Disability and the Built Environment: Analytical Study of Public Buildings in Prishtina

Rozafa Basha

Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina"
rr. Kodra e Diellit p.n., 10000 Prishtina, Kosovo; rozafa.basha@uni-pr.edu

Abstract

Every sector of society and government should offer a barrier-free access. Local governments should set an example by providing full physical access to public buildings they administer. The benefits of providing access to these buildings are substantial to empowering all citizens regardless of age, gender, ability and financial situation. The built environment in Kosovar cities continues to be extensively inaccessible for people with disabilities.

The study presented in this paper is focused in analysing the situation of accessibility of the built environment in Kosovar cities, with a particular focus in public buildings. The study is constituted of analysis of current situation of accessibility of the built environment in Kosovo, complemented by an insight of accessibility problems from theoretical perspective and finally through a discussion of findings of accessibility investigation of 195 public buildings in Prishtina carried out in the summer of 2016. The analysis concludes that the extent of inaccessibility of the built environment and in particular of the public buildings in Prishtina continues to be a disturbing phenomenon demonstrating the persisting segregation in the Kosovar society of persons with disability. Though in the past decade the existing stock of public buildings has seen mandatory improvements by providing minimal accessibility, in the majority of cases these technical interventions haven’t improved to a greater extent the accessibility of these buildings whatsoever. Hence, this paper concludes with recommendations and measures that are to be taken by different stakeholders in order to ensure improvement of the general accessibility situation in Kosovo.

1. Introduction

The city can contribute to a more equal, inclusive and cohesive society if the places we live, the facilities we use and neighbourhoods are designed to be accessible and inclusive [1]. Difficulties moving in the city and lack of access to buildings and services are some of the main problems faced by persons with disability (PWD) while performing basic daily tasks. Lacking access in the built environment indicates a major violation of elementary rights to participation in the public life for PWD.

Equal rights, independent and dignified life of PWD is already guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) adopted in 2006 [2]. In developed countries members of the PWD community to a great extent are treated as equal participants in society, culture, politics, etc. There are laws, regulations and state standards that regulate and ensure that the built environment, buildings and public spaces are fully accessible to everyone.

Physical access creates a vital contribution to increasing the social participation of all people and in particular of people with impaired mobility such as PWD. To design an environment without barriers for all, it is necessary to recognize the experience of disability and illness as a normal part of life. Only with such an approach to shaping the built environment free movement and an independent and dignified life for PWD and other communities will be ensured.

The study presented in this paper is focused in analysing the situation of accessibility of the built environment in Kosovar cities, with a particular focus in public buildings. The study is constituted of analysis of general accessibility situation of built environment in the Kosovar context, complemented by an insight of accessibility problems from theoretical perspective and finally through a discussion of findings of accessibility investigation of 195 public buildings in Prishtina. The latter investigation was carried out within the framework of the campaign "Prishtina for all" in July 2016.
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production new laws, regulations and guidelines are to be taken by different stakeholders to ensure a more accessible environment in Kosovo. As the regulations and laws and relevant legal mechanisms are basis for ensuring implementation of accessibility measures in the built environment, recommendations of this nature are directed to central and local government. With a purpose of preventing the creation of new barriers [4] in the future, both legislative bodies are advised that reviewing, amending and producing new laws, regulations and guidelines are to be done through participatory process. On the other hand, implementing technical parameters for building construction are not sufficient to ensure inclusivity. The civil society is advised to step up to ensure that planning for the needs of a community is complemented with activist engagements which promote inclusive design and accessibility rights as a matter of civil rights and protection of PWD community from discrimination. Finally, as education plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the built environment [5], a recommendation goes to educators of architects and other professions influencing the shaping of the built environment.

2. Kosovo context

Regulations and anti-discrimination laws in Kosovo are drafted at national levels and the inclusion of the PWD community through the legal framework is ensured in education and employment. But despite the existing but incomplete legal framework in Kosovo, the PWD community continues to be marginalized. In most cases, this community lives on the verge of poverty because despite of the legally guaranteed employment quota with the Labour Law [6] public institutions and companies seem reluctant to implement, possibilities for economic empowerment and opportunities for independent life are thus made impossible. Related to the economic empowerment of the PWD is also the fact that a great number of members of this community are lacking education. Though regulated by the Law on Pre-University Education [7], families lacking information and awareness very often keep their disabled members from getting into schools. Notwithstanding the latter fact, in most cases today, architectural barriers in schools and in the entire built environment make it impossible for the individuals of this community to travel to and attend school. Some of the most occurring architectural barriers that hinder education of PWD community are shortage of ramps or ramps constructed with inappropriate slopes in school buildings; lack of accessible toilets; lack of accessible public transport; various infrastructure barriers; inaccessible sidewalks and public space in general, etc. (Figure 1).

