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Nikola Garovnikov is a civil engineer and consultant with over 15 years of international experience in the planning, rehabilitation, and evaluation of buildings, with a particular focus on historic structures and infrastructure projects. He completed his education in Novi Sad, Padua, and Prague, and is currently a doctoral candidate at the Vienna University of Technology.

Through his work as a project manager and site manager in Austria and the wider region, he has specialized in construction coordination, budget management, and the optimization of building processes. He is the founder of Nikola Garovnikov e.U., where he provides services in project documentation preparation (building permit documentation), technical consulting, and business development within the construction sector.

As co-founder and technical director of the Vienna-based organization MOVEO, he develops and leads projects that combine construction, accessibility, sustainability, and social inclusion, with a focus on practical, implementable solutions and international cooperation.

He is the author of several professional publications in the fields of building rehabilitation and energy efficiency, as well as co-author of the novel "Dodirodaje." His work integrates technical expertise, a research-driven approach, and hands-on experience to deliver sustainable, functional, and inclusive solutions in the construction sector.

A Practical Framework for Accessibility Assessment

The Open Buildings Checklist Methodology

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Abstract

Assessing accessibility in the built environment often remains fragmented, overly technical, or disconnected from real user experience. This paper presents the Open Buildings Checklist Methodology, developed within the Erasmus+ project *Open Buildings of Europe (OBLIGE)*, as a practical and transferable framework for accessibility assessment. The methodology combines structured evaluation criteria, measurable thresholds, and participatory assessment involving users with disabilities. It translates complex accessibility standards into an operational tool that can be applied across building types and contexts. The paper examines the conceptual foundations, structure, and application of the methodology, demonstrating how it bridges the gap between regulatory frameworks and practical implementation.

Introduction

Accessibility assessment is a critical component of inclusive design. It enables the identification of barriers, supports decision-making, and provides a basis for improving the usability of buildings. However, in practice, accessibility audits are often limited by their complexity. Many existing tools require high levels of technical

expertise, are difficult to apply consistently, or fail to capture the lived experience of users.

The Erasmus+ project *Open Buildings of Europe (OBLIGE)* addresses this challenge by developing a checklist-based methodology that simplifies accessibility assessment while maintaining technical rigor. The methodology is designed not only for specialists, but also for a broader range of stakeholders, including facility managers, public authorities, and community organizations.

At its core, the methodology is built on a pragmatic assumption: achieving absolute accessibility in all contexts is rarely feasible. Instead, the goal is to create environments that are reasonably accessible to the widest possible range of users.

This shift from perfection to practical improvement is central to the approach. It enables continuous progress, rather than static compliance.

Conceptual Foundations

The Open Buildings Checklist Methodology is grounded in the principles of Design for All and Universal Design, as well as in international and European frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and standards including EN 17210 and ISO 21542.

A key strength of the methodology is its inclusive definition of accessibility. Rather than focusing solely on mobility impairments, it explicitly considers a wide spectrum of users. These include people with visual and hearing impairments, individuals with reduced mobility, persons with cognitive disabilities, and those experiencing temporary limitations, such as injury or pregnancy.

This broad user perspective reflects the reality of human diversity and aligns with the functional approach promoted by contemporary accessibility standards.

Another important conceptual element is the recognition that accessibility is both a physical and experiential condition. It depends not only on measurable features, such as dimensions and gradients, but also on usability, clarity, and comfort. The methodology therefore integrates technical evaluation with user experience.

Structure of the Checklist

The checklist is organised into three main sections, which together reflect the full user journey through the built environment.

The first section addresses accessibility to the building site. It examines how users reach the building, including transportation links, pedestrian routes, and external conditions. This stage is often overlooked, yet it is critical, as barriers at this point can prevent access entirely.

The second section focuses on accessibility within the building. It covers entrances, circulation, vertical movement, and the usability of spaces such as offices, meeting rooms, and sanitary facilities. This section represents the core of the assessment and addresses the most common accessibility challenges.

The third section deals with emergency exit and safety. It evaluates whether evacuation routes, alarms, and procedures are accessible to all users. This aspect is essential for ensuring not only usability, but also safety and dignity in critical situations.

