Chapter 87
An Accessible City is a Healthy and People–Centred Smart City

Elena Marchigiani

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5996-7318

Department of Engineering and Architecture, University of Trieste, Italy

ABSTRACT

Accessibility for all is an inspiring issue for future urban agendas. In European cities, the ageing of urban population and the growth of social and economic disparities call for interdisciplinary reflection and practice on the relations between well-being and inclusion and the organization and upgrading of public facilities. The challenge is to ensure the usability of urban spaces to the largest extent of persons, according to their different capabilities. Based on research developed at the University of Trieste (Italy), and taking the region Friuli Venezia Giulia as its main study context, the article questions a variety of recent urban tools and policies in order to show their level of innovation and the obstacles that still oppose their more effective integration. The aim is to highlight possible fields for public action and the need to rethink planning instruments and technical skills in the frame of a user experience and smart design approach.

INTRODUCTION

In Europe today, approximately 359 million people – 72% of the total population – live in cities, towns and suburbs. Even though with a slowing speed, the share of urban inhabitants continues to grow and it is likely to reach more than 80% by 2050. However, considerable differences are recognised between expanding large capital cities, metropolitan areas and suburbs, on the one side, and shrinking small and medium-sized cities and sprawled settlements, on the other (European Commission & UN-Habitat, 2016). As a common feature, the "proportion of people aged 80 or over in the EU-28 population is expected to more than double by 2050 (from 5.4% of the population in 2016 to 11.4% in 2050). Therefore, sooner than later, ageing is likely to affect all EU regions" (Margaras, 2019). In addition, urban areas are generally facing complex social problems: exclusion of less well-off people and families from the

city centres, reduced social cohesion, increase of stress affecting physical and mental health, lack of supply of efficient/affordable services (from housing and public transport, to education and healthcare).

In the next future, the spread to larger social groups of multiple vulnerabilities will have important impacts on the maintenance of welfare policies and on the arrangement of the living environment, calling for stronger attention to the relations between well-being and inclusion, the distribution and usability of public spaces and urban equipment.

In this frame, accessibility comes to the fore as a strategic and cross-cutting issue of the *2030 Urban Agenda*, and as a perspective from which many fields covered by the *Sustainable Development Goals* need to be addressed in a coordinated way (United Nations, 2016a).

In synergy with welfare policies, accessible urban spaces can substantially contribute to health and well-being precisely because – through actions favouring physical connections and integrated management of public equipment, green areas, and soft mobility (mainly pedestrian and cycling) – they can help tackle the challenges of contemporary societies. The reference is to the promotion of autonomy and physical activity, in order to reduce the onset and chronic nature of diseases due to sedentary lifestyles and demographic trends; the creation of opportunities for social exchange; the contrast to the negative impacts of urbanization on environment and climate (D'Alessandro et. al., 2017).

In this sense, accessibility prompts to re-frame the *right to the city* issues into a broader habitat/ecological/political debate, and to build bridges between reflections on the ethic dimensions of spatial, social and economic urban conditions (Chan, 2019; Fainstein, 2010; Soja, 2010).

When interpreted as a *service* that cities must offer to the largest extent of people in relation to their different capacities and abilities, accessibility fosters a deep renewal of urban regeneration policies and interventions, a renovated pact between a variety of disciplines and tools, and a radical shift towards a *people-centred idea of smartness*.

The development of a Smart City actually implies a continuous process of innovation, which in addition to supplying highly technological services and products, should mainly improve citizens' quality of life. The challenge that administrations are called to undertake is to address public policies to the treatment of real needs, through the monitoring of behaviours and demands, and the direct involvement of people in city government. In this perspective, citizens are no longer understood as passive sensors or users, but as fundamental actors who contribute to the building of new knowledge infrastructures and services.

However, despite outstanding reasons for a committed *accessibility turn*, progress towards a widespread and coordinated treatment of these issues is slow. Under the pressure of the just claims of people with disabilities, *accessibility for all* has become a recurring slogan, but planning tools and processes, as well as spatial interventions and the implementation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) support, still struggle to get rid of the extraordinariness of solutions defined for specific targets of users. In fact, taking accessibility as the core of inclusive environment and design means addressing not only people with (actual or potential) disabilities, but many other forms of social, economic, spatial exclusion that can affect everyone, at different stages of their life. Nonetheless, difficulty remains to build more effective synergies in the ordinary making of urban planning and policies.

Based on research developed at the University of Trieste (Italy), the article analyses this difficulty and outlines proposals to go beyond. Specifically, the second section focuses on multidisciplinary debate and the variety of inputs that accessibility gives to city regeneration. Taking the Italian region Friuli Venezia Giulia as its main study context, the third section questions recent tools and policies, in order to show their level of innovation, as well as the obstacles that oppose their more effective integration. In the fourth section outputs from the on-going research, *Proactive City. The City as a Gym of Active*

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