

POSTMODERNIST MANTRA: WELLBEING FOR ALL CITIZENS. HOW FRIENDLY IS MY NEIGHBORHOOD TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

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Abstract

People with disabilities have the right, as all other people, to a habitual and healthy life. They belong to the community and they are entitled to a meaningful existence. But are these assertions accurate? How often can we detect uneven surfaces, correct dimensions or grades of the sidewalks or the accurate positions of the ramps? The use of access dedicated to the people with disabilities (and not only for them) is a daily exercise taken for granted by all the inhabitants of an area. A thorough analysis and a systematic identification of the challenges that the people with disabilities are facing on a daily basis was imposed after a period of over one year of observation completed by a vast number of photos taken for so many circumstances identified as barriers for all citizens. The community space taken into consideration is a neighbourhood from Iași and the awareness of the authors derived from their interest for the people of third and fourth age, as well as disabled people, with whom they interact within the Association AFECT from the city mentioned above. Taken into account the systematic aging process, by exposing the perceptions and attitudes of people with disabilities in their daily confrontation within the public spaces we tried to clarify the dilemmas with regards to the limited or/and inadequate access and, by extension, the key challenges to their wellbeing.

Keywords: *access, disability, inclusiveness, public spaces, urban planning, wellbeing.*

1. BACKGROUND

A good, healthy and accessible environment appropriated for all the citizens, inclusive and welcoming public areas for all ages and all citizens, including for those with disabilities, represent the guarantee of a healthy society. An inclusive infrastructure must comprise inclusive public spaces for all as well as an adequate city design, with priority towards people with disabilities (Patrick & McKinnon, 2022). The

presence of ramps and areas with easy access for different social categories such as disabled people, elderly people or parents with children in strollers, ensures positive aspects, general wellbeing and good mental health.

A series of semantic demarcations ensure the accurate use of the terms when we are talking about disability. It is very important to understand the phenomena of disability as well as the nuances that can induce stigma (Goffman, 1990) and perpetuate an erroneous approach of the term disability.

According to a guide produced by the World Health Organization, approximatively one out of six people worldwide have a form of disability (WHO, 2025). This number will definitely grow as we are witnessing a bigger life expectancy and due to that fact that people with disabilities present extensive ranges of illnesses that imply constant care. However, we have to be aware that "environmental barriers impacting the pedestrian environment are seen as a cause of disablement." (Eisenberg et al., 2020)

The social model of disability approaches it as a difference, without bringing into dialogue the notions of good or bad. This model is underlining the lack of opportunities and discriminatory behaviours that are limiting movement, circulation and, implicitly, the wellbeing of people with disabilities (Martin, 2013). An extremely important aspect for the wellbeing of all people, not only for those with disabilities, is the presence of urban green spaces and their access to these spaces. The contact with nature as well as the benefits of some microclimates that reduce the air temperature and the urban noise (Madureira et al., 2015) represent so many advantages for the citizens from the neighbourhoods where the blocks of flats are

predominant. Getting out of their homes, people with disabilities can connect to the exterior world and can enjoy their time together with family members and friends (Perry et al., 2021).

The accessibility of people with disabilities is ensured by a series of changes regarding the environment that can be adapted and respected by all citizens. It is important to acknowledge that people have a wide range of abilities and interact with the environment and the public spaces in very complex ways (Lid & Solvang, 2016).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper presents the outcomes of a qualitative study aiming to evaluate the public infrastructure from a specific area from Iași, in order to identify the obstacles that people with disabilities, as well as other categories of people, face every day on the infrastructure of the public spaces of a specific area, and to provide recommendations for improvements. The study was conducted over a period of eight months, from October 2024 to May 2025, and took into scrutiny the area Nicolina. The analysis monitored the way the people with disabilities interact with the urban area they live in as well as how they interrelate with other citizens. The research was focused upon the aspect of the wellbeing of people with disabilities and the results led to the identification of several other social categories whose degrees of wellbeing greatly depend on the infrastructure of the public spaces of their neighbourhood.

We have used as main method the observation (Cojocaru, 2010; Tetley, 2013; Watts, 2010) for a period of over one year, followed by a thorough mapping of the delimited analysed space of the neighbourhood. The authors took also approximately a number of 150 photos as representative diaries which captured the degree of deterioration of the sidewalks and pavements, the significant differences regarding the border heights, the undersized sidewalks or the complete lack of sidewalks, the absences of ramps or ramps with incorrect inclinations or various dangerous degree inclinations, improper for human use. Another very important aspect took into

consideration was the irregular parking strategy of the inhabitants of the area and the total disrespect for the legislation in use for this matter

The qualitative analysis was completed by a series of interviews (Alejandro & Knott, 2022; Knott et al., 2022; Maryudi, & Fisher, 2020). The researchers employed the purposive sampling and took the interviews in the public space of the selected neighbourhood. The interviews were registered with the phone; the consented form for the use of the information was also recorded on the phone. The role of the questions was to allow the conversation to flow naturally and the researchers modified their queries to suit the respondent's experiences.