Though in the past decade the existing stock of public buildings has seen mandatory improvements by providing minimal accessibility, in the majority of cases these technical interventions haven’t improved to a greater extent the accessibility of these buildings whatsoever.

However Administrative Instruction (AI) 33/2007 [8] regulating barrier-free design and construction has been in power since 2007, public buildings constructed subsequent to this document’s approval continue to have architectural barriers and as such remain to a great extent inaccessible to the needy (Figure 2). Among many factors making this phenomenon persist is incompetent and unethical design practice of Kosovar architects, lack of rule of law, incomplete legislation and lack of will of local administration to enforce regulations in power. In conclusion to the above analysis, the inaccessible public buildings, especially the ones under the local governance entail larger problems the PWD have to face in the city, such as being deprived from participation in decision-making, education, employment, and having less access to health and other services. In other words, due to the above mentioned problems the PWD community in Kosovo is unable to exercise the rights guaranteed by the United Nations Convention [2] for an independent and dignified life.

3. Literature review

Within the European Disability Strategy 2010 – 2020 [9], one of the key commitments is "Providing Access to Goods, Services and Assistance Tools for People with Disabilities". This commitment is seen as a precondition for participation in society and economy. Within the European Parliament legislative resolution on Equal Opportunities for the Disabled (2004) [10], it is stated that for the purpose of empowering people in society, EU institutions are obliged to guarantee the removal of physical barriers that prevent people from participating, and to establish respect, dignity, autonomy and independence for all.

According to the UN Habitat Report Equity and the Prosperity of Cities (2013) social inclusion is seen as an important factor that provides environment where individuals and social groups among other things have access to the ‘commons’ are free to fully engage to collective affairs [11]. Equality and justice are the basic principles with which the city accessible to all is produced and managed. While democratic and inclusive processes promote improvement in the physical environment, social development in the city etc.

As mentioned above, the basic document regulating the rights of people with disabilities is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [2]. Its preamble emphasizes the principle of "All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated" (from the Vienna Declaration). It also stresses that access to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, education, health, information and communication is important to enable the PWD community to enjoy all fundamental rights and freedoms.

Any obstacle in the built environment can be experienced as a barrier to achieving fundamental rights and freedoms. Barriers are encountered everywhere: barriers to movement, space and time barriers, barriers to access information, communication barriers, etc. A barrier is not necessarily characterized by its physical form and the physical form of the space, but by lack of information, signs, and spatial knowledge, etc., which hinder or limit the flow of actions, information and communication. The concept of a “barrier” has a broader definition as well. Some colours and some letters can be perceived more clearly than others; some floors finishes have direct impact on usability and functional performance [12] or can create better friction and better acoustic conditions that facilitate
orientation. Not all are exclusive but some exclude certain communities, limiting the possibility of a free and independent life.

When discussing the physical barriers Imrie and Hall (2011) maintain that they are compounded by social and attitudinal barriers which tend to regard disabled people as inferior and of little value. [13] On the aspects of social and attitudinal barriers, the above-mentioned authors continue, that it is “the socio-institutional structures and relations of the development process that are implicated in the production and perpetuation of disabling barriers in the built environment” and because of which “the needs of disabled are excluded or not properly addressed at all stages of design and the development of the built environment.”

Authors Lau and Chiu (2003) term accessibility as “the freedom or ability of people to achieve their basic needs in order to sustain their quality of life. [14] Physical access creates a vital contribution to increasing the social participation of people with disabilities. There are numerous definitions for physical accessibility. According to Handicap International, an accessible environment is the one that enables free and unobstructed movement, regardless of age, gender and ability [15].

European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 focuses on eliminating barriers in eight fields of actions, Accessibility, Participation, Equality, Employment, Education and training, Social protection, Health, and External Action. [9] According to Kerbler, the capacity to access and fully participate in society is a human right. As such, accessibility is also an important political issue because the realisation of human rights falls first and foremost within the political sphere. [4] Tanya Titchosky (2011) states that access as it is “tied to the social organization of participation, even to belonging needs to be sought out and fought for, legally secured, physically measured, and politically protected”, and it also needs to be understood as “a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations between people in social space” [16].

