

## **2\_1\_2 A new Approach**

### **It concerns us all**

At some point in our life, approximately 2/3 of the population becomes dependent on an environment designed for all, an environment designed to accommodate both the able and disabled. Those of us who are not directly affected by a disability themselves most likely have an aunt, a friend or an acquaintance whose life has been made more complicated by the structural barriers inherent in most buildings. It seems important to us that you recognize that becoming disabled can happen not only to others, but to all of us.

“Access for all of us” doesn’t simply mean planning wheel-chair accessibility into a design; rather it means the architect must bear in mind the special needs of all types of handicaps which affect individuals. There are three categories of handicap which are relevant to the building industry:

- People with a mobility disability, who may also require a wheelchair
- People with visual impairment, who may have bad vision or be totally blind
- People with a hearing impairment, who may have difficulty hearing or are deaf

In Europe, over 100 million individuals come under consideration for more user-friendly design:

- 35 millions mobility impaired, among which 350’000 are confined to wheelchairs
- 70 millions hearing impaired, among which 800’000 are deaf
- 8 millions sight impaired, among which 600’000 are legally blind

What is crucial about these numbers however is that they cannot be regarded as static figures but must be seen as having dynamic value. A person who is healthy today may not be able to move so easily in 20 years and may need glasses. Most individuals with disabilities are elderly persons that often suffer under a combination of handicaps. In addition, cognitive constraints such as difficulties with orientation or communication, intellectual or mental impairments may add to the problems facing the disabled.

### **Access for All**

Access for All is central to the competition, but the scope is much broader than easy access itself. The urban and architectural qualities of internal, external, horizontal and vertical connections to and from all functions must be equal for handicapped and non-handicapped users. Experiencing wide or confined, covered or open, dark or bright spaces should be the pleasure of all. This is a moral imperative in our democratic society.

Due to the reduced mobility of people with disabilities, the immediate surroundings of their residence may become equal with their overall action sphere. Whereas unimpaired people can easily move to places of their own choosing, a handicapped person must often rely exclusively on the attractions already offered inside the short range of their mobility. In order to enlarge their overall activity range, much higher accessibility requirements should be met by public spaces and public facilities, such as museums, over and above that which they currently offer. Catering to daily needs, giving access to outdoor activities, offering diversified experiences of space, conveying a feeling of security are all part of the envisaged project.

All of the following requirements do not limit aesthetic design in any way, but should be regarded as a possibility to encourage architectural creativity.



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### **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 accessibility, the most important demands for the majority of mobility impaired are met and there are fewer barriers for the vision impaired. Facilitating elements for wheelchair users also makes these environments easier for children to access.

### **Impaired vision**

Persons with vision impairments are most often aided by visual, acoustic and tactile measures. Improved lighting, contrasting colors, hand rails at stairs, tactile guide lines 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 persons having a cognitive handicap, and can be a decisive factor in whether or not they can navigate an environment easily and independently.

### **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 lip-reading for hearing impaired persons, reassuring another way for them to communicate.

### **Impaired orientation**

As a consequence of impaired vision or psychic disorders, but also quite often as a consequence of impaired hearing, the sense of orientation can be critically impaired. 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 an impaired sense of orientation.

### **Social impairments**

Some impairments have no physical or psychic cause but are due to circumstances more related to the society we live in. A working mother with infants torn between her duties as a mother and as an employee may be impaired because she can not find affordable day care, a safe playground, an apartment close to her workplace. An urban environment with affordable services, safe public areas and a functioning neighborhood will meet most of her needs.

## **Inclusive Urbanism**

The term “inclusive urbanism” marks an important step away from regarding “access for all” as merely a concept for detailed building regulations or technical rules about access to buildings. For any disabled or handicapped person, how she or he can experience and make use of the public space is equally important as how a particular building or facility can be accessed or made use of.

But “Inclusive Urbanism” goes even further than that, accessibility alone will not suffice! Economical, racial or social exclusion is much more prevalent in today’s architecture than one would expect. Barriers are being raised on purpose in order to keep an environment free from undesired users; exclusivity is high on demand in many urban developments around the globe.



