

Access for All - a priority theme for EDF-activities in a unifying Europe

Speech of Mr. Maarten van Ditmarsch of the National Disability Council of the Netherlands (VGPN) at the EDF seminar on Universal Access, 12 and 13 January 2001, Brussels, in co-operation with Mr. Silvio Sagramola of Info-Handicap Luxembourg.

Background

One of the most obvious and difficult problems for many disabled people is the physical inaccessibility of the built environment. Accessibility is one of the decisive issues for the (degree of) participation and integration of disabled people (and often also of their family and friends) in society. Equal opportunities and the growing awareness that the accessibility of public buildings, houses, means of transport etc. is a basic right is becoming more and more common, especially since the publication of the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations (rule number. 5) in 1994.

In most European countries organisations of and for disabled people, but also organisations of and for the elderly and other NGO's, are constantly active to promote accessibility for all. Already in 1970 the well-known International Symbol of Access was introduced world-wide.

Also, the European Commission became interested in this issue. In 1985 the Bureau for Action in Favour of Disabled People (the present Unit Integration of the disabled of DGV) published a study and working document about the state of the art of accessibility in the EC-member-states. It described the situation, both in member-states legislation and in practice, similarities and differences. One of the recommendations was that a greater degree of consensus and a more common approach should be achieved within the EC on the universal aspects of access. A prime requirement for making sure that access is fostered in a systematic and purposeful way is to have an agreed policy, formulated on the same lines in all member states.

A lot of consultations since the publication of the above-mentioned study took place which resulted in founding a steering group of representatives and experts of organisations involved in promoting accessibility for all; experts of nearly all EU-countries, but also from Switzerland and Hungary. One of their tasks was to stimulate that the main general access criteria (measures) should be harmonised and standardised within Europe. The result of their efforts was the birth of the well-known European Manual for the Accessibility of the built environment, which evolved into the European Concept for Accessibility. The concept in its present form was adopted in 1996 on a conference in Doorn, the Netherlands, financed by the European Commission in the framework of the Helios II programme.

The Concept is based on the universal design principles. These principles apply to the design of buildings, infrastructure, building and consumer products.

1. The objective is the provision of environments, which are convenient, safe and enjoyable to use by everyone, including people with disabilities.
2. The universal design principles reject the division of the human population into able-bodied and disabled people.
3. Universal design includes supplementary provisions where appropriate.

Function of the European Concept for Accessibility

The European Concept for Accessibility provides the principles and criteria for universal design. In this respect the Concept serves as a reference work for the harmonisation of the Concepts of Accessibility in Europe and provides a basic foundation for a European Standard on Accessibility.

With this in mind, this document can also be used as a reference for the development or revision of national oriented manuals and design directives.

Therefore, the document is primarily intended for:

- policy-makers and legislators, national and on the European level;
- international and national oriented consumer-organisations which wish to represent their interests in a European perspective.

Integral Accessibility

In the European concept the three basic principles of integral accessibility are explained. Integral accessibility means that 'everyone' can use the built environment in an 'independent' and 'natural' way.

This objective is not very explicit, but it will be if we translate the key concepts of 'everyone', 'independent' and 'natural' into three basic principles, the three basic principles of integral accessibility:

1. the range principle:

Integral accessibility guarantees, in a physical sense, the possibility of reaching and using spaces and the furnishings, which are intended for use for all the people within the range of the 'extended scope'.

2. the independence principle:

Everyone within the range of the extended scope must be able to use the accessibility facilities independently.

3. the naturalness principle:

Everyone within the range of the extended scope must be able to feel that the accessibility facilities are 'natural'.

Explanation of the range principle: the extended scope

It may be so, that our objective is to make the built environment accessible for everyone, but in order to make the concept of 'everyone' usable we need a restriction. The range principle only guarantees the physical accessibility of a building for people who are included under the so-called 'extended scope'. The extended scope represents a considerable diversity of individuals in a certain range: tall and short people, fat and thin people, strong and weak people, people with cases, prams or crutches and wheelchair users. As a definition of the term 'extended scope' we use the following phrase:

"the extended scope is the collection of people who are implicitly represented by a system of agreements relating to size which is based on differences in human size and physical possibilities. This is expressed in the carrying out of activities relating to accessibility such as moving around and reaching out."

A European approach or national approaches

In many European and other countries (for example Turkey) new as well as revised manuals on access are based on the universal design/design for all principles. Also discussions are devoted to the issue if accessibility for all will be better promoted by a directive or recommendation of the European Commission and the Council or is a matter of subsidiarity and shall be left to national legislation. Up till now the European Commission with respect to the accessibility of buildings only subsidised the exchange of information and published examples of good practices (amongst others in the Helios-programme).

However, in the meantime Europe becomes more and more a social-economical and political entity, especially since all member-states have ratified the Treaty of Amsterdam, including a non-discrimination clause.

This development makes that gradually accessibility gets more priority as an European issue for (European) authorities, industries and NGO's.

A European directive on construction products already exists, a CEN-standard on the accessibility of lifts is nearly ready and a directive on the accessibility of buses and coaches is in the making. COST-studies deal with the accessibility of trains, stations etc. And, finally in 2000 the Commission's Communication towards a barrier-free Europe for people with a disability did not come out of the blue.

Still many organisations, however, including the Commission, make the mistake that accessibility is something only or especially for disabled people.

The principles and criteria in the European Concept for Accessibility take everybody including disabled people into consideration and should be for our future work the main-reference work. An on-going process accessibility of the built environment is from now on the European political agenda.

