City Space Architecture

EDITORIAL

What is Inclusive and Accessible Public Space?

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As I write this introduction from Davos, Switzerland, on the side lines of the World Economic Forum's Annual Meetings, I am reminded of the intensity and volatility of change that we are living through. Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor of Germany declared that the global pandemic simultaneously confined access to traditional public space while expanding access to new virtual and distributed and decentralized "public" spaces. Traditional public spaces were shut down, and for nearly two years we had to reinvent what public spaces were, who they were designed for and how they would be accessed. With the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, accessibility and inclusion took centre stage.

Public facilities play an important role in every city, and they should be able to accommodate persons of all ages and abilities. Disability rights advocates argue that facilities and spaces such as schools, parks, civic or community centres, public safety facilities, arts and cultural facilities, recreational facilities, and plazas should be accessible to all, and equitably distributed throughout the city. They should be designed by, with, and for people with disabilities and older persons, and by doing so would be safe, and accessible by design.

In my book, *Building the Inclusive City* (2019), I lay a foundational framework for understanding the public-private, socio-economic, moral, institutional, interpersonal, cultural, and psychological underpinnings of accessibility.[1] Public space is not only a public good, or a collective resource, it is a medium for social exchange and common understanding. Public spaces are also not only physical but also virtual, and include traditional and emerging digital spaces.[2] According to the renowned geographer and urbanist Edward Soja, public space is more expansive and nuanced, recognizing a dynamic co-creation of what he terms a social-spatial dialectic. Society creates space and space shapes society. Manuel Castell also describes the space as a conduit of communication and "flows" of economic and social transactions and social and cultural transformations. These spaces of flows create a logic and generate value to the corresponding notes in the network.

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[1] Building the Inclusive City: Governance, Access and the Urban Transformation of Dubai
https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-32988-4

[2] Online communities include those on WhatsApp (see Cities for All Global Communities), as well as others on virtually any other topic that are formed on Telegram and Discord. These virtual spaces are creating decentralized autonomous organizations or DAOs and accelerating our transition to third generation of the internet called the Web3 or metaverse. Billions of users access and create content that is inaccessible and excludes persons with disabilities on traditional social media, websites, and apps.

For persons with disabilities and older persons, "public spaces play a central role in the creation of inclusive communities and more specifically, in the formation of a public culture and in enriching cultural diversity" (Ravazzoli, Torricelli, 2017). Furthermore, public spaces are spaces and hubs for mobility, economic activity and exchange and should be accessible to all regardless of impairment type.

By denying or restricting access to train stations, airports, bus stops, micro-mobility infrastructure like shared bikes, and scooters, and other intermodal terminals we are denying and restricting our own economic and social development. Accessibility barriers in essence make these streets, sidewalks and bike lanes spaces of exclusion and congestion, or as social theorist Marion Iris Young would argue, public spaces of "oppression." In the urban environment, realizing the politics of difference means building spaces that do not create barriers or prevent participation and rather promote and defend the access of all groups. A city that does not prioritize the access and inclusion of people with disabilities has decided that disabled people do not have the same value or citizenship worth as those without disabilities. In *Rethinking Architecture: Design Students and Physically Disabled People*, architect and humanitarian Ray Lifchez wrote (1987, p. 1):

> "Building forms reflect how a society feels about itself and the world it inhabits. Valuable resources are given over to what is cherished—education, religion, commerce, family life, recreation—and tolerable symbols mask what is intolerable—illness, deviance, poverty, disability, old age. Although architects do not create these social categories, they play a key role in providing the physical framework in which the socially acceptable is celebrated and the unacceptable is confined and contained. Thus when any group that has been physically segregated or excluded protests its second-class status, its members are in effect challenging how architects practice their profession."

In other words, treating all people the same creates unequal results; cities that do not promote politics of difference choose instead to protect only what they view as normative. Popular memes on equity versus equality have made clear the argument that requiring all people to perform the same or undifferentiated tasks (such as climbing stairs to get into a library) is perhaps equal, but not equitable or inclusive.[3]

The climate crisis also elevates the need to create master plans that centre on walking and biking "in the design of sustainable mobility systems and the creation of sustainable and liveable cities" (Ravazzoli, Torricelli, 2017, p. 38). These authors cite the European Union's assessment that interventions that link sustainability to inclusion can create sustainable cities with "attractive open public spaces and promote sustainable, inclusive and healthy mobility" (European Union Regional Policy, 2011, p. vii).

Yet despite concerted efforts to link sustainability to inclusion (see Sustainable Development Goal 11), collectively cities and other stakeholders that value public spaces have failed to measure, assess, and operationalize "inclusion" through resilience strategies, "green projects", or municipal planning, and in city life.

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[3] Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.

Conclusion

The articles gathered in this publication could not be more timely or important. In fact, this publication is a first of its kind and comes at the heels of a global coordinated effort to redefine politically, and publicly the future we want, and the cities we need. As you explore this special issue, a few themes emerge, namely that the creation of truly inclusive and accessible public spaces is an important aspect of realizing a just and sustainable world not only for older persons and persons with disabilities but for all of us. Just public spaces are designed by centring on the marginalized, or the least well-off stakeholder. Where environmental elements - and space itself - were conceived for the most part as fixed, immobile, and inflexible, planners did not see how their actions furthered stigma and exclusion. Out of the notion of normalizing or standardizing public spaces to a "normal" or "standardized" worker, a group of feminist theorists led by Martha Nussbaum (2006) criticized John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and began to centre human flourishing (and by extension inclusion and accessibility) at the centre of theories of justice. Accessibility and inclusion continue to be undertheorized and have until recently been technical or political objectives that are placed at the margins (or on the periphery) of public discourse. Public facilities are the most tangible expressions of the social construction of space, and of how society "justifies" space and makes justice tangible.

References

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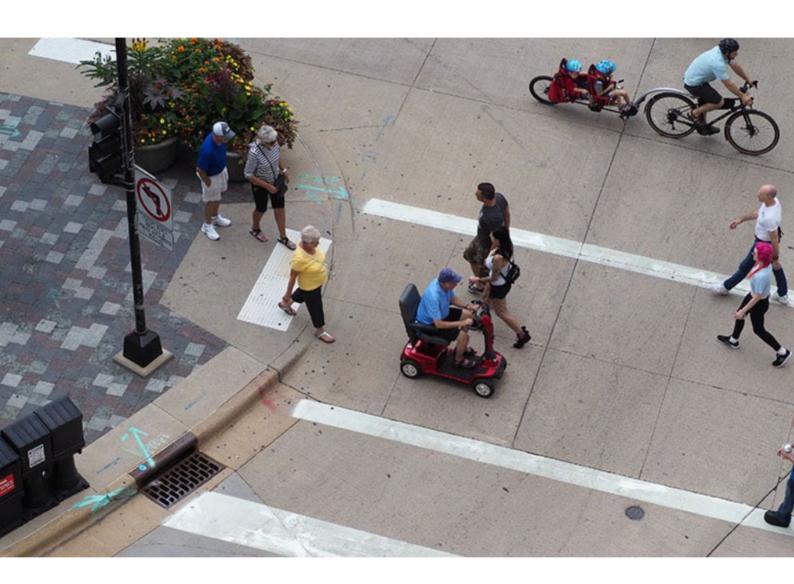Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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