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# **Beyond the Neo-Spartan Standard: Using Art and Innovation to Design the Inclusive City**

***Marina Roxana Corneliu***

## **Abstract**

**This article argues that inclusive urban and cultural design requires more than physical accessibility. Drawing on the author's experience founding and producing the B-Inclusive Festival in Bucharest, Romania, it examines how disability-led cultural events can shift societal affective responses to non-normative bodies, producing perceptual change that persists after the event. The article introduces the concept of the vulnerability spectrum, proposes a critique of what the author terms the Neo-Spartan standard in urban and cultural design, and presents B-Inclusive Festival as a working model for a different kind of city: one that anticipates human diversity rather than accommodating it as an afterthought.**

**Keywords: *inclusive design, disability-led culture, affective change, universal design, vulnerability spectrum, B-Inclusive Festival***

***October 2025, Bucharest. A woman with Down syndrome steps to the front of the stage. She performs with an authority and precision that makes the audience forget, briefly, that they came with any expectations at all. The room goes quiet in a way I have not heard before at a cultural event: not the polite silence of tolerance, but the***

*alert silence of people whose frameworks have just become insufficient.*

**That moment of insufficiency is what B-Inclusive Festival was designed to produce. And it is, I have come to understand, the most politically significant thing a cultural event can do.**

## **The City Was Not Built for You**

**Most cities, and most cultural spaces within them, were designed around a body that does not actually exist. The perfectly able, permanently healthy, neuro typical adult who never ages, never breaks, never varies. Call it what you like. I call it the Neo-Spartan standard: the residue of a century in which states measured human worth through the lens of productivity and military utility, treating fragility, neuro-diversity, and physical variation as problems to be managed rather than realities to be anticipated.**

**This is not ancient history. It lives in the height of a kerb, in the acoustics of a concert hall designed for one type of auditory processing, in the absence of tactile navigation in a museum that calls itself inclusive. The built environment encodes a set of assumptions about which bodies belong, and those assumptions were never neutral. They were political decisions we have inherited without examining them.**

**Universal Design emerged precisely to challenge this inheritance. But there is a dimension of the problem that ramps and captions cannot reach: the affective one. Even when a space is physically accessible, the cultural atmosphere within it may not be. People with disabilities are welcomed as recipients of good design, not as its**

**authors. As audience members, not as artists. As objects of care, not as creators of experience.**

## **Culture Is Not the Theatre. It Is Everything.**

**Before we can design inclusive cultural spaces, we need to be honest about what culture actually is. It is not only the theatre or the museum. It is the coffee we drink with friends on a terrace that was never designed for a wheelchair. It is the street we walk down to touch the facade of a historical building, or simply to be in the presence of a city's memory. It is the history we tell, and the history we do not tell. It is the sport we play in public squares, and the experiences we transform into the stories we carry for the rest of our lives.**

**Culture is the texture of everyday life. And if that texture is designed only for a fraction of the people who inhabit a city, then inclusion remains a performance, not a reality. The inclusive city is not built through legislation alone. It is built through the accumulated quality of ordinary shared experiences, and those experiences are shaped by who is allowed to be their author.**

## **When the Stage Disappears: B-Inclusive Festival 2025**

**This is the problem B-Inclusive Festival set out to address. Founded under Better Inclusion, a youth-led NGO established in Romania in 2025, the festival's first edition took place across multiple Bucharest venues from 3 to 5 October 2025, with the support of the Municipality of Bucharest through ARCUB, the Ministry of Culture, and the University of Bucharest. Over 500 participants engaged across three days of theatre, exhibitions, workshops, and community**

**events, all designed around a single structural premise: persons with disabilities as primary artists, creators, and narrators.**

**What we observed is this: when that premise holds, the boundary between creator and spectator becomes unstable. Audience members who arrived with established frameworks for engaging with art found those frameworks insufficient. The person on stage was not an object of care or inspiration. They were the author of an aesthetic experience. That dissolution of the creator-spectator boundary produces something that outlasts the event itself: a different affective relationship to disability, carried out of the room and into the city.**

**Participants leave carrying a different perception than the one they arrived with. Not because they were lectured. Not because they were asked to be empathetic. But because the design of the experience made the usual distance impossible to maintain.**

## **Designing for the Vulnerability Spectrum**

**The principle underlying all of this is one I have come to call the vulnerability spectrum. No one is simply normal. Bodily and neurological experience exists on a continuum shaped by age, illness, accident, environment, and history. The person who does not need a ramp today may need one in twenty years. The person who finds loud spaces overwhelming is not exceptional; they are early.**

**Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, one of the founders of disability studies, calls the imaginary standard body the normate. The normate is a fiction. And when we design cities around a fiction, we produce environments that fail most people, eventually. What B-Inclusive Festival contributes is an experiential proof: that when disability**

**leads, the result is not a narrower aesthetic but a richer one. Tactile exhibitions that invite touch rather than prohibit it. Sonic architecture that makes auditory difference an aesthetic feature. Shared spaces where having a coffee together is the point, not a side effect.**

**Accessibility, treated as a creative constraint rather than a compliance requirement, generates innovation. It always has. Subtitles were designed for the deaf and became indispensable to anyone watching television in a noisy room. Designing for the vulnerability spectrum produces cities and cultures that work better for everyone.**

## **What Comes Next: B-Inclusive 2026 and an Open Call**

**The second edition of B-Inclusive Festival is planned for September 2026 in Bucharest, scaling from a three-day pilot into a seven-day city-wide event. The vision is to position Bucharest as a strategic hub for inclusion in Eastern Europe, a region where 22.9% of the EU population lives with activity limitations and where, as our own experience confirmed, inclusion culture remains fragmented and underfunded.**

**The 2026 edition will move across the city: from outdoor spaces and street art interventions to theatres, museums, and innovation hubs. It will integrate immersive technology including tactile exhibits, sonic architecture, and a digital layer for participants who cannot physically attend. And it will continue to operate on the same founding principle: persons with disabilities as architects of the experience, not its recipients.**

**We are currently issuing an open call for artists, cultural organisations, researchers, designers, urban planners, and institutions who share this vision. Whether you work in accessibility technology, community arts, urban design, or social research, there is a place for your work within the festival's framework. We believe that every person is a universe worth exploring, and that a city which understands this becomes, quite simply, a different kind of universe to live in.**

**To contribute to B-Inclusive 2026, reach out at [marina.corneliu@b-inclusive.ro](mailto:marina.corneliu@b-inclusive.ro) or visit [b-inclusive.ro](http://b-inclusive.ro).**

## **Conclusion**

**The inclusive city does not begin with a ramp. It begins with a question: who is this for, and who decided? When we start from the reality of human variation rather than from the fiction of the perfect citizen, what we build will not look like what we have now. It will be better. For everyone. That is not idealism. It is design.**

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