This three-part structure mirrors established frameworks in accessibility standards, particularly the emphasis on access, circulation, and egress.

Measurable Criteria and Thresholds

One of the defining features of the methodology is the inclusion of explicit, measurable criteria. These criteria translate abstract accessibility principles into concrete parameters that can be verified on site.

Examples include door widths, ramp gradients, threshold heights, and the reachability of controls. The checklist also addresses sensory aspects, such as lighting, glare, and signage visibility.

By focusing on measurable thresholds, the methodology provides clarity and consistency. It allows different evaluators to produce comparable results and supports objective decision-making.

At the same time, the checklist avoids excessive technical complexity. It uses a clear yes, no, or not applicable format, combined with qualitative remarks. This makes it accessible to non-specialists while preserving analytical depth.

From Measurement to Meaning

While measurable criteria are essential, they do not capture the full reality of accessibility. A building may meet technical requirements but still be difficult to use. For this reason, the methodology integrates user experience into the assessment process.

This is achieved through participatory approaches, including surveys and interviews with people with disabilities. These inputs provide

insight into how spaces are actually experienced, revealing issues that may not be visible through technical evaluation alone.

The combination of measurement and experience represents a significant advancement over traditional audit methods. It ensures that accessibility is assessed not only as compliance, but as usability.

The Assessment Process

The application of the checklist follows a structured process that supports consistency and clarity.

The process begins with defining the scope of the assessment and identifying relevant user groups. This is followed by a preliminary review of available information, such as building plans and existing accessibility features.

The core of the process is the on-site assessment. Evaluators follow the user journey from arrival to exit, verifying criteria, taking measurements, and documenting observations. User feedback is collected in parallel, providing an experiential perspective.

The findings are then synthesised into a structured evaluation. Barriers are identified, and recommendations are formulated. These recommendations are prioritised based on their impact and feasibility, distinguishing between low-cost improvements and more complex structural interventions.

Finally, the results are communicated in a clear and actionable format. This includes both technical specifications and practical guidance for implementation.

Practical Value and Applications

The Open Buildings Checklist Methodology is designed to be highly adaptable. It can be applied in a wide range of contexts, including:

- **Accessibility audits of existing buildings**
- **Planning and evaluation of renovations**
- **Certification and compliance processes**
- **Educational and training activities**
- **Community-led assessments**

Its simplicity makes it particularly valuable for stakeholders who are not accessibility specialists. At the same time, its structured approach ensures that it remains relevant for professional use.

The methodology also supports continuous improvement. By enabling repeated assessments, it allows progress to be monitored over time and encourages iterative development.

Bridging Policy and Practice

A central contribution of the methodology lies in its ability to connect high-level frameworks with practical implementation.

International conventions and European standards provide a strong normative and technical foundation for accessibility. However, their impact depends on how effectively they are translated into practice. The checklist serves as a bridge between these levels.

It operationalises principles such as equal access and usability by providing concrete tools for assessment. It also supports accountability by making accessibility measurable and transparent.

In this sense, the methodology contributes not only to individual building improvements, but also to broader systemic change.

Limitations and Considerations

While the methodology offers significant advantages, it is important to acknowledge its limitations.

First, as a checklist-based tool, it cannot capture all aspects of complex architectural environments. Certain issues may require more detailed analysis or specialist input.

Second, the effectiveness of the methodology depends on the quality of its application. Proper training and awareness are necessary to ensure consistent and accurate assessments.

Finally, the methodology must be adapted to specific contexts, particularly in heritage buildings where structural modifications may be constrained.

These limitations do not diminish its value, but highlight the importance of using the checklist as part of a broader, integrated approach to accessibility.

Conclusion

The Open Buildings Checklist Methodology represents a practical and scalable framework for accessibility assessment. By combining measurable criteria with user-centered evaluation, it provides a balanced and effective tool for identifying barriers and guiding improvements.

Its strength lies in its clarity, adaptability, and focus on real-world usability. It enables a wide range of stakeholders to engage with accessibility and supports a shift from compliance to inclusion.

In a context where accessibility remains unevenly implemented, such tools are essential. They translate principles into practice and support the creation of environments that are not only accessible, but truly inclusive.

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