

EDITORIAL

Universally Accessible Public Spaces for All

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At the occasion of the 10th session of the World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi (2020), the World Blind Union (WBU) and City Space Architecture committed to develop and publish a special issue of The Journal of Public Space with a specific focus on universally accessible public spaces. This voluntary commitment was included in the Forum's outcome declaration, the Abu Dhabi Declared Actions (2021), intended to support accelerating the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and urban dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during the Decade of Action. In particular this Special Issue is contributing to Goal 17 - *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*, and its outcomes are focusing on Goal 11 - *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*.

Across the past two years, the two organisations have collaborated through a series of online meetings, to share objectives and goals, and different knowledge-sharing webinars around public space. In particular, one of the webinars was included in the global online initiative "2020: A Year without Public Space under the COVID-19 pandemic"¹ developed by City Space Architecture in cooperation with the School of Architecture at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and promoted through The Journal of Public Space. The webinar, titled *Creating Accessible and Inclusive Public Spaces with/for Resilient Communities*², was aimed at presenting the context of the global changing population dynamics in relation to older persons, persons with disabilities and other historically marginalised groups, and to reaffirm the crucial importance of inclusion and accessibility of public space as a right to access basic urban resources and services.

Today, more than half of the world's population live in cities, 15 per cent of them being persons with disabilities. By 2050, 70 per cent of the world's population will live in urban communities including over two billion persons with disabilities and older persons requiring inclusive and accessible infrastructure and services to live independently and participate on an equal basis in all aspects of society. Local and regional governments, and other key urban stakeholders, face immense pressure to adapt strategies, policies, and urban planning and design practices to fully respond to the rights and needs of all persons with disabilities and intersecting social groups. Recent examples of global crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, reminds us that much remains to be done to address persisting and emerging accessibility barriers which sustain inequalities and exclusion of persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups, such as older persons: they

¹ The initiative included 20 webinars, from May to September 2020, a final two-day online conference in November 2020 (<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/navigationMenu/view/covid-19-program>) and a special issue of The Journal of Public Space, Vol. 5 n. 3 (2020) (<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/issue/view/76>)

² A summary of the webinar with recorded video is available at: <https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/navigationMenu/view/webinar7-summary>

have shone a light on the need for inclusive and accessible infrastructure as one of the most critical challenges of the 21st century (Al Jubeh, K., Dard, B., Zayed, Y., 2020).

There are several core global instruments and frameworks that specifically stress the importance of accessibility and Universal Design: the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015), and the New Urban Agenda (2016).

Accessibility is a right, and a precondition for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society (CRPD Article 3). Delivering on the commitments of the humanitarian and development frameworks towards leaving no one behind means true alignment with the CRPD. It also means that governments, policy makers, and planners must address accessibility across all interventions, policies, and programs including how accessibility of the built, digital and social environments is grasped and integrated across urban and rural development processes, budgets and policies (CRPD Article 9) – including plans and strategies for climate action, resilience and emergencies. Despite these frameworks and instruments are outlining commitments and obligations to accessibility, Universal Design – and meaningful participation – is too often overlooked and forgotten in discussions and processes guiding urban governance, planning and how our urban environments are designed. This directly impact the extent to which persons with disabilities and intersecting groups can enjoy their human rights and opportunities in cities and communities, including equal access to public spaces and services, education, jobs, health and more (Bravo, 2022, p. 25).

The imperative for universal accessibility calls for public spaces that are accessible, available, affordable, appropriate and of good quality for all. Such public spaces benefit everyone and are a crucial medium for transformative change in cities which celebrate realization of inclusive and diverse, green and sustainable, safe and resilient, healthy and vibrant communities. Universal accessibility in public spaces is also a critical link in everyday life's mobility chain and contribute significantly to improve safety, health and resilience, as also explained in the eight interconnected domains of urban life of the WHO age-friendly cities Framework³. Practitioners should recognise the full spectrum of human rights, needs and preferences and design for such diversity 'right from the start' so as to ensure equality and non-discrimination, lessen the risk of retrofitting environments, reduce costs and champion inclusion, sustainability and resilience. Some of the main challenges ahead are shrinking public spaces, insufficient integration of the universal design principles in planning and design policies and practices, the lack of participatory planning with persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups, lack of inter-agency coordination at national and local levels, lack of inclusive budgeting, need for capacity development and knowledge sharing to adopt universal design strategies that benefits all society (UCLG, 2019).

In view of this, the World Blind Union, a founding member of the International Disability Alliance, and a representative organisation of the world's 253 million persons who are blind or partially sighted, proactively works in the urban development field, including in an agreement with UN-Habitat, knowledge production, policy development and towards increased engagement of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in discussions and decisions guiding urban development. On another level, City Space Architecture is promoting public space culture, in an agreement with UN-Habitat, with the intention to address urban complexity from a human-oriented perspective, applying an interdisciplinary approach and defining new methodologies and tools for effective design, implementation and long-lasting impact.