The European Concept for Accessibility in 2001

In March 1996 the ECA expert group was enthusiastic and so were many others who read the concept because there was a general agreement on the fact that a very important work had been achieved. However, since 1996 the European expert group got into a vacuum. The Dutch organisation CCPT decided to quit its co-ordination task and a new co-ordinator had to be found.

In May 1999, Silvio Sagromola, director of the Luxembourg Disability Information and Meeting Centre took over the co-ordination of the European Concept for Accessibility and we had to find ways to promote, disseminate and improve the concept.

In 1999 the European Concept was published on the world wide web, presuming that more people could have access to its content and would be able to join the discussion about what good accessibility is all about.

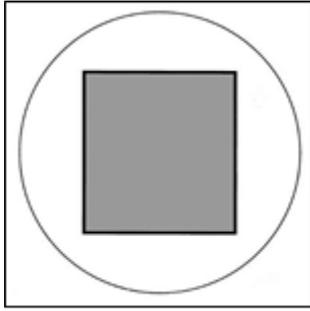
(Address of website: <http://www.eca.lu>)

This was also a good opportunity to check whether the statements of the 1996 version of the Concept were still true and indeed the experts became aware of the fact, that the European Concept for Accessibility needed to be updated and Mr. Maarten Wijk, who was the author of the 1996 version of the E.C.A., demonstrated this in a very clear way:

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Implicit Design (up till 1970)

Before the term accessibility was ever used - say forty years ago - the environment had always been implicitly shaped on the basis of some sort of uniform picture of man. Buildings were made, which seemed to function properly, and which did function to a certain extent. However, human diversity or human limitations were not an issue in the building trade. Obviously, such a design creates a gap between the environment and the needs of its diverse users.

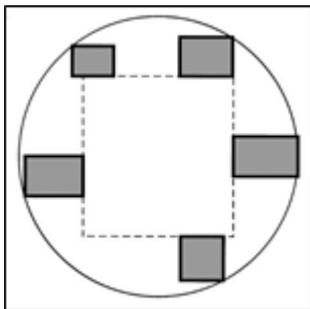


This can be visualised by a square and a circle. The circle represents the needs of all individuals, when using the environment. The square represents the needs of some sort of uniform picture of man. As you can see, there is a lot of space between the square and the circle. This space is the 'gap' between human needs and the environment.

Designing for the Disabled (1970/1990)

At the beginning of the seventies, accessibility starts to become an issue all over the western world. It were organisations of people with disabilities who put the issue on the agenda. This is understandable. After all, it is people with disabilities who suffer the most from an inaccessible environment. Over the years, these groups wrote down their specific needs in all kinds of handbooks, using all kinds of symbols. The word Accessibility became a stigmatised term and an equivalent for Designing for the Disabled.

In practice designing for the disabled means implicit design for the standard picture of man, and attaching special facilities for special user categories.

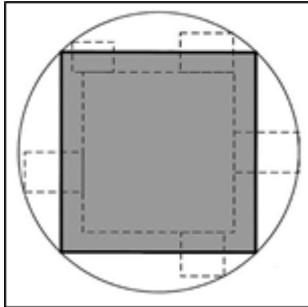


In the diagram you can see little squares around the square of implicit design, representing the specific needs of categories in an attempt to fill the circle. But these little squares do not fill the circle and they are isolated, just as the issue of accessibility became isolated in the building trade. Nobody was really interested in the topic, apart from people with disabilities themselves and their representatives. Dealing with accessibility was an act of charity, and- ... - it still is.

Integral Approach / Universal Design (1990/2000)

During the eighties, the organisations of disabled persons started to recognize this isolation and a new marketing approach is developed. An approach which can be referred to as the Integral Accessibility Approach or Universal Design.

The strategy is to combine the special needs of categories into one package of requirements and emphasizing, that not only people with disabilities benefit from the improvements, but also other categories like children, the elderly and people with prams and luggage.



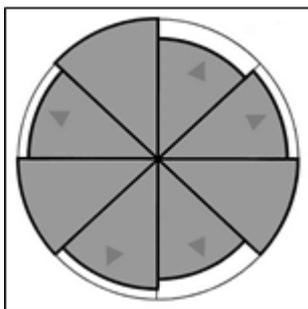
To put it boldly, one could say that persons with disabilities were sucked into the average, creating a new kind of average.

The integral approach can be put in a diagram as well. As you can see, the square has grown, covering parts of the special needs, but not covering the whole circle. There is still a gap.

Since the European Concept was created during the nineties, it is a typical example of the integral approach. Not so much in its philosophy, but in its statement - the Universal Design Principles - and in its dimensional criteria. The problem is ... the fact that we still want to use some sort of picture of man, and this is wrong. A square never will fill a circle.

Ergonomic Diversity (2000+)

We should no longer talk about the specific needs of certain categories of people, but talk about human functioning. We should look at every aspect of human functioning, without categorizing, without trying to make some sort of picture of man out of it.



The circle of human needs has to be split into separate sectors representing all aspects of human functioning, and then we have to search for the proper criteria to cover the extremes in each of these aspects (as you can see in the diagram).

Aspects of functioning are the ordinary things people do in order to function in the environment, like seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, smelling, recognizing, understanding, appreciating, moving around, operating, breathing, staying warm, and cooling down.

Looking at human functioning and taking human diversity as a leading principle will - at some stage - cover the whole circle with criteria for lightning, acoustics, temperature, space, texture and all other environmental parameters.

It may seem logical and it is logical, and yet it has never been done. However, if we ever succeed in doing this, we will make all people aware of the fundamental nature of accessibility for their functioning. Accessibility will loose its stigma and become a mainstream issue. We won't need terms like Universal Design or Design for All anymore. We will only refer to good design and bad design.

We hope we will make the European Concept meet this challenge.

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