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## Rolling Inspiration

### ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS Summer 2006

The meaning of accessible is critical to this column: Civil Rights is the rationale for accessibility. The accessibility laws focus on people within a narrow range of specific disabilities such as those who use wheelchairs or have visual or hearing impairments. They ensure access to designated types of buildings based on assumptions about particular barriers in the environment- for instance they stipulate that there must be one level of entry into public buildings for someone who uses a wheelchair, and that a person who doesn't see well should have audio signals and Braille signs in a lift.

Accessibility is a mandate: universal design is a movement.

Universal design is known elsewhere in the world as design for all, lifespan design, and inclusive design.

Universal design comes from incorporating these guiding principles into underlying design thinking. Providing a universal environment means creating a space that doesn't segregate some and prevent others from using it independently, but does benefit many whose needs have not traditionally been considered. Proponents also insist that universal design meets the highest aesthetic standards and contest the stereotype of accessibility that creates places that are segregating, costly and ugly.

I have recently been looking at a large newly built hospital complex complete with accommodation and training facilities. It is really a beautiful complex fulfilling many of the fundamentals of universal design such as good wayfinding. This is seamlessly implemented. Many of the people populating this campus are temporarily disabled people anyway and so it is a perfect example of an environment which should not have a 'medical model' approach. "them and us", but a 'social model' approach which is not patronizing, but inclusive.

However it emerges that, even so, the basics in inclusivity have not been implemented because of a mindset that concentrates on strictly obeying 'the regulations' which in themselves (as they are set out as a separate section) are segregating. The costs would have been no more, but there is controversy now as to the brief. Professional people should rise above this. It reinforces the need to spell this out early on in any project, and it is my contention that it should be spelled out as 'universal design principals to be used' Quite often universal design principals are naturally part of good architectural balance, form, rhythm, so no special effort has to be exerted for it to happen.

I have also recently been to an exhibition in London called 100% Design which had the latest in design on show relating to building materials, furnishings, lighting and products, mostly from Europe, but also from the Far East. The ideas are overwhelming; and could fit into universal design criteria quite easily. A urinal which has an angular look, covers the trap to vandal-proof it and doesn't have that usual 'I'm in the wrong place' look. Screens made out of recyclable coloured rubber, exceptionally durable, can be used outdoors, and with all the other sustainable qualities prized in these times of crisis about the future of the world. Chairs that are UV proof and work outside and inside and can morph into tables; contemporary, functional and well-crafted.



“Space and light and order. Those are things that men need just as much as bread to eat and a place to sleep.’ Le Corbusier.

The disability sector as well as other roll players including the architectural profession is being asked at present, and going back 3 years, to comment on the Draft 3 of proposed changes to the ‘deemed to satisfy’ which is the non-statutory section of the National Building Regulations. The Part S is the section of the Regulations relating to Access for Disabled Persons. The proposal is now much more wordy, and some of the items are really ridiculous such as the item relating to “ramps”. (the chart presented now asks that any ramp at maximum gradient of 1:12, not at a main entrance, should have the stringent requirement of only a 170mm rise between landings. This would lead to ramps which are not at all comfortable for able bodied people) in addition it will motivate towards using mechanical equipment for vertical circulation solutions which are not conducive to feasibility in our country where maintenance and sustainability are a problem.

In my opinion, there should not be a separate section for Disabled People: it only reinforces the subconscious attitude of society that disabled people need to be separated and not mainstreamed. It also leads to confusion with other Parts of the Regulations, as these are presented to the public separately for comment, so you have no idea what cards are on the table for the other Parts. For instance in Part D Safety, at present there is an Item: Ramps, which allows for gradients of 1:8 for able bodied pedestrians. Who is to know which are for which?? There is no obligation for signage. The disabled person would have to test it out (especially downwards) to know it was dangerous.

These issues are being debated. It is hoped that reason will prevail, and we wont have start to address attitudes all over again.

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(THIS AND THAT: ACCESSIBILITY, UNIVERSAL DESIGN, COMMODITY FIRMNESS AND DELIGHT, LETS MAINSTREAM.)

My suggested heading.