Producing quality, open access knowledge on universal design, accessibility and inclusion in public space

In August 2021, World Blind Union and City Space Architecture launched the Call for Abstracts for this Special Issue. The call invited a broad range of stakeholders, including academic researchers, professionals, policy makers, local authorities, and civil society organisations from across the globe

³ Read more: <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/age-friendly-cities-framework/>

to submit articles, case studies and viewpoints. The requested submissions were intended to capture good practices, opinions, and applied research around accessibility, universal design, and inclusion in relation to public spaces. The call was seeking contributions able to evidence learnings and demonstrate levels of progress towards achieving public spaces that are accessible to and inclusive of all, in line with development frameworks and human rights instruments, with a particular focus on:

- Effective and appropriate measures to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility and ensuring equality and non-discrimination in public spaces including parks, streets, sidewalks, and footpaths that connect, playgrounds of recreation, marketplaces, etc;
- Critical role of inclusive and accessible public spaces in enabling enjoyment of human rights, improving quality of life and access to services, ensuring independent living and mobility including during emergencies and building back better after disasters, conflicts, or pandemics;
- Co-creation process, strategies and mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation and engagement of diverse marginalised groups, including all persons with disabilities in line with CRPD General Comment 7;
- Effective implementation and monitoring of adequate accessibility standards across various forms of public spaces and across main areas of accessibility including the physical environment, information and communications (including systems and technologies), transport, etc.;
- Strategies to address accessibility, reasonable accommodation, and universal design together with key considerations such as intersectionality, gender equality, resilience, health, economic, engineering, cultural, environmental, maintenance and safety issues, etc;
- Learnings and experiences on how to promote a universal design approach and mainstream accessibility into local policies, plans, budgets, programs, and practices related to public spaces;
- Capacities, data and tools needed to assess and address accessibility gaps/pitfalls, measure impact and guide the design and realisation of inclusive and accessible public spaces at local levels.

In response to the call for abstracts we received more than 89 proposals, as research articles and case studies, but only 18 were selected and authors were invited to submit the full papers. The selection was made according to one clear purpose: deconstruct preconceived ideas/stereotypes and promoting an intersectional approach, overcoming misunderstandings and address the lack of efficacy in the application of the concept of universal accessibility in the drafting of policies and in the design of urban spaces. For this reason, we worked with the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) to direct invitations to local governments to contribute to the issue.

The double-blind peer review process⁴ lasted several months and engaged experienced academic researchers and experts on urban planning, architecture, accessibility, and disability inclusion from across our networks. Authors received feedback on how to improve contents and were specifically asked to champion an intersectional perspective, considering the extent possible the inclusion of all persons with disabilities and other diverse groups and their intersecting identity characteristics, including age, gender, class, race, location, disability, educational status, migrant status etc. Authors were also encouraged to use appropriate language that do not reinforce negative stereotypes or stigma and align with relevant frameworks, and capture varying access requirements, including physical, digital, and social, and barriers to inclusion (e.g., attitudes, stigma), with reference to relevant frameworks and instruments, particularly the CRPD.

The contents of this issue are presenting:

- 8 academic articles, with research findings from Hong Kong, India, United Kingdom, Ecuador, Mongolia, Indonesia, Sweden, Kenya, United States;
- 7 non-academic articles, presenting case studies from New Zealand, Australia, Norway, Spain, Indonesia, and the Netherlands.
- 2 viewpoints sharing reflections, experiences, and recommendations from persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, from Kenya and Zimbabwe.

⁴ Read about the double peer review process of The Journal of Public Space:
<https://www.journalpublicspace.org/index.php/jps/peer-review-process>

We invited to serve as Guest Editor for this issue Dr Victor Santiago Pineda (2017), a global thought leader, urban planner, and distinguished scholar on inclusive and accessible cities, who is leading the work around the Global Compact on Inclusive and Accessible Cities. We asked him to, in his guest editorial, share reflections on the very concept of inclusion in the domain of public spaces. As we aspire to make available accessible versions of this special issue, contents are published through accessible PDFs, together with Epub and HTML-formats which are more user-friendly to screen-reader users.

As we launch this publication at the 11th session of the World Urban Forum in Katowice, Poland (June 2022) across multiple events, the journey does not stop here. The ambition of this Special Issue is to reach and stimulate discussions amongst broad audiences; on what works and what can be done differently towards making public spaces, and ultimately cities and urban communities, inclusive of and accessible to all. We believe that this Special Issue is a critical piece of the puzzle to inspire and support discussions and actions to leave no one, and no place behind in an urbanising world. We hope you enjoy the reading as much as we have enjoyed working with the authors who made this Special Issue a reality.

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