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Research Paper

# (Dis)ability and the experience of accessibility in the urban environment

## *(In)capacité et expérience de l'accessibilité dans un environnement urbain*

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ABSTRACT

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, people have a right to participation. The built environment plays a major role in determining what people with disabilities can do and be, and Universal Design has become an important strategy for improving accessibility. The social and psychological dimensions are important to the experience of accessibility. We have interviewed citizens with sight loss and mobility restrictions while walking in an urban environment, talking about accessibility, to gain more knowledge on barriers and accessibility as experienced in an urban environment. The analysis highlights how attention to physical details in the built environment and psychosocial factors such as being different, are important. The study indicates that people with impairments may have a wide range of needs that require accommodation. These findings lead to the conclusion that accessibility must include biological, psychological and social dimensions to provide a sound understanding of the person–environment interaction.

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RÉSUMÉ

D'après la Convention des Nations unies relative aux droits des personnes handicapées, tous les individus devraient avoir le droit de participer de façon égalitaire à la société. Au regard de ce que les personnes vivant avec des handicaps peuvent être et faire, l'environnement urbain joue un rôle prépondérant, et la conception universelle s'est imposée comme une stratégie fondamentale dans l'amélioration de l'accessibilité. Les dimensions sociales et psychologiques de l'expérience vécue de l'accessibilité sont cependant trop souvent ignorées, bien qu'elles y tiennent une place importante. Dans le cadre de cette étude, nous avons interviewé des personnes qui vivent avec des capacités visuelles ou motrices réduites au cours de déplacements dans la ville à propos de l'accessibilité. L'objectif de la démarche était d'étoffer les connaissances sur les barrières et l'accessibilité telles qu'elles sont perçues et vécues dans un environnement urbain. L'analyse des entretiens met en lumière l'attention que ces personnes portent aux éléments matériels et physiques dans un environnement urbain, ainsi que l'importance que revêtent les facteurs psychosociaux, notamment ceux liés à la différence. L'étude démontre que les personnes vivant avec un handicap sont susceptibles d'exprimer une diversité de besoins nécessitant des aménagements. Ces résultats conduisent à la conclusion que pour mieux cerner l'interaction entre l'individu et son environnement, il est nécessaire d'appréhender l'accessibilité en incluant ses dimensions biologiques, psychologiques et sociales.
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## 1. Introduction

There have, in recent years, been three important and interlinked developments in the field of disability studies. The first is a focus on equal accessibility for persons with disabilities, as reflected in international policy documents and legislation. This focus on equal accessibility for persons with disabilities has not only raised awareness in our global consciousness, but also led to the development of a conceptualization of disability as a complex interaction between individual and environmental factors. This second development represents the realignment of the global view of disabilities from the level of individual responsibility to the interactional and is manifested in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) article 1 and preamble through the statement "*that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*". (United Nations CRPD).

Thirdly, and of great relevance to this paper, is the evolution of Universal Design (UD). UD is defined in CRPD, article 2 and is furthermore referred to by Sanford (2012) as a rehabilitation strategy which promotes the design of environments, products, programs and services which are sensitive to and accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. UD is therefore a strategy which has the potential to promote equal participation and enable people by dismantling disabling barriers.

An important element in building up knowledge to support UD strategies is the recognition that people live with a wide range of abilities and interact with the environment in complex ways. Whereas some studies discuss UD in general (Imrie & Hall, 2001; Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003), others focus on barriers in the built environment (Castrodale & Crooks, 2010; Gray, Gould, & Bickenbach, 2003; Heylighen, 2012). Few studies however examine how people with impairments experience the urban environment. Studies tend to focus on specific issues in the urban environment such as shared spaces (Hammond & Musselwhite, 2013; Imrie & Kumar, 2010; Parkin & Smithies, 2012) or a single type of

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