suffer disabilities with age. A person who is fully mobile and has excellent vision and hearing today may struggle with all those faculties in later life. Indeed, most "disabled individuals" are elderly and have to cope with a combination of disabilities, including cognitive constraints such as difficulties with orientation or communication.

Requirements of "Access for All"

Incorporating an "Access for All" philosophy into architecture requires a conscious shift away from thinking of design in terms of what is "normal". This is a big challenge, not least because it means questioning cherished beliefs and ideas, and thinking hard about more prosaic issues.

It is important to bear in mind that spaces do not exist independently of their surroundings and the means by which they are accessed. An occupant's experience of a space is always influenced by the journey into that space and vice-versa. If the journey was difficult or painful, the space may be perceived as unwelcoming or alternatively as a place of sanctuary. The mood of a space will similarly influence the occupant's perception of the journey ahead. In extreme cases, people may simply choose to avoid a space because the journey is too difficult, perhaps because of congestion or physical barriers.

In short, Access for All requires a broader focus. It demands more of the architect but at the same time it provides more scope for creativity, in part because spaces that were previously disregarded or discounted suddenly develop a potential of their own.

Access for All requires taking the following special needs into account:

Impaired mobility

Although wheelchair users do not comprise the largest segment of people with special needs, it makes sense to use wheelchair accessibility as a standard in planning. When a building is designed with wheelchair access, the most important demands for the majority of mobility-impaired people are met and there are fewer barriers for those with impaired vision. Facilitating elements for wheelchair users also makes these environments easier for children to access. The result is that a greater variety of people are able to experience the space.

Impaired vision

People with impaired vision are most often aided by visual, acoustic and tactile measures. Improved lighting, contrasting colors, handrails on staircases, tactile guides or variations in flooring can make navigating in complex environments much easier. Special elements such as good lighting, legible signage and pictograms are also important for people with a cognitive handicap, and can be a decisive factor in whether or not they can navigate an environment easily and independently. Here, the architect has a real opportunity to explore how spaces can be an experience for all the senses.

Impaired hearing

Hearing-impaired individuals are dependent on technical devices, such as quality public address systems or induction loop systems for hearing aids and transponders. Good lighting improves conditions for lip-reading, and generally enhances the visual experience of the space.

Impaired orientation

A person's sense of orientation can be compromised by impaired vision, psychological disorders, and also impaired hearing. Elaborate signage will be of no advantage here. A clear urban and architectural concept with a hierarchical circulation system, a logical layout and applied common sense will go a long way in helping people with or without an impaired sense of orientation!

Social factors

The social dimension can never be ignored in an Access for All design philosophy. The quality of life of working parents with childcare responsibilities depends enormously on whether they have access to affordable day care, a safe playground, an apartment close to their place of work. An urban environment with affordable services, safe public areas and functioning facilities has the potential to transform the lives of parents, children and elderly people.

Social and mental disabilities

In this year's competition, the task is to address the needs of a neglected urban area in the shadow of the proud and famous UNESCO Heritage old town of Bern, Switzerland. For the first time in the history of the Schindler Award, the competition's focus on disability will not be limited to the physically impaired. This year's challenge is to include in your designs facilities for those suffering from social and mental disabilities living at the fringe of our society; people such as drug abusers, alcoholics, the homeless and destitute.

Conclusions from previous Schindler Award competitions

The Schindler Award competitions held so far all received a positive echo among European schools of architecture. More than 1,900 students from over 130 universities throughout Europe submitted projects for competition tasks in Brussels, Paris, Vienna and Berlin. Roughly half of all projects were judged in an internal selection process at their respective universities.

The juries of each competition (Brussels 2004, Paris 2006, Vienna 2008, Berlin 2010) convened for intense discussions and decisions, on the basis of which the following conclusions and recommendations were formulated:

Form Follows Function

This tried and true axiom for architecture and design, *and not the inverse*, is as valid today as it ever was. Architecture should reflect progress in other fields and take account of all people and all needs. If basic functional requirements are considered early in the planning stages of a building or other facility, a true user-friendly design is possible with little or no additional expenditure.

It goes without saying that the layout of access routes, the size of rooms, the inclination of ramps etc must conform to established building norms for disabled people. However, the mere addition of mechanical transport to serve people with special needs would fall short of the goals set for this competition.

The same routes for all people, regardless of their capabilities

Designs which result in that people with special needs cannot use the same routes and entrances as everyone else should be taken as evidence that "Access for All" is not sufficiently embedded in architectural education. Elevators, ramps and disabled-access routes are often hidden from view, even in public buildings.

In the opinion of the jury, the lack of adequate design provisions for people with special needs is not because such designs are too complex, but rather because "Access for All" is simply not yet an integral part of most architecture schools' curricula.

Many projects still deal with the topic exclusively on a technical and normative level, meaning Access for All remains an afterthought rather than an integral aspect of architectural design.

Personal experience creates awareness

There is no better way to gain insights than to simulate the experience of a disabled person yourself. Students who have spent some hours in a wheelchair, or have worn a blindfold or frosted glasses to simulate vision impairment, find the experience highly insightful and valuable. The jury believes that such experiences should become part of every architectural undergraduate program.

Experience of architecture for all and all senses

It should be self-evident that everyone, regardless of their capabilities, has an equal right to experience the public spaces and urban culture of our cities. Our surroundings should be able to stimulate all the senses so that people who do not have full use of all sensory abilities are still able to experience the urban environment.

For vision-impaired people, special audio events or tactile experiences could be conceived, while visual signage or even olfactory stimuli could make a real difference for people with hearing problems. People with an impaired sense of orientation, and the population generally, would benefit considerably if cities had clear concepts governing access routes and vertical and horizontal mobility. Such a concept would cover all forms of transport and access, both inside and outside, including routes, corridors, stairs, escalators and elevators. The impaired sense of orientation experienced by people with mental or psychological disorders could be further mitigated by harmonious sensual experiences.

It is the jury's view that the teaching of architectural design could be broadened considerably in all these aspects.

Conformity of norms – variety of designs

The projects submitted to the jury in previous competitions reveal a great deal of variation among building codes for special needs, and vast differences between the norms and regulations applied throughout Europe. In the interests of people with special needs and to facilitate their ability to travel, these norms and regulations should be streamlined and standardized.

At the same time, the variety of design applications pertaining to special needs should be broadened and new applications encouraged. In this respect, the students' projects submitted to date were an encouraging start, and pointed to new ways in which people with special needs may participate in the overall spatial, urban and cultural experience. However, it is obvious that we are still very much at the beginning when it comes to developing such design applications.

Access for All requires patience, dedication and persistence

The competitions held so far show that there is much to do to overcome the deficits in educating young architects about Access for All. Competitions such as the "Schindler Award" are an innovative means of getting there.

Ebikon / Bern September 19, 2011

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