

DESIGN FOR ALL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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MAIN TEXT

The names 'Design for All', 'Universal Design', 'Inclusive Design' and 'Transgenerational Design' are all used to refer to a relatively recent movement in which, though in practice it uses the technology and the knowledge of ergonomics – a science that made great progress during the second half of the 20th century –, performance is not the end goal. In Design for All, ergonomics is a valuable instrument but not the final objective.

The aim of this paper is to identify the foundations of the Design for All movement and how they have developed over history.

Statistics and demographic trends

The statistics for disability in the world are staggering and the argument that disabled people are a minority no longer holds. The latest and most rigorous work at international level on disability is the *World*

Health Survey (World Health Organisation, 2002-2004) and the *Global Burden of Disease Study* update (World Health Organisation, 2004).¹ According to the WHS there are about 785 million people with disabilities (15.6% of the global population), while the GBD raises this figure to 975 million people over 15 (19.4% of the world population) living with disabilities. Out of the total world population for 2010, the WFS estimated that 110 million people (2.2% of the world population) have significant functional difficulties, while the GBD estimates that 190 million people (3.8% of the world population) have severe disabilities or the equivalent to the disability caused by problems like tetraplegia, severe depression or blindness.

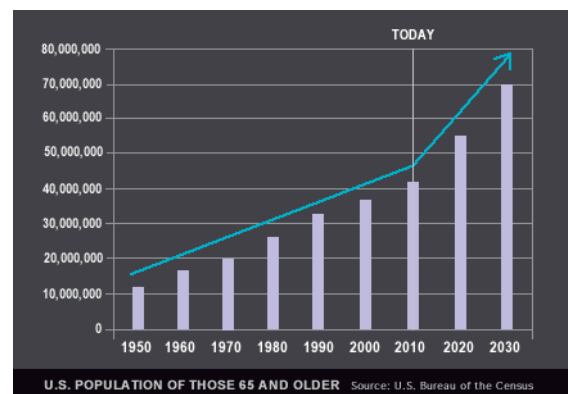
On a global level the main recognised causes of disability are infectious disease (HIV, malaria, polio, leprosy, trachoma), chronic disease (diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, mental disorders, cancer, respiratory diseases),

traffic accidents and, very especially, ageing. This is one of the clearest global trends of the 21st century, as statistics show that old people make up a very large proportion of the disabled population (World Health Organisation and the World Bank, 2011).² In spite of the differences between developed and developing countries, the fact is that people not only live much longer in old age, but also, thanks to progress in medicine, war veterans, injured people and people suffering from infectious diseases who at one time would not have survived now do so in reasonable conditions. The combination of low birth rate and longer life expectancy results in an increasingly ageing population with varying degrees of disability.

Not only do people live longer, they also live with more difficulties. The two world wars created a huge population of veterans with disabilities, while antibiotics and other developments in medicine mean that people survive accidents and diseases that were once fatal. These demographic changes result in a population that is older and has more disabilities than it seems.

One example of this trend can be found in the work done by the Center for Universal Design based on the U.S. Census Bureau, which estimates that by 2010 the United States will have 40 million people over 65, four million people over 85 and

almost 60,000 centenarians. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2020 there will be between 7 and 8 million people over 85 and about 214,000 over 100.



The statistics on disabilities in Europe – the continent with the world's oldest population— are also significant. According to the 2008 *Demographic Year Book*, in Europe there were 118 million people over 65, which amounts to 16.1% of the population, compared to 113 million people under 15, which amounts to 15.5% of the population (United Nations Statistics Division, 2008). According to figures from the European Disability Forum, 15% of the population of the European Union – some 80 million people – suffer some kind of disability and it is estimated that 40% of the population has reduced mobility.³ The EDF puts continued emphasis on the low rates of employment integration of people with disabilities, who tend to be considered inactive population. Only 20% of people

with disabilities enter the labour market, as opposed to 68% of people without disabilities.