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As a consequence we must stride towards an urban environment which aims to *include* rather than *exclude* certain groups of our society as much as we stride towards an urban environment free of technical barriers. Europe, being a union of different cultures and religions itself, must be at the forefront of inclusive urbanism. Europe's architects, having been raised in democratic and socially balanced situations, are challenged to fight this unfortunate tendency towards urban segregation and proclaim an environment for all peoples alike, regardless of their sex, age, race or ability.

### **Conclusions from the first and second Schindler Award**

(By the jury of the Schindler Award 2005 - 2006, Paris, September 2006)

The first two Schindler Award competitions held in 2003 – 2004 and 2005 – 2006 both received a positive echo amongst the European Architectural Schools: All in all, close to 100 universities throughout the continent – from Spain in the west to Tbilisi in the east, from as far north as Lund to Bucharest in the south, submitted proposals for the sites in Brussels and Paris. Roughly 350 students took part in the competitions and completed their projects; about half of them underwent an internal selection process at their respective university.

The juries in Brussels and Paris convened for a total of ten days of 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 still valid today. Architecture should reflect successful achievements in medicine and technology and accept that everywhere where people can be found, handicapped people belong as well. If basic functional requirements are considered early in the planning stages of a building or other facility, then a true user-friendly design is made possible with little or no additional expenditure.

It goes without saying that the layout of access ways, the individual room size, the inclination of ramps etc are to meet the well published building norms for handicapped people. However, the mere addition of mechanical transport to serve the disabled would fall short of the goals set for this competition.

#### **The same paths for all people, regardless of their abilities!**

Designs which prevent disabled people from using the same paths and portals as their non-disabled companions are proof that «access for all» is not sufficiently embedded in architectural education. Only too often are elevators and ramped access gates hidden away, even in public buildings.

In the opinion of the jury, the apparent lack of convincing solutions for this theme is not because of the complexity of the task but because of the deficit in the curriculum of many schools where *Access for All* is not yet an integral part.

Many projects still deal with the topic exclusively on a technical and normative level, thus remaining additive and external rather than becoming an integral design element.

### **Self experience creates awareness**

Trying out typical movement restrictions of disabled people helps students understand!

A humanistic attitude towards equality can be stimulated and developed by the experience of practicing inabilities yourself: drive around in a wheelchair for some hours, use a blind fold or darkened glasses to simulate vision impairment, plug your ears to experience how it feels to have a hearing disability!

Promoting such experiences ought to become part of every architectural undergraduate program.

### **Experience of architecture for all and all senses!**

All people, regardless of their abilities, should be granted an equal right to experience space and urban culture. Specific disabilities should be balanced by offering alternatives for the other senses these people are able to use.

For vision impaired people, special audio events or tactile adventures should be conceived. Visual signage or even olfactory elements help hearing impaired people. Even the sense of orientation felt by mentally challenged people can be improved by harmonious sensual experiences.

An impaired sense of orientation calls for a clear concept for the main elements of internal and external, horizontal and vertical circulation such as pathways, corridors, stairs, escalators, elevators.

The teaching of Architectural Design must be broadened greatly in these aspects

### **Conformity of norms – variety of designs!**

The projects submitted to the jury bespeak the great variety among the building codes for disabilities, and the vast differences between the norms and regulations, applied throughout European countries. In the interest of disabled people and their freedom to travel, these norms and regulations must be streamlined and standardized.

At the same time, the variety of design applications thereof should be broadened and new applications encouraged. In this respect, the students' work we received only hinted at the direction in which we must go further. Nevertheless, they did indicate ways in which disabled people may participate in the overall spatial, urban and cultural experience.

### **Implementing *Access for All* takes patience, dedication and persistence.**

The two competitions held so far show that a long and strenuous path still lays ahead of us until we overcome the deficits in education of the <design for all> concept. Competitions such as the <Schindler Award> are an innovative means of getting there.

Ebikon / Bern August 31, 2007

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