The study participants were the following: eight people with various physical disabilities, five caregivers, members of the family who take care of people with major deficiencies (people with mild, severe and mixed dementia, as well as people with Alzheimer's disease), and six old people aged 68 up to 89 years old. In order to expand the analysis, we took into considerations the answers of 6 parents with children in baby strollers as well as four drivers, all residents of the investigated neighbourhood. The demographics illustrated the following: for the first group of respondents we had 79% women and 21% men, and for the second group we had 45% women and 55% men. As for the age sets, for the first group the ages varied from 35 up to 89 years old, and for the second group the ages were between 23 up to 44 years old. The diversity of the participants brought a rich perspective upon the topic of the analysis as all respondents had different backgrounds, experiences and concerns. The generational differences and the gender roles contributed with their own input to a valuable depiction of the social context of a neighbourhood.

The questions asked aimed to clarify the following aspects:

How does the general public perceive the discourse regarding the wellbeing of people with disabilities?

Is the public infrastructure from a neighbourhood of an important city adequate for the people with disabilities?

Which are the attitudes of the residents from the neighbourhood, of the pedestrians as well as

those of the drivers towards the people with disabilities (and not only for that category of people)?

From the total fifteen questions addressed by the investigators, we used a number of three open-ended questions towards the completion of the inquiry, offering to the respondents the opportunity to express their own views and opinions with regards to their interaction with the urban environment as well as their wellbeing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysed sample of people was heterogeneous, which gave us the possibility to depict a thorough representation of the notion of wellbeing seen by the disabled people themselves as well as by the other citizens. Taking into consideration the complexity of this relationship between disability and wellbeing (Campbell & Stramondo, 2017), we had to comprehend and examine a category of people which should use the public space in the same way we do: freely. However, we had to take into consideration the fact that people with disabilities is not a category that can use the public sidewalks and roads whenever and however they want, as their circulation and participation to the urban environment is often hindered (Lid & Solvang, 2016). In most of the cases these people depend upon their caregivers and they are getting out of their homes for specific purposes: to go to a medical appointment, to different institutions (banks, public libraries, administrative bodies), or shopping. However, "access is still a challenge due to numerous barriers including availability, accessibility and affordability of the full range of quality health-care services" (UN, 2019).

For the goal of this investigation we had to observe and interview these people during their spare time and this was not a very simple exercise. We also experienced situations when some people with disabilities refused to answer or to give course to our endeavour, which made us consider the interviews of other categories connected to the previous one, such as caregivers, older people with mild physical disabilities as well and some residents from the neighbourhood

with disabled relatives that were willing to answer our questions.

After the analysis of the observation notes, the photos and the transcription of the interviews we were able to identify a series of recurrent themes such as inadequacy of public infrastructure, lack of accessibility, of supporting facilities such as curbed/dropped ramps, and unclear road indications for people using assistive devices such as wheelchairs or scooters on the public roads.

The examined public space

The area under scrutiny is delimited by the streets Petre Țuțea, Bradului, Minervei and Orientului. The other examined streets within the neighbourhood are Minervei, Sălcilor, Egalității, Gheorghe Doja, Cireșica and Pantelimon Halipa. These streets contain block of flats with a height regime of four stories, as well as some blocks with six and eight stories, bordering the road Nicolina. There are also some small clusters of houses between the blocks, respectively approximatively 25 houses. The residents of this area have access to a series of institutions, shops and clinics such as: Nicolina Neighbourhood Centre, a public library, four dental clinics, a medical office, four kindergartens, a day care centre, a secondary school, a technical College, a private art school, a bicycle centre, three pharmacies, three smaller supermarkets, five small grocery shops, two shops selling meat products, two fast-food shops, two tax collection centres for the apartment complexes, a store selling metallic doors, a shop selling second-hand home appliances, five beauty centres, three veterinary offices, two sewing points, a point for central heating service, a confectionary laboratory, two churches (Orthodox and Pentecostal), a complex with various companies from a former unit of wood manufacturing and a car wash.