Accessibility of the built environment comprises one of the spatial rights according to Carr et al., with users such as women, the elderly and the disabled usually suffering the most restrictions of these rights, i.e. freedom of action and movement in the physical environment [17]. Hence, Harnik (2003) states that accessibility measures should not be based on an idealized healthy adult but rather on “a senior on a cane, a parent pushing a stroller or an eight-year-old riding a bicycle” [18]. The built environment is made accessible with the implementation of accessibility standards that are complemented to national building codes. If these standards are not strictly implemented and ruled out of the urban design process, “the mobility and self-reliance of disabled people is hindered, thus denying them their basic right to a social life” among other things damaging their self-confidence [19].

To continue the elaboration of accessibility of the built environment within the framework of rights, as argued by Lefebvre (1968) and Harvey (2008) it also is the right to the city [20], which is a collective right for all people who inhabit, access and use the city [21]. Social Inclusion presents a particular challenge in the design of urban environment and raises a number of questions related to mobility and participation in everyday life. [22] Accessibility can be explained as the opportunity to get from home to a number of destinations (social, educational, recreational and employment) and a good access to pedestrian and transportation system [23].

Chronologically, concerns on achieving accessibility of the built environment by removing obstacles – architectural barriers became a focus of the work of social and disability activists and architects when disability started to be viewed as a social construct in which case the environment and the society is seen as a disabling agent rather than the medical conditions of individuals. [24] The environment may be changed to improve health conditions, prevent impairments, and improve outcomes for persons with disabilities. Such changes can be brought about by legislation, policy changes, capacity building, or technological developments. [25] The concepts and designing approaches for ensuring accessibility according to Jos Boys comes with many names – universal design, barrier-free design, accessibility design, design for all, inclusive design [26]. The designation comes with variation in approach in some cases, but as Jos Boys maintains, the general belief surrounding all these concepts is that making buildings accessible for the disabled will also make them work better for everyone.

4. Accessibility investigation

In the framework of the campaign "Prishtina for all" lead by Non-Governmental Organization Handikos in July 2016, a survey of accessibility of public buildings and facilities under the local governance of the city of Pristina was carried out [3]. The aim of this survey was to highlight the major problems persons with disability (PWD) living in the city of Prishtina face with buildings and services managed by the local government.

The study included 195 buildings and public services and the investigation results reflect an extremely problematic situation with regards to physical access for all groups of the community of PWD and other citizens, such as the elderly, parents moving with children’s strollers and anyone else who at some point in life faces trouble moving in the built environment.
4.1. Methodology

The survey which aimed at assessing physical access for PWD in public buildings and services of Prishtina was realized within five days of field work, in the last two weeks of July 2016. Prior to field work, a registry of public buildings and services of the city of Prishtina was compiled, initially based on the typologies that are most visited by the PWD community. Setting the investigation from the premise of the inclusive city, as the main component of the campaign “Prishtina for all”, and based on the fact that inclusivity is one of the important pillars of sustainable cities the developmental ambition of all cities today, other public typologies such as culture, sports, recreation, and services and enterprises (public and private) such as banks, post offices, public utilities, were included in the list of buildings and services to be evaluated.

The assessed public buildings comprised public typologies covering education, health, social and welfare, administration, culture, sports, recreation, and services and enterprises (public and private) such as banks, post offices, public utilities.

A field group of four architecture students was formed following a two-day training on how to gather data and identify architectural barriers. They set out to visit listed buildings and facilities and completed forms for each building with data relevant to accessibility for PWD. The assessment form was designed to contain the basic requirements for the physical access of PWD with a focus in accessibility for wheelchair users, people using walkers and other mobility aids and the group of people with impaired vision. The requirements set in the assessment form were drawn from the AI 33/2007 annex of the Construction Law no. 2004/15 [27].

