

Research Project Industry Summary: Managing accessibility of public spaces

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This is an industry summary of a study undertaken to investigate accessibility of public spaces for people with disability (PWD) in Australia.

Key Words: disability, participation, accessibility, built environment, universal design.

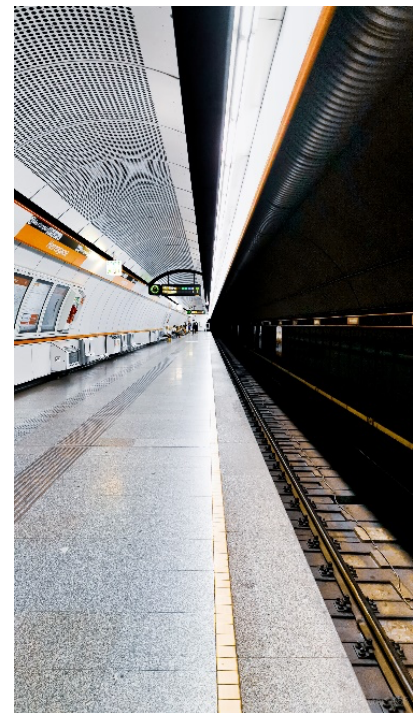
PUBLIC SPACE - Public space may be defined broadly as any space that can be used by a member of the public, including facilities such as sports and leisure precincts, parks and gardens, arts and cultural centres, urban infrastructure, transport hubs, healthcare facilities, and shopping facilities (Tibbalds, 1992). While some public spaces may be purpose built (such as a sports stadium), the cross-purposing of spaces (for instance holding concerts in sports venues), the interconnectedness of public spaces, the wide range of space users, and the continual revolution of vendors, events, and uses of the space create unique challenges to managing accessibility within these spaces for those with disabilities that fall outside of the physical modification of space.

Background

The importance of making public spaces more accessible has been highlighted by recent public inquiries and poor experiences of PWD in transport hubs and other locations. The need for accessibility of public spaces is becoming more widely recognised due to several developments. These include a global aging population, public inquiries and the development of public policy drawing attention to the rights of PWD, and coverage of negative experiences of PWD when using public spaces.

While the need for accessibility is well recognised, accessibility does not always meet the diverse range of needs and accommodate the limitations people may have. As such, improving accessibility of public spaces for PWD can be complex for businesses to manage.

This project aimed to understand the processes and systems used by operators of public spaces to facilitate accessibility of public space. This was achieved through a systematic literature review and interviews with public space operators.





Methods

A project Advisory Group was formed consisting of key stakeholders with lived experience of disability, or those who had relevant experience in designing accessibility features. This group was recruited and involved in the development of search terms and interview questions, identification of key businesses/organisations to approach for participation, and interpretation of results.

The systematic literature review was conducted using a series of searches in Scopus, CINAHL, Business Source Premier and PsychINFO, and followed the PRISMA protocol (Shamseer et al. 2015). The review focused on the methods, processes, and practices employed by organisations who manage public spaces to provide more accessibility. The timeframe of records was not limited, though the review was limited to records that were in English.

Subsequently, researchers interviewed 15 representatives of 13 public space owners/operators (including sporting facilities, cultural institutions, and local government) to explore how they manage accessibility in public spaces.

Interview data was analysed using thematic analysis.

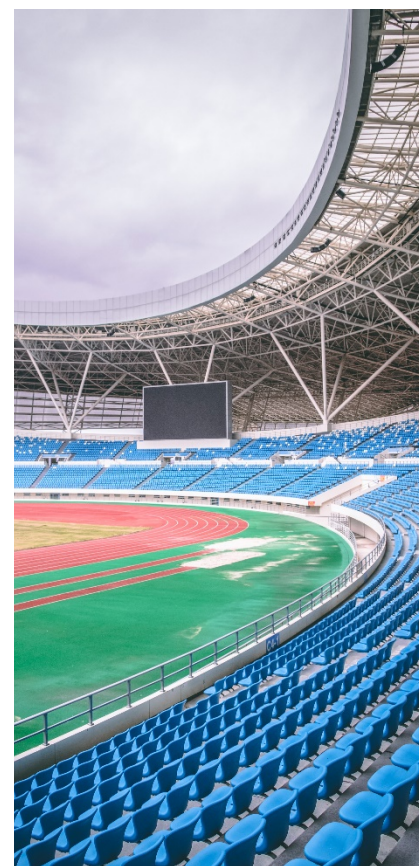
What did we learn?

Literature Findings

From the initial 1098 records identified, 41 were determined to be appropriate for full text review, of these a list of 15 relevant articles were included in the final review. These were drawn from a range of disciplines and countries, and with varying focus on particular public spaces, and particular groups of people with disability. Broadly, the literature highlighted the absence of several systemic practices from the management of accessibility in public spaces, including poor consultation, a lack of awareness and training, and a lack of auditing/measurement of accessibility (e.g., Heaven & Goulding, 2002). Strategies that were in place tended to focus on aspects of the built environment rather than social and cultural elements of facilitating accessibility (e.g., McGrath, 2008). In the case of Olympic cities, legislation was seen as crucial to embedding accessibility in the longer term across a city's infrastructure (McGillivray et al, 2018).

