

# Momentary versus sequential accessibility and usability, achieving universal design through storytelling

Author: Jonas E. Andersson, architect SAR/ MSA, associate professor

Affiliation: Urban Studies, Malmö University

Email: [jonas.andersson@mau.se](mailto:jonas.andersson@mau.se)

## Abstract:

Since 2015, the Swedish disability policy promotes a universally designed built environment as an ideal to reach for future building and physical planning. Breaking with an almost 50-year tradition of arguing for an accessible and usable built environment, the concept of universal design has come to supersede the old twin concept of accessibility and usability, in the following AU. Latently, this change may refer to the dual face of the AU concept: When programming AU for the built environment, architects or other similar professions focus on the identification of momentary obstacles for horizontal or vertical access to the inside of the building from the outside, or vice versa. However, while using the built environment, users focus on an accessible and usable pathway from the inside of the building to the outside, or vice versa.

Common for both actors are the strive to create a series of horizontal or vertical movements that allow for accessing or egressing the building. Active in this thinking also lies an associational approach towards the built environment by the users, who expect a sequential type of AU. On the other hand, architects tend to use a perceptual approach to identify potential conflicts in the usage of the built environment, which results in a momentary identification of AU (Rapoport, 1978). In a similar manner, architects often tend to act as non-disabled proxies for potential users with disabilities, while users interact with the built environment with their disabilities and the level of AU that is provided. To narrow the gap between the two players, the traditional way of teaching AU to architects, engineers and other designers has been to implement full-scale try-outs with students with mostly fully abled bodies simulating disabilities by blocking sensory information and using assistive devices like wheelchairs, canes and rollers.

There is a logical error in such training since skill in using assistive devices as a prolongation of the individual body is reduced to not being valuable. Problems in the realisation of AU in the built environment might be attributable to this lacune in knowledge and ultimately discriminatory approach towards people with disabilities. An opposite way of teaching AU for architects, engineers and other designers would be to combine the experiment with using assistive devices with listening to how people with disabilities experience appropriate and poor AU, thus, promoting an aggregated knowledge.

Key words: accessibility, usability, spatial experiences, disabilities, abled body-ness.