

9 April 2006

Rolling Inspiration

ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS: Autumn 2006

Architects are involved with built environments, and the spaces between them. That these should not be exclusive seems to be an unnecessary statement.

It is however a mindset of all societies that this is so.

The proportions of a man according to Vitruvius drawn by Leonardo, have distracted the profession from the broader needs of the general population.

Architects cannot continue to participate in excluding a large segment of society, just because it's traditional.

Universal design principles do not ask anyone to sacrifice principles, and do not preclude people like Leonardo's man from using any environment, and seldom do they cost more if incorporated into the original concept. There are legal imperatives (the Constitution and the Employment Equity Act) as well as economic and ergonomic motivations, to allow access to more people and more efficient management and use of resources and staff, who may be temporarily impaired through injury to employing universal design at conception stage, to all public buildings. Good wayfinding will automatically be the result.

South Africans have done with segregation. We can be the most integrated society if the architectural profession gets serious about it.

Accessible environments, as with sustainable and energy saving environments, are good architecture. It is often perceived that the range of people who would benefit from these is very small; but the statistics prove otherwise. In United Kingdom 1.5% of the population are wheelchair users: of these a third are under 65 years old. 12% of 20-29 year olds have a disability or long term illness; 31% of 50-59 year olds have a disability or long term illness. The age group over 60 years old is the fastest growing sector. To this must be added all those temporarily disabled on an everyday basis, through trauma, convalescence, having luggage, high heels, a mother with a baby in a push chair, pregnant women. In fact the population who find our traditional environments suitable are male, between 18 and 40, not very tall or very short, right handed, have good sight and hearing, and compose 18% of the population!

This on its own will not persuade you.

Of the disabled sector there are 10 times more vision impaired people than wheelchair users.

That's not counting ordinary people who wear glasses. The fact is that, with the increase in medical knowledge, more people who might not have been part of the body of 'public' are going out and about; or they would if the environment was not a minefield of barriers. It's our profession who assist in making it so.

We are the makers; we don't want menders to come in after us to fix it.

If it can be understood that most of the accommodations for disabled people are eminently suitable for everybody, then the architect will not contemplate using anything else. Parking places which are properly illuminated, level and spacious are everybody's dream; Entrance doors which clearly indicate that they are the front door are a good orientation tool for good circulation; lifts which have a voice over announcement are essential for even average height people like myself so that I'm clear about which floor I'm on; doors which don't have a snappy closer so files (or a tray of coffee) can be carried through comfortably are a boon; office chairs on wheels are much easier to use than ones without; stair nosings which are highlighted are much safer for everyone; floors which are not like an icerink are really more sensible in a public place; ramps are easier to use as vertical circulation handling of crowds; email is marvelous; vibrating phones and different ringtones for different callers are a must have; taps which are not slippery to turn on and off, and have a ready mix temperature of water; light switches and entries to carparks which have a decent size button to press; writing on a document or a price tag which isn't fine print; cupboards

which have an accessible bottom shelf (or none at all) are hardly ever thought of; Supermarket counters seem to be the only ones which are undiscriminatory. All these things were originally invented as assistive devices!

So why is the profession resisting the incorporation of accommodations which will suit a broad range of people, leading to an increased value asset for our clients, and complying with our Bill of Rights of which we are all so proud. In the workplace accommodations actually have to be made for just about every employee, (the man with 10 children, or a wife who is chronically ill, a woman with a weak bladder; a smoker;) though these accommodations are considered as within the norm. They are in reality no more onerous than those required for disabled people generally. Who is disabled?

A popular definition is a "person who has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."

"severe disfigurement is also treated as a disability."

Day-to day activities are activities carried out by most people on a regular basis and involve the following:

Mobility;

Manual dexterity;

Physical coordination;

Continence;

The ability to lift, carry or move ordinary objects;

Speech, Hearing and Eyesight;

Memory, or the ability to concentrate, learn or understand;

Being able to recognize physical danger.