Interview Findings

These themes were reflected in the interview responses from public space operators, who were largely focused on physical accessibility and relied upon siloed strategies such as design, rostering extra staff, providing training and guidance, regulating others' use of the space, and furnishing equipment. Integrated systems approaches were limited, with many participants reporting



reactive or “one-off” responses to events due to the variable nature of space use. Overall, the findings of the interviews were grouped into subthemes relating to the following themes:

Theme 1: How is accessibility in public spaces managed?	Theme 2: Facilitators to managing accessibility in public spaces.	Theme 3: Barriers to managing accessibility in public spaces.
<p>Event-based management: Due to the variable nature of events and associated variability in demographics of space users, accessibility was often managed on an event-by-event basis.</p>	<p>Regulation and guidance: Having organisational policies or guidelines specific to accessibility within the space facilitated a systematic approach to accessibility.</p>	<p>Built and physical environment: Accessibility features were confined by the physical parameters of the spaces managed.</p>
<p>Design of facilities and spaces: A prominent component of accessibility improvement was designing/modifying permanent structures or aspects of the physical/digital space.</p>	<p>Resources: Financial and physical resources allocated to addressing accessibility issues were frequently cited by participants as a barrier.</p>	<p>Organisational issues: Financial constraints, organisational priorities, coordination of services, entrenched views and stigma all posed challenges to addressing accessibility within organisations.</p>
<p>Customer service: Customer services approaches included providing training for staff, developing policies and Disability Action Plans, and public education.</p>	<p>Design of facilities and space: Facilities that were designed with accessibility in mind created an “aspirational” organisational culture focused on a desire to maintain accessibility and inclusion.</p>	<p>Diversity of customers and stakeholders: The fluid nature of the use of public spaces and the diversity of the stakeholders and space users made unified approaches to accessibility difficult.</p>
<p>Regulation of third parties: Incorporating accessibility requirements in permits, event manuals and venue hire agreements to create an overall approach to accessibility among stakeholders providing services in the public space.</p>	<p>Commitment: The role that leadership’s commitment played in facilitating accessibility management was discussed by all participants.</p>	<p>Policy/legal: Although guidelines, legislation and standards provided a starting point, participants also noted limitations to their usefulness in thinking beyond basic compliance to meet the diverse needs of public space users.</p>
<p>Awareness and promotion: Accessibility options were unutilised when intended users did not know about them. Promotion was done through websites, advertising, and word of mouth.</p>	<p>Drawing on lived experience: Incorporating lived experience into processes designed to identify issues and propose solutions for accessibility provided valuable insight for participants.</p>	
	<p>Integrated processes: Strong relationships with surrounding stakeholders responsible for transportation into and out of the public space was key to facilitating measures that addressed accessibility into and out of the public space.</p>	



What next?

Management Systems Frameworks as Integrated Solutions

A possible integrated solution that emerged in the analysis is the development of Management Systems frameworks (MSF). The potential adaptation of MSF for accessibility management would mean that accessibility could be managed in a manner consistent with Management Systems that organisations are already using – accessibility strategies would not be ad-hoc “add-ons” but be integrated and consistent with existing management systems. This arrangement would harness the recommendations from the literature regarding what processes should be used and embed them in a structure that has already been shown to be effective for improving the management of complex objectives across organisations, such as safety, quality, and environmental management (e.g., see ISO45001; ISO9001; ISO14001).

Recommendations and future directions

Managing accessibility of public spaces could be improved with more systematic approaches that document plans and facilitate review and improvement, consistent with existing frameworks for managing other complex objectives such as quality and safety. Example recommendations include:

- Broaden understanding of space user needs and environmental impacts on accessibility.
- Prioritise meaningful incorporation of the views of those with lived experience of disability in identifying accessibility needs, recommending solutions, and evaluating outcomes.
- Systematically evaluate the acceptability and usefulness of accessibility measures and outcomes from the perspective of a wide range of stakeholders.
- Increase communication between those who are working in this space to promote the development and discussion of ideas and challenges.
- Involve leadership in awareness and promotion of accessibility as a human right (rather than a customer experience issue or a risk to be managed) within the organisation.
- Develop organisational policies which define accessibility and expectations for addressing it. Incorporate these policies into third-party agreements.
- Put procedures in place to evaluate needs, implement findings, and assess outcomes of accessibility measures.
- Refine and develop legislation that enshrines accessibility as a human right in public spaces.

About the project

This project was funded with seed funding from the UNSW Disability Innovation institute (DIU). The research team comprises: A/Prof Carlo Caponecchia, Dr Elizabeth Mayland and Dr Vanessa Huron.

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