

Background note. Universalist design - international standardization

The “Universal Design”, in accessibility grounds, suggests an utopist quality in the conception of the built environment, its equipment and perception. It marks us a paradigmatic goal in the field of processes of claiming for segregated sectors of the society due to non-inclusive surroundings.

It is important to align paths towards perfection, but so is to perceive invariables, different conditions and main priorities in order to design sustainable strategies in uneven processes.

The “universalist design” - with “universalistic” character - adapts philosophically to unequal processes, complex and uncompleted, in a transit of constant improvement, free from any “school” or absolute label, and open to degrees or doses of progress with a transversal reach more suited to the global diversity and to the instant synthesis.

Vindication, rationalization and synthesis.

*“... the accessibility, that comes out strongly mid XX century, has been implementing from the hand of 3 major axis of action. A first step is the manifest of a necessity, generally exposed by the **vindication** of the collective most affected, that drives to the implantation of decided emergency measurements, a second stadium where the need is analyzed, structured and **rationalized** (generally from sectors related to the collective) into guides and specific standards, to end in a third phase of **synthesis** mixing in the criteria of accessibility in the reflection, progress, standardizing and sector legislation...”¹*

The United Nations “World Program of Action concerning Disabled Persons” has promoted the vindication at a global level, though it has not yet reached all its corners. Hunger, thirst, precarious sanitation or slaving domination, among others, are factors that cloud or divert humanitarian objectives. Huge distances separate the “today” from the perfect design of an inclusive environment. We have to act in a responsible way, gradually and prioritizing.

The analysis of the needs and structure of determined facts leads us to rationalize criteria and parameters to apply in order to avoid barriers in the environment we design. The first “symbolic” curb cuts for wheel chair users – that marked a start in the process of the new conception of the cities – have evolved into universalist curbs with adequate design of the slope and leveled pedestrian itineraries, and later on to warnings and facilities to people with sensorial and intellectual impairments, as well as transportation means for the elderly and babies in their trolleys.

The rationalization has advanced, though showing big steps in the availability of local, national and regional standards; specific standards for improving accessibility, each time more refined and even, striving to achieve a more extended autonomy. Paradoxically this local or regional extension as it advances it gets loaded with protective magnetism that pushes back possibilities of gradual universalistic evolvment and its sustainability in developing economies.

Such “specific standards for an improvement of the accessibility” when they don't constitute an ideal technical support, have meant inconsistently an auto-segregation of the national building codes. The value of its creation sheltered by a fault can have

¹ Xavier García-Milà y otros, 2010, “**Accesibilidad urbana: reivindicación, racionalización y síntesis**”

masked the reality that today, walking towards a transversal and Universalist conception, evolves to a state of synthesis. The accessibility is one more substance in the synthesis of the organic compound in the life quality of the human beings. It is our social responsibility to integrate in a synthetic and synergic way this quality in the process of development.

The process of synthesis implies considering significant factors of local order, such as geographic, ethnic and social aspects and economical and technological realities.

The technical **Standards**, when created strictly following the guidelines of the International Organization for Standardization (**ISO**), result in an ideal technical support, applicable to the national codes, contracts and politics of State or private development. A wide spectrum of active members in the international technical standards committees, covering the participation of emerging economies representatives, is key to achieve a consensus that synthesizes the diversity of natural courses and keeps a valid and efficient constant update.

“In developing an ISO standard, considerations should be given as to whether the single technical solution proposed is applicable to all countries and can be applied by all countries”. The application of the “Guidance on the implications of the ISO Global Relevant policy” says: “where a single technical solution is not possible because of market differences, options can be included in the ISO standard, with a note specifying the market for which the options are intended”.

Thus the importance of recognizing guides and parameters in values that are objective and basic along with those recommended and exceptional, or national conditions that can be associated to ethnic, geographic aspects or economic circumstances or available technology, among others.

The technical standardization committee for Accessibility **ISO/TC59/SC16** walks its final phase for registry of **FDIS 21542 on Building Construction – Accessibility and usability of the Built environment**.

The document will define guidelines and basic recommended parameters which's scope of application will be established locally by the member countries, organizations or private structures. In the final document there will be included exceptional conditions applicable to different realities such as existing buildings in developing countries.

The local alternatives – whether due to an advanced process in its state of art in highly developed countries or due to a much needed gradual application in developing countries – will be protected by such exceptional conditions. According to ISO/TR 9527:1994, “too high a requirement can mean in practice that nothing is implemented”. Though differencing factors exist, the clear definition of basic guidelines at an international level will help the spreading of international good praxis.

Just as the IS ISO/IEC 7812 supports the universal use of local credit or debit cards in transactions without geographical limits or electronic barriers, to have an International Standard on “Building Construction – Accessibility and usability of the built environment”, will bring an ideal support for development and the international mobility, in work, commercial, intellectual, cultural, leisure and accessible tourism networks.

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