From victims to people with rights

Curiously, although the Design for All movement really took off in the 1990s, work and action by the United Nations in favour of the rights of people with disabilities go back much further, to the years after the Second World War, when numerous war veterans began the fight against discrimination. Since then, the movement in support of employment and social integration for disabled people has followed a long and eventful path whose bases can be consulted in *History of United Nations and Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2011). According to this document, from 1945 to 2007, at the rate of almost one a year, the United Nations carried out a consistent series of actions directed at recognising the rights of disabled people.

The first thing to be said is that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed in 1948, lays down the foundations for the promotion and protection of human rights when it states that every individual has 'the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or

other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control'.

From 1945 to 1955 the United Nations Secretariat and the Economic and Social Council were the main bodies in matters of disability, centred on furthering the rights of people with physical disabilities and on projects to prevent disabilities and promote rehabilitation.

From 1955 to 1970 the United Nations began to shift from a charitable approach to disability to a social one. Furthermore, the 1970s brought a new approach to the matter as the concept of the human rights of people with disabilities began to be internationally accepted.

During the 1980s, with the object of improving their integration in society, a number of initiatives were taken on a national and international level to improve the situation of disabled people. To this end, programmes were launched that were directed at rehabilitation and prevention and national committees were established representing 141 countries whose goal was to make improvements in the following areas: the social and economic situation of people with disabilities, programme development and implementation, research, decision-making policies, legislation, decentralisation at national and local levels and aid to developing countries.

During the 1990s five United Nations World Conferences were held that put the emphasis on the need to create a 'society for all', calling for participation by citizens in all spheres of society, including people with disabilities. As a result, thanks to the United Nations declarations, at the end of the 20th century there was a genuine change in mentality on the way disability was understood, with a shift from the medical model to the social model and an increased awareness that people are disabled by their environment as much as by their bodies. In fact, environment – along with poverty – have a marked effect on the impact and scale of disability.

Disability and environment are interdependent. For example, people with visual or auditive impairments who have access to every type of glasses and hearing aids can work and lead a practically normal life. On the other hand, wherever these aids are not technically or economically accessible these people become disabled because they can not work or lead an independent life.

At the turn of the millennium, more than 40 countries introduced laws against the discrimination of disabled people. The most recent and extensive recognition of the human rights of people with disabilities is the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, Enable, 2006).⁴ Its aim is to 'promote, project, and

ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by people with disabilities and to promote respect for their inherent dignity'.

The countries that ratified this convention took on an international commitment to implement the provisions of the legal text. The CRPD puts people with disabilities on the human rights agenda, shifting the paradigm from charity to rights, from a medical model to one based on social/human rights. Disabled people are no longer considered victims or patients; they are people with rights and with a part to play in society.

The *Convention*, passed by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 and ratified by all the countries of the European Union the following year, is a legally binding treatise on human rights forming part of the United Nations human rights apparatus.

Nevertheless, legal recognition of the rights of people with disabilities could be worthless without rigorously up-to-date social research. The latest research on disability at world level is the *World Report on Disability* published in 2011 by the World Health Organisation and the World Bank. It explicitly acknowledges that disability is a human rights related issue because: 1) disabled people experience

professional and social inequality; 2) disabled people suffer lack of respect and violations of their dignity, and 3) disabled people are often denied their autonomy (World Health Organisation and the World Bank, 2011).

The concept of Design for All

The change in thinking over disability – from medical to social and from body to environment – was a direct call to town-planners, architects, engineers and designers, to the extent that their bad practices not only prevented access to the built environment but also to information technologies, vehicles, culture, etc. In this respect it was seen that highly specialised engineering and design of technical assistance and rehabilitation had to evolve towards a much broader concept committed to the integration of people who have difficulty interacting with their environment, whether they are disabled or not. The philosophy of *Design for the Disabled* therefore gave way to the much broader philosophy of *Design for All*. In fact, *Design for All* is a philosophy that seeks to engage all designers as its goal is none other than to ensure that no-one is discriminated by products or services on the basis of age, size, sex, race, culture or ability.