Each completed form was entered as an individual item/building within a digital database. The assessment form used in the field work to assess accessibility contained the following sections:

- General information: summarizing location, activity, name of the institution, etc.
- Entrance to the building or the entry way: architectural elements that allow access to the entrance of the building. The information included items related to the parking places for the disabled, access to the entrance, ramps, outside staircases, tactile surfaces leading to the entrance of the building, colour contrasting floor leaders for people with impaired vision, access signs, orientation plan, etc.
- The interior space of the building: interior access elements and possibility of horizontal movement in the floor and vertical one between the floors of the building. Among other things assessed items include interior stairs, interior ramps, the size of the corridor and other communicating spaces, toilets for people with disabilities, doorknobs, interior tactile surfaces, colour contrasting strips on the stairs, the elevators, access signs, service counters, dimensions of classrooms, offices, etc.

It should be noted that only the immediate environment around the building or the public area surrounding the building is taken into account when the accessibility of the entryway is assessed. Public surface and its constituent elements, road infrastructure and urban transport have not been addressed in this assessment.

4.2. Discussion of results

Out of the 195 assessed buildings and locations the most critical identified problems are as follows:

Figure 3. Ministry of Infrastructure - regional office for examination and issuing driving licenses located on the upper floor of Central Bus Station accessible through a spiral staircase (source: author)
Examples of inaccessible public buildings because of lack of ramps are shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5.

In 60 buildings/locations the existing ramp is not meeting the standards because of the following: the ramp gradient is exceeding recommended figures; ramps lack railings dimensioned for adult and children wheelchair users; ramps are too lengthy without landings.

In 26 locations designated toilets for PWD exist but are not accessible due to one of the following reasons: toilet equipment is inadequate; toilets are kept locked or used as a storage space, etc.
Out of the 195 assessed buildings and locations only 8 buildings had designated and/or marked parking areas for PWD in their parking lots.

In 28 assessed cases the existing elevator does not meet the accessibility standards for wheelchair users. Accessibility of elevators for the visually impaired - In most cases elevator’s push buttons are equipped with Braille inscription, but in rare cases they are equipped with loudspeakers and audio signalling.

Exhibiting accessibility signage in the exterior and the interior space of buildings is an important element of informing the PWD community if the building is accessible. As the above graph shows 163 buildings lack this information.

Only 25 buildings have orientation plans that are not as per requirements set in the AI 33/2007, hence partly or completely incomprehensible to people with impaired vision.

The most critical problems observed in public buildings in Prishtina is linked to horizontal movement of visually impaired persons (Figure 6). All the assessed buildings lack tactile surfaces, technology aids and detailing in their exteriors and the interiors of public use.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion to the above analysis, the inaccessible buildings under the local governance entail larger problems the PWD have to face in the city, such as being deprived from participation in decision-making, education, employment, and having less access to health and other services. In other words, the PWD community in Kosovo is unable to exercise the rights guaranteed by the United Nations Convention [2] for an independent and dignified life. However, AI 33/2007 has been in power since 2007, public buildings constructed subsequent to this document’s approval continue to have architectural barriers and as such continue to be

Figure 6. Library “Syri” for the visually impaired persons managed by the Ministry of Culture lacking tactile paving along the paths leading to its entrance (source: author)
partially or completely inaccessible to the needy ones. Among many factors making this phenomenon persist is incompetent and unethical design practice of Kosovar architects, lack of will of local administration and municipal planning departments to enforce the Administrative Instruction regulating barrier free design and construction.

On the other hand, the results of the investigation show that the extent of inaccessible public buildings in Prishtina continues to be a disturbing phenomenon demonstrating the persisting segregation in the Kosovar society of PWD community. The prevailing problems occurring in public buildings are lack of ramps, existing ramps with unsurmountable incline, lack of accessible toilets, etc. The most critical problems are the ones impeding the movement of people with impaired vision. According to this investigation there is a complete lack of accessibility elements (tactile strips and surfaces and orientation plans in Braille scripture) that would enable the movement of people with impaired vision. As noted above, the building accessibility assessment lacks the requirements for many other groups of disability, and a future expanded investigation should cover the areas of disability the research presented in this report is lacking. In the future a comprehensive city – level accessibility investigation should aim at creating a broader picture of architectural barriers and other impeding elements that obstruct the free movement and independent life of all citizens.

Nowadays new technological developments, new materials offer new and innovative ways of solving a range of accessibility problems. It is essential that national and local bodies develop a complete legal framework and special guidelines for improving physical accessibility for PWD to the built environment in general. Improving accessibility of the environment is an important commitment in developmental strategies of the European Union (EU) and with Kosovo’s ambition of EU membership, the existing Kosovar legal framework should develop apace with European developments. Whereas principles of universal design following concepts of creating user friendly built environments and objects of everyday use are to be adopted and included within national design codes.

