Accessible Environments

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"And it is out of love and understanding that any building is born, to bless or curse those it is built to serve" — *Frank Lloyd Wright.*

If you can't get in, what's the point of it all?

Knock, knock...

Wheelchair-friendly buildings are all very well, and very important, but if you can't get through the front door they don't do anyone any favours.

Following on from the last edition, we are still on the outside, trying to get in. It is no use only to start thinking about the accessibility of buildings once you get to be inside: the spaces between and the forecourt are equally important.

No-one who is going to visit St Peters in Rome has any doubt as to where the front door is! This classical approach is how ALL buildings should be designed. Already a big hurdle has been put behind you if you know that you are at least at the right entry. This applies to private homes, hospitals, shopping centres, airports and waterfront developments alike, as well as sports stadiums!

But even when the entrance is obvious the chances are that there might be the well known sign (which is in compliance with the National Building Regulations) which indicates that disabled people should use another entrance! This is in contradiction to the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, but is nevertheless widely used, even at the Apartheid Museum!

Okay, so say we are arriving at a business or a shopping centre or hotel by car. In a shopping/office precinct like La Lucia Office Ridge in KwaZulu-Natal, is the parking at ground level?

Parking in a bay which has a camber is as good as a workout for anyone! When you find the designated bay, is there access out of it? It's really a pleasure for everyone to be able to open their car door fully and to be on the level, and have a smooth hard surface and good lighting. I like to recommend seamless paving but I've seen many wheelchair users managing on a well compacted fine gravel, or even grass (like a cricket pitch or a tennis court).

Cobbles are high fashion just now; they are good to look at, but not all have the smooth edges that will be easy for everyone, including vision impaired people and those using walking sticks. The street furniture used over sumps, and drainage channels is often something just taken 'off-the-shelf' and is a hazard to navigate (even on a bicycle). I believe that all parking bays for standard size vehicles should be suitable for everyone. Part of the dream of being mainstreamed will truly be closer then. How many bays would actually be lost in the process?

So you're now approaching the front door, and you might easily find one of those fancy revolving doors which were so popular in the '60s. Actually there are some marvellous revolving doors used at the casinos, which are giant doors and are very suitable for everyone and just as effective for keeping out the cold wind and draught. But many revolving doors still used are definitely a barrier to many people and a no-no for wheelchair users and vision impaired people.

These days air conditioning technology can devise an air curtain behind automatic doors, which will fulfill all the functions for which the revolving doors were designed. It is also convenient for mothers with pushchairs, people with luggage and a host of others. It is also useful to have a mat just inside the door to pick up dust and grime and this can serve as a tool for vision impaired people coming the other way to know that there is a door in front of them through echo location.

Security mantraps are popular at banks and financial institutions. These also need a drastic redesign. The revisions are actually very simple, but the specialists who manufacture them are not aware of these flaws in the design, as security is the focus, and to make them accessible too appears to be a compromise. It is seldom a question of either or. The present design excludes large people, wheelchair users, mothers with pushchairs, and pregnant women.

OK, so we are finally through the door and the next event is the reception counter.

There are some organisations like the Sheraton Hotel group and some super-

markets who appear to have thought this through, but for most this is a real barrier.

They don't suit the people manning the area and give out a very excluding signal to disabled people whether they are consumers or workers. The cashiers hall at the local authority in Pietermaritzburg (Msunduzi) has recently been changed to 760mm high counters with extremely good lighting, and acoustic ceiling so there is no hollow sound to make people feel uncomfortable. On researching this it has emerged that the counter hands love it and so do the customers and they are now suitable for the broadest range of people, including wheelchair users.

Supermarkets have a more or less standard approach to their check-out counters - it would be nice if the airports could do the same at their check-ins! It appears they both have the same tools to work with: a computer terminal and some storage space for documents, bags, etc. Only the smallest amount of the top is raised so that a customer can sign a cheque, credit card or account card standing up, with the bulk of the counter at the level to suit small people, wheelchair users, and the goods from the trolley.

Just as the receptionist is one of the most important people in any organisation, so too is the reception area. It is where all visitors orientate themselves, and get to understand the building they have entered, and decide in which direction they will navigate this environment.

These issues are ones which make the difference between attempting an outing and not going out at all for persons with disabilities, but apply to all people.

At the entrance to every underground train station in London is a simple Key map; it is completely diagramatic and has actually been in use, with only small variations, since 1933. Many have tried to analyse what it is about it which makes it so effective. This type of key should be a clue to how to guide visitors through any environment successfully.

Good wayfinding is a fundamental of sound architecture which ties in with universal design principles. So environments that suit disabled people and temporarily disabled people are eminently suitable for the rest of the population.

Entrance to Ushaka, a new development in Durban. It is very clear where the front door is.

The cobbles on the left are just a bit too rough to suit wheelchair users, vision impaired people and fashionable women with modern shoes. Those on the right are perfect for all of these.

The handrail at Ushaka shows that it need not necessarily have the negative connotations of a grab rail.

Steps outside the Tate art gallery in Britain: some outside steps which highlight the nosings while protecting them, and have handrails and very shallow gradient which suit a wide range of people.

A cut out in the pedestrianised area near London Bridge forming a horizontal water feature: very striking but a hazard.