

4 February 2006

Rolling Inspiration

ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS – Autumn 2006

Safety and Security are two issues which are a constant contradiction. I have been doing some work for a large banking group. Of course this sector definitely has a high priority on both of these fronts, as regards the people and the money. It would be difficult to decide on which was the most important! Without the people (clients) though, there would be no money. On a radio interview with a banker a couple of years ago being asked about security (or was it safety) at ATMs he admitted that the most sure way of solving the problem was not to have ATMs!

It's similar in a way for disabled people in the big wide world: it would be safer if we didn't have any; like it would be better if we couldn't feel the difference between hot and cold, then we wouldn't have to worry about environments being heated or cooled, or we'd only need to inhabit parts of the world with a temperate climate. Or we all had the energy of a 20 year old and could do without having a lift in a 6 story building. But these are all parts of the wonderfully diverse society that we live in, and what makes it interesting and mature. If one looks at the whole spectrum it has been worked out that actually only 18% of people are what is generally called 'able bodied'. So in broadening what built environments should be, they could accommodate the other 82% as well, without having to sacrifice anything.

In many corporate, commercial, and even industrial environments in our present society, it is considered as a special needs issue to accommodate disabled people as part of the organizations. Their safety and security is one of the reasons why employers resist taking disabled people on, or why the developers of buildings feel it is going to undermine the integrity of their business planning by having additional passengers on board. Do all the 18-40 year olds, fit, good sight, good hearing, and right handed pull their weight? Each group has their strengths and weaknesses. The skills and attitude of each person should be the issue.

In the interests of safety, the fireman always wants the fire not to spread to other buildings, and the occupiers of a building to be able to escape the fire or other emergency; whereas the security department wants to ensure that there is the minimum number of exits by which people or goods could escape during non-emergency periods. Fire doors are installed to comply with legislation, but in the main are kept locked, to reduce 'shrinkage'. There are elaborate plans as to delegating the unlocking to 'safety' officers, but often the same safety officer has not ensured (on a daily basis) that no clutter or cleaning equipment is stored in front of these escape routes. In doing an appraisal of accessibility, it is always noticeable how much clutter is around, as this is the bane of vision impaired people and wheelchair users. Of course if these disabled people were also part of the staff in this type of environment, they would easily become the unwitting cause of the logjam, when it could have been avoided by doing the Safety bit properly in the first place.

Another area of interest is the vertical circulation in buildings. For various reasons escalators are very popular. In the commercial sector it is perfectly obvious that it really only suits some people, and it is recognized that it is essential that all floors also be served by lifts. It is disappointing that the lift industry itself has not realized that it cannot continue providing products which do not suit the whole range of people who might use them; voice announcements as well as lit numbers, are absolutely essential. I am of average height, but often get stuck behind taller people, or even standing with my back to the door, so it is good for everybody, except hearing impaired people, not just vision impaired people. There are actually a whole list of other safety issues like the emergency button lighting up if it has functioned properly, for hearing impaired people which are not customarily installed.

What's a bank without a counter? (not a money counter; a reception counter) Some of the banks have decided to have some sitdown counters, but most still have counters where the teller and the client both stand. Or the teller sits on a high chair. This is very limiting, and exclusive, and should be changed. It leads to a patronizing approach to disabled people, and is contrary to our Integrated National Disability Strategy.

The mantraps, or revolving doors at entrances to banks are on the whole very unsatisfactory. The people in this industry also need a wake-up call. A completely different system could be used, and hopefully the present products will not be tolerated by the banking sector any longer.

“The future does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic towards common problems and their fellow man alike, timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects”
from a speech by Robert Kennedy.

Joan Seirlis Pr Arch
www.universaldesign.co.za



Apartheid Museum: Johannesburg: Main Entry.