The analysed urban space revealed an important number of medical centres, institutions and shops ensuring the necessities of all residents from the maintenance, supply and expenditures that should be quite easy to be accessed by all inhabitants. However, the daily experiences of people with disabilities, as well as those of their caregivers within their own neighbourhood, do not ensure an inclusive space with suitable accessibility (Patrick & Mckinnon, 2022) and

hinder their wellbeing. Understanding the universal design implies a conception of disability (Lid, 2014).

On Bradului Street there are several blocks with studio flats, looking like hostels, where a lot of old people as well as people with various disabilities reside. These constructions were erected during the communist regime and used by the construction companies from those times as rooms offered to their workers who migrated from the countryside to the city, for a better life. In fact, these were temporary dwellings as, during those times, a bigger apartment was easy to be obtained after an increase of the family. Nowadays these studio apartments, with a surface of approximately 18 m², are resided by old people and people with disabilities, lured by the smaller bills for heating and energy (as the rooms are very small). People with disabilities are facing barriers daily and disabled children, as well, are impacted in various ways, from limitations to attend schools and/or various social events (McAndrew et al., 2021).

However, a shift had occurred during the last 10 years, and a lot of students are currently living in these rooms, as the rent is more affordable than in other areas. Nonetheless, these old civil buildings do not have disabled ramps or elevators and are not suited for people with disabilities. The adaptation of the civil buildings and the urban space to the individual needs of people with disabilities is a must, but still a dream. There is only one exception for one entrance, as there is a ramp erected by a dweller of the block. We have to understand that people with disabilities are defined also in terms of relationships: not only with their relatives and caregivers but also with the rest of the citizens in the heterogeneous network of people who inhabit a specific area (Winance, 2016).

Another important aspect of this area is the absence of some access on the sidewalks, respectively on the streets Minervei corner with Petre Țuțea, or on street Sălciilor crossing street Gheorghe Doja. This is a common urban infrastructure and a vital aspect for all people, not only for only one group. "People with disabilities are part of human diversity, and although often referred to as a single population, they are a very diverse group of people" (WHO, 2022). A caregiver

with a person in wheelchair has to plan very carefully the path they will take, as they would not want to make unnecessary and sometimes dangerous moves on the roads. With regards to the accessibility, the law states that the physical environment needs to be adapted via different measures and adjustments to the needs of the people with handicap (MMANPIS, 2006). However, some of the sidewalks of this area are obstacles for the mobility and cannot ensure the so desired accessibility, and respectively, a full participation to the social life. It is paramount for everybody, especially for old people and people with disabilities, to reach and use places and activities of interest without barriers (Gaglione et al., 2019).

Goal 3 calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all people, including for those with disabilities. "Health and well-being are preconditions of a full and productive life for persons with disabilities because one's health and well-being affects one's ability to participate fully in work, in education and in the community" (UN, 2019). Disability inclusion is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals taking into account that health for all is a priority and safer roads represent an intricate aspect of the public health interventions targeting the persons with disabilities (WHO, 2023).

As we have mentioned in the beginning, not only the people with disabilities are disadvantaged by these occurrences, but also the old people, parents, especially mothers with children in buggies, who encounter the same difficulties when crossing a busy street or when they want to ascent or descend a curb or dropped ramp. The access is also obstructed for old people (or people of all ages) with shopping strollers. Therefore, the inclusive infrastructure eludes some categories of citizens and the physical barriers are still present (WHO, 2025).

Another issue worth mentioning is the poorly design of the sidewalks, which are very high in some areas and completely destroyed by the cars that are parked every night (and sometimes even during the days) in these areas. The pathways present uneven surfaces; some are undersized, too narrow, they present holes with various dimensions and severe cracks. There is a lack of supporting facilities such as accesses, ramps or

cross-slopes, and unclear, or missing, road traffic indications. There are no signs for the diminishing of the speed limits, especially in the vicinity of the kindergartens and schools. The sidewalks and the pedestrian crossing/crosswalk are not adapted to the needs of the people with disabilities. One can encounter destroyed borders on street Sălciilor, Egalității, Petre Țuțea, and the examples can go on. People with disabilities are excluded from the everyday, urban life due to the presence of several barriers they have to encounter, respectively physical, attitudinal and social (WHO & WB, 2011). The general attitude of the citizens can be classified as indifferent towards the rights of people with disabilities, although some of the respondents were aware that nobody can predict a disability and therefore were more inclined towards a protective perspective.

As the examined area has very few parking spaces, some cars are parked directly on the sidewalks. The drivers do not respect the pedestrian rights and they park their vehicles on green spaces, on sidewalks, and in front of the access areas for the sidewalks.