Many definitions have been given of the concept of *Design for All*. Here we shall turn to the Stockholm Declaration passed on 9 May 2004 at the Annual General Meeting of the European Institute for Design and Disability, which says:

'Design for All is design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality. This holistic and innovative approach constitutes a creative and ethical challenge for all planners, designers, entrepreneurs, administrators and political leaders.

Design for All aims to enable all people to have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of society. To achieve this, the built environment, everyday objects, services, culture and information – in short, everything that is designed and made by people to be used by people – must be accessible, convenient for everyone in society to use and responsive to evolving human diversity.

The practice of Design for All makes conscious use of the analysis of human needs and aspirations and requires the involvement of end users at every

stage in the design process.'

(European Institute for Design and Disability, 2004).

Design for All sets out to eradicate a series of bad practices by professionals, such as, for example, making designs based on values corresponding to average measurements on anthropometric tables, taking oneself as a model in checking the functionality of a service, using icons or symbols (with the idea of customising a design) that are not universally recognised and could therefore lead to confusion, taking it for granted that there are places, products or services intended for a specific public and that the rest of the population will not use them; using excessively professional or unfamiliar language in reports, official forms, web sites, information panels, etc. intended for the general public (Various Authors, 2002)⁵.

In search of new ethical standards

During the second half of the 1980s an earthquake shook the world of design, bringing down the few utopias of Modernism that still remained standing. Nevertheless, no-one can say that they would have reached the end of the 20th century intact anyway, as the destructive efficacy shown by military weapons during the Second World War seriously questioned the idea that technological

progress always leads to social progress. Furthermore, the very real danger of a nuclear war destroying the entire planet loomed throughout the Cold War, triggering concern for environmental problems on a global level.

The Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 and with it the utopia of socialism that had fed the more progressive and committed sectors of design since the 1920s. It became difficult to keep up the belief that an egalitarian society could be achieved through architecture and design, because the dream of egalitarianism had faded. Stripped of ethical standards, the more avant-garde sectors of design took to pure aesthetic speculation and announced the arrival of the post-modern style. It seemed that the only place for design was in the service of product differentiation and of market interests. So could this also be the end of the utopia of design? Had all ethical standards been given up? I think not.

During the 1990s, two social projects arose that were once again to inspire the world of design. One was Green Design; the other was Design for All. The energy and hope that various designer groups and universities put into the invention and planning of an environment-friendly world without barriers makes me

think we really are looking at one of the new ethical standards of the 21st century.

Conclusions

Although no-one can deny that Design for All is also a tool for improving the offer of products on the market – the population figures given above indicate that companies offering products 'For All' or 'universal' products have a promising future before them – the idea that design can and must be at the service of human rights is an attractive one to designers. I think the success of Universal Design, Transgenerational Design and Design for All is due to the synergic conjunction of three factors in time:

1. The change in the concept of disability that has shifted from medical to social and from body to environment.
2. The exhaustive development of international legislation demanding respect for the human rights of people with disabilities.
3. The search for new ethical standards for design to replace those that once inspired Modernism.

¹ The first *Global Burden of Disease* was commissioned from the World Bank in 1990 to report on the relative weight of premature mortality and disability brought about by different diseases, injuries and risk factors.

² Disability figures are much higher amongst people between 80 and 89, the fastest-growing age group at the global level, with an annual increase of 3.9%, and it is calculated it will reach 20% of the world population over 60 in 2050. See tables 2.2 and 2.3 of the *World Report on Disability* (World Health Organisation and the World Bank, 2011) p. 35..

³ The EDF has taken its figures from various Eurostat and Eurobarometer documents.

⁴ The *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and its Optional Protocol was adopted on 13 December 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and was opened for signature on 30 March 2007. There were 82 signatories to the Convention, 44 signatories to the Optional Protocol, and 1 ratification of the Convention. This is the highest number of signatories in history to a UN Convention on its opening day. It is the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century and is the first human rights convention to be open for signature by regional integration organisations. The Convention entered into force on 3 May 2008.

⁵ See: Various Authors (2002), *Libro blanco del diseño para todos en la universidad*, p. 45.

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