Section 9 of The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 2000, (which arises from the Constitution) states:

No person may unfairly discriminate against any person on the ground of disability, including-

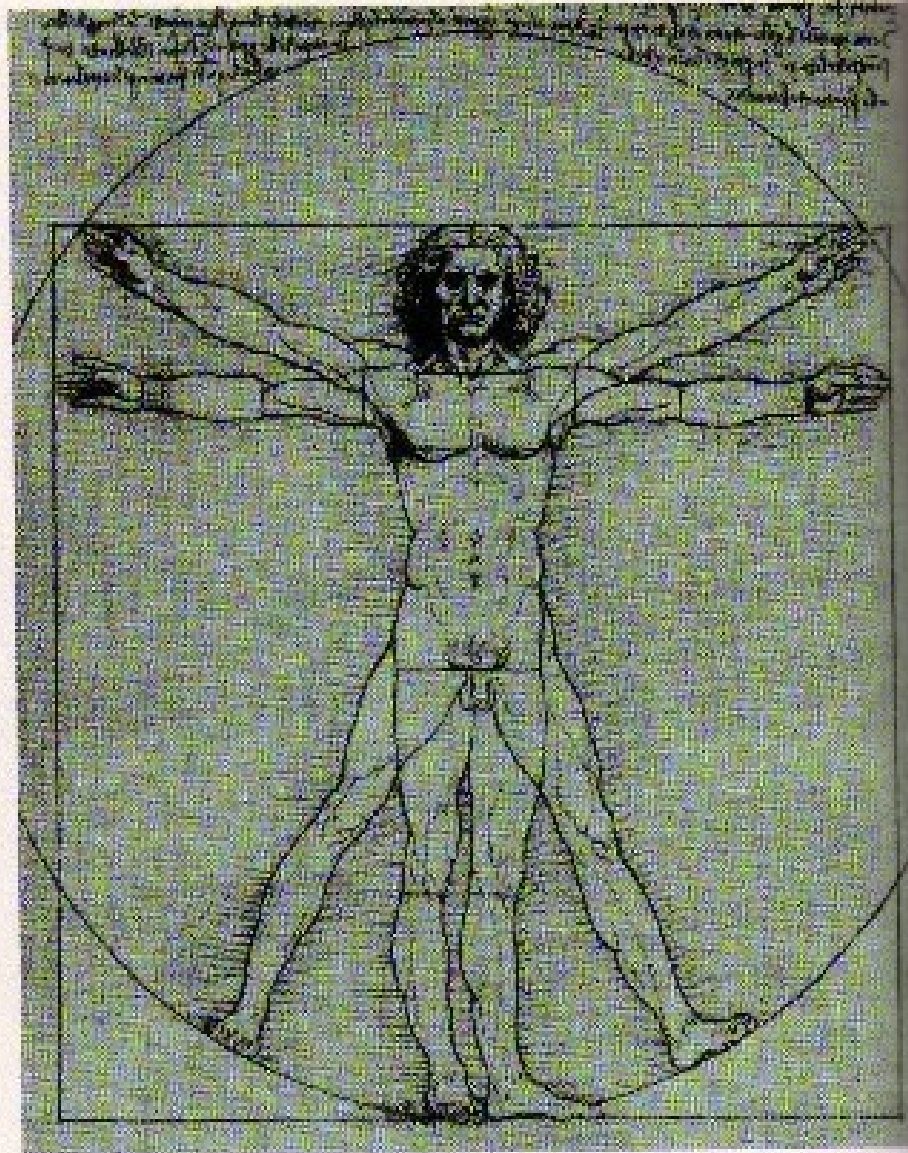
- a) denying or removing from any person who has a disability, any supporting or enabling facility necessary to their functioning in society;
- b) contravening the code of practice or regulations of the South African Bureau of Standards that govern environmental accessibility.
- c) Failing to eliminate obstacles that unfairly limit or restrict persons with disabilities from enjoying equal opportunity or failing to take steps to reasonably accommodate the needs of such persons.

Of course it will probably not happen quickly that this legislation is used to set a precedent, but it seems to me that it sets out nicely and clearly and simply what our country expects of us as a profession. The National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act with which we all deal with every day, is not something we had to learn; it is sound building practice.

Thus accessible architecture is also.

This is a summary of a presentation at a conference held at University of Kwazulu-Natal in September 2005.

Joan Seirlis PrArch
PO Box 216
Gillitts 3603
universaldesign.CO.ZA



ANATOMY
Proportions of man according to Vitruvius.