6. Recommendations

As the regulations and laws and other relevant legal mechanisms are basis for ensuring implementation of accessibility measures in the built environment, recommendations of this nature are directed to central and local government. With a purpose of preventing the creation of new barriers [4] in the future, both legislative bodies are advised that reviewing, amending and producing new laws, regulations and guidelines are to be done through participatory process. On the other hand, implementing technical parameters for building construction are not sufficient to ensure inclusivity. The civil society is advised to step up to ensure that planning for the needs of a community is complemented with activist engagements which promote inclusive design and accessibility rights as a matter of civil rights and protection of PWD community from discrimination. Finally, as education plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the built environment [5], a recommendation goes to educators of architects and other professions influencing the shaping of the built environment.

6.1. Recommendations for the central government

- Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning (MESP) should establish a working group composed of architects, urban planners, transport engineers, lawyers, municipal officials, representatives of the PWD community and advocates of disability rights with the aim of reviewing the Guidelines for Barrier –free Design and Construction within the AI 33/2007. As it is 10 years since these regulations has been approved, due to the up-to-date normative, technological and technical advancements, updating articles and incorporating a wider domain of the built and natural environment within this Administrative Instruction is a prerequisite to keeping the legislation apace with European developments.
- It is recommended that the same institution review national design codes and norms for various building typologies and adopt the concept and principles of universal design.
- It is recommended that MESP draft a strategy and guidelines for elimination of existing architectural barriers in the built environment.
- It is recommended that relevant institutions establish measures of implementing the existing legislation on barrier free design enforced through mechanisms of regular inspections and financial penalties.

6.2. Recommendations for the local government

As municipality has a full responsibility over designing, planning, maintaining and managing the infrastructure in the city, it is recommended as follows:
• Establishing mixed commissions made up of professionals and representatives of community for identification of all architectural barriers in the city.

• Establishing working groups with architects, landscape architects, environmentalists, urban planners, lawyers, municipal officials, representatives of PWD community and advocates of disability rights aiming to draft municipal action plans for the elimination of architectural barriers in buildings and public spaces.

• Organize debates and public discussions on urban issues with community groups, including PWD community. Incorporating community needs and proposals for infrastructure, town planning and accessibility improvement drawn from these meetings is necessary for achieving a greater local democracy.

• Involve representatives of PWD community in architectural and infrastructure project evaluation commissions, public tender commissions, urban planning projects to ensure maximum representation of community's interests and implementation of technical regulations for unimpeded physical access and free movement in buildings and public spaces.

• Setting up technical and quality control mechanisms are required for implementing the technical parameters from an early stage of design. City planning offices should require meeting these parameters to produce building permits in the beginning and use permits at the end of the construction process as well. These parameters should cover the whole range of technical requirements of the built environment, such as constructions, public space, natural parks, etc.

• Closely monitor implementation of barrier free design and construction guidelines.

6.3. Recommendations for the civil society

Implementing technical parameters for building construction are not sufficient to ensure an inclusive community. Planning for the needs of a community to achieve desired outcomes will have to be complemented with activist engagements which promote inclusive design and accessibility rights as a matter of civil rights and protection of PWD community from discrimination.

• Continue with advocacy for disability rights, freedom of movement, independent and dignified life and improvement of their overall situation.

• Continue civic pressure on central and local administration to ensure the implementation of existing regulations and upgrade of general legal framework with regards of achieving greater accessibility and representation of PWD community in public life.

• Facilitate and mediate communication between central and local administration and the PWD community in relation with their accessibility requirements.

6.4. Recommendations for educators

The most effective way of ensuring accessible built environment is through education of future professionals that deal with shaping the built environment. Curricula of design and construction are to be designed embracing inclusive and universal design concepts and principles. [5] Taking in consideration the needs of people with impaired mobility should be considered as ethical conduct of design professionals when approaching a design problem. Hence, the knowledge and skills gained during education and professional trainings of making the built environment accessible to all is a prerequisite to creating professionals that will set basis for an inclusive society.

Acknowledgements

This paper, with the aim of developing its scientific argument among other things discusses an investigation of accessibility of public buildings in Prishtina, in which the author of this study was engaged as a scientific consultant to design the investigation methodology, by the Non-Governmental Organization Handikos. The investigation was part of a wider campaign ‘Prishtina for All’, supported by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Germany.

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