Nicolina neighbourhood has also a number of four kindergartens, three of them are public and one is private. The private kindergarten is situated approximately in the middle of the area, on a two-way street, Street Gheorghe Doja no.10. In the morning the respective street (as well as the intersection of the streets Egalității with Gheorghe Doja) is jammed with the parents' cars getting their children to the kindergarten. Although this traffic congestion takes about 40 minutes in the morning and approximately 30 minutes in the afternoon, it is a real challenge for the pedestrians who have to walk in this area. The area is crowded because in the vicinity of the kindergarten there is also a public secondary school and the students are brought to school by private vehicles.

Advantages and disadvantages of the studied neighbourhood

The analysis underlined a series of advantages and disadvantages of the examined area. Some of the benefits are:

- one-way streets, which are useful for the huge number of cars as the streets are quite narrow and packed with parked cars on the sides;

- generous sidewalks for the pedestrians (especially on Sălciilor Street the width is of approximately 6 meters);
- paved sidewalks: although it can be considered a design advantage, it is also a disadvantage, as the paves are not always aligned and can represent a danger, especially for the old and frail people;
- several green spaces: two parks and several children for children accessible for all residents and equipped with benches that can be accessed by all people – however the entrances are not adapted for the disabled people.

Among the disadvantages we can list the following:

- non-inclusive sidewalks: people with disabilities, people with shopping strollers and parents with children in pushchairs cannot properly use the sidewalks and the dedicated ramps;
- lack of equality especially for the people with disabilities. The poorly maintained sidewalks, the cars parked in front of the access areas of the sidewalks/ramps as well as the lack of access areas to the sidewalks represent so many obstacles, very challenging for this category of people. The restriction of motion represents a serious threat to the freedom of movement;
- critical limitations not only for the people with disabilities but also for the other categories mentioned above. The lack of lifts or ramps that can make easier the access in the buildings with flats are limiting the movements, confining a lot of people into their homes for very long period of times;
- threats for all the pedestrians, as the badly maintained sidewalks as well as the streets represent true hazards. For the disabled as well as the old people, a simple stone dislocated from its place or a crack in the pavement can lead to falls and severe injuries/fractures, that imply medical interventions/operations and long and costly recuperation. The same is applicable for every other category of people and age using these areas, denying the right to wellbeing for all residents. "Understanding the current status of work towards improving accessible pedestrian infrastructure can call

attention to the gaps in the process of planning and implementation” (Eisenberg et al., 2020).

One of the main troubling aspects for the disabled people is represented by the erroneous parking of cars. The rules referring to parking on the public domain are clearly specified in the Emergency Ordinance no. 195/2002 for the circulation on public roads. According to article 72, it is forbidden for cars to occupy the sidewalks if they block the passage of the pedestrians. The law underlines that the sidewalks are destined, mainly, for the circulation of the pedestrians, and the parking is allowed only if there is enough space for the path of the pedestrians. However, a lot of drivers park their cars on the sidewalks without a respect for the above-mentioned Ordinance. Their overall attitude is driven only by the personal interest: the cars parked on the sidewalks, on green spaces and in front of the accessible ramps or cross-slopes are so many reasons to prevent people from safety, connectivity, and inclusivity, being a threat to wellbeing.

This deficit of parking spaces represents the motivation for the drivers but the pedestrians must not be deprived of their right to walk on their dedicated spaces. People with disabilities are excluded from the everyday, urban life due to the presence of several barriers they have to encounter, respectively physical, attitudinal and social (WHO & WB, 2011).

Parking is also forbidden on the green spaces and can impose sanctions similar to those applicable for parking on the sidewalks. Yet, some drivers identify any space, no matter the type, in order to park their vehicles. The green spaces and parks are dedicated to protect the urban space and to offer some relaxed time to the residents. The contact with nature through parks can enhance spiritual health (meaning in life), as well as mental and social health and contribute to social wellbeing (Townsend et al., 2015). Yet, the smallest green spaces are overrun by cars. The vehicles are also parked on the curb/dropped ramps and this, in time, leads to the deterioration of the sidewalks as well as curbs and/or the cross-slopes. Moreover, some drivers park their cars on whole area of the sidewalks, completely blocking the access of the pedestrians. Although these actions represent violations of the rules of

use of the public domain, they are not sanctioned unless the citizens stand up and notify the local police.

A less known aspect is that the local police cannot dispose the towing of an illegally parked vehicle during the weekends as the contracted companies do not work on Saturdays and Sundays. This assertion was declared by a several police officers from the dispatch centre of the local police contacted by the authors of this article during weekends with regards to erroneous parked cars. Due to the fact that there are not towing cars during these two days, the police cannot help the pedestrians in their attempt to use the public domain. The impact of illegal parking upon the accessibility, and respectively, upon the freedom of circulation of all people is huge. Taking into account that the supervision and control of the circulation of all vehicles is done by the traffic police, a more comprehensive set of measures must be implemented to avoid such disturbances the whole time, not only for segments of the week.

In coping with various life circumstances, people with disabilities should preserve their well-being and mental health and try to value themselves as much as possible. This means that they should avoid isolation and behave as all other people: they should be able to walk whenever they want, to have access to all institutions, supermarkets, shops, parks and leisure areas. Disability inclusion is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goals and represents a global health priority (WHO, 2023).

Another aspect that is worth underlining is the awareness-raising as well as the change of the attitudes on the rights of people with disabilities aiming to foster respect for their dignity, to combat stereotypes and prejudices and to promote their capabilities and contributions (UN, 2007, p.8).

The public space of the neighbourhood viewed by its users

Some of the respondents were more explicit in their answers and others were less explanatory. However, we extracted a lot of elements of interests from the majority of the replies such as “preferred routes,” “visual elements,” “favourite activities,” “leisure events,” “accessible routes,”

"pedestrian access routes," and "friendly public places."

I am fortunate to have my mother with me all the time. I would not be able to get out of the house without her support as I have to use the wheelchair in all circumstances (M, 35 y.o.).

Sometimes I feel like a prisoner in my own flat. I am confined in a wheelchair and I am also confined in my house. It is so frustrating ... (M, 52 y.o.).

We have a park nearby my apartment and it is a very nicely done area, with nice benches, however the entrances are not friendly for the people with disabilities (W, 62 y.o.).

We would like to get out more often, just to see other people, to feel the air and to enjoy the sun in summer and the fresh air during winter ... but it is not a very simple thing to do. We have to plan very carefully the itinerary and sometimes we encounter cars parked on the sidewalks. It is like we are invisible, or simply annoying (W, 48 y.o. & M, 55 y.o.).

There are a lot of shops in our neighbourhood and they do have adequate entrances for people in wheelchairs. We just have to arrive there ... but it is easier to be said than done (W, 65 y.o.).

The present analysis revealed that people with disabilities, elderly people as well as other categories of residents from a neighbourhood have fewer opportunities to get out of their homes and meet with their peers or others. Therefore, the general access to various institutions, NGO's, sidewalks, roads is sometimes unmanageable. The research provides a lot of information with respect to this category of people and calls for a change not only in urban space but also in residents' attitudes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study outlines some shortages that associate people with disabilities and the urban space as well as some benefits. The findings of this analysis indicate that roads and sidewalk infrastructure is, until now, inadequate for most

of the people, including for those with disabilities. Although we do have a comprehensive legal framework for the disabled people in Romania, the enforcing authorities still lack important knowledge in the matter. "Built environment practice and academia around built environment practices does not have a history of understanding disability, or human rights legislation pertaining to build environment accessibility, or people with disabilities' lived experience of neighbourhood accessibility" (Jackson, 2018).

Some of the most cherished benefits identified by the respondents were the presence of caretakers (usually family members) and their ability to identify the right pathways within the neighbourhood. "Taking a stroll," "getting out of the house" and "being able to enjoy my life" are the replies that indicate that wellbeing can be achieved by all people, no matter the disability, via simple and ordinary actions. Improving the distribution of urban places, the services and the usability of the paths, will lead to an increase in the quality of life (Gaglione et al., 2019).

Among the limitations of this study, we can mention the moderate sample size. A study that would take into consideration several neighbourhoods and more subjects would provide more comprehensive data and valuable insights upon the relationship between disability and wellbeing. Another aspect that could be taken into consideration for a further analysis consists in involving urban planners, designers and civil engineers in such a framework.

An important aspect of this study is the personal reflection of the authors. "Dismantling barriers must build on an understanding of the particular person who experiences the concrete barriers" (LID, 2014). We can all make small gestures to respect the right of people with disabilities and remove the obstacles they might encounter: we can (and should) park the cars only in the parking areas and definitely not on the sidewalks, we should not throw on the ground plastic papers or wrappers that can provoke accidents, we can clean the snow during winter from the area surrounding our entrance to the flats. All these are simple and rewarding activities that can ensure safety for all residents and can have a huge impact on the wellbeing of the doers as well as on the wellbeing of the users.

It is also important to underline that the consideration of all inhabitants with regards to their neighbourhood should be encouraged, taken into consideration, and put into practice in order to ensure a healthy and happy life for all. A close cooperation between planners, municipality representatives, researchers and citizens for larger and continuous obstruction-free pathways is paramount to ensure an effective communication with regards to the multiple benefits of all citizens offered by rightfully adapted urban spaces.

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