

Design for All



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She coordinates strategic initiatives in Romania, including the national accessibility resources hub România Accesibilă and Audara, a structured accessibility assessment tool aligned with national, European, and international standards.

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Accessibility as Infrastructure: An Integrated Model from Romania

Cristina Căluianu

Abstract

Accessibility implementation across Europe is increasingly supported by international standards, European harmonized regulations, and national legal frameworks. However, in practice, accessibility often remains fragmented, project-based, and compliance-driven.

This article presents an integrated accessibility ecosystem developed by a Romanian non-governmental organization, designed to translate complex regulatory and standards-based requirements into coordinated implementation practice. Framed within Romanian legislation (Law No. 448/2006; Government Emergency Ordinance No. 112/2018; Law No. 232/2022) and technical regulations (Order No. 189/2013 approving NP 051-2012), grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), and aligned with ISO 21542, ISO 21902, EN 17210, WCAG 2.1/2.2, and EN 301 549, the model integrates structured assessment, cultural accessibility innovation, inclusive tourism implementation, knowledge dissemination, and social economy-based service provision.

The ecosystem includes the digital assessment tool Audara, the multisensory heritage initiatives [Feel the City](#) and [Feel Brâncusi](#), accessible tourism services delivered through the specialized

operator Accessible Romania by Sano Touring, the national accessibility resource hub România Accesibilă, and the protected unit [Accesibilitate 360](#) employing persons with disabilities as trained professionals. The article argues that systemic integration of these components enhances sustainability, professional credibility, and replicability of Design for All implementation beyond isolated compliance measures.

Keywords

Design for All; Accessibility ecosystem; Inclusive tourism; Cultural accessibility; Social economy; Built environment accessibility standards; Digital accessibility

1. Introduction

Accessibility has evolved from a rights-based claim toward a structured policy and standardization domain. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) established accessibility as a precondition for equal participation. Subsequent international and European standards have translated this principle into operational criteria. ISO 21542:2011 defines technical requirements for accessibility and usability of the built environment, while ISO 21902:2020 provides guidance for accessible tourism services. EN 17210:2021 further articulates functional accessibility requirements within the European context. In digital environments, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 and WCAG 2.2) and EN 301 549 (ETSI, 2021) establish measurable criteria for ICT accessibility. At policy level, Directive (EU) 2019/882 (European Accessibility Act) and the European Accessibility Resource Centre AccessibleEU support harmonization and capacity building across Member States.

Despite this normative architecture, implementation frequently remains fragmented. Accessibility interventions are often limited to isolated physical adaptations, temporary cultural initiatives, or minimal compliance-driven digital adjustments. Cross-sector integration between built environment, tourism, cultural heritage, and digital communication remains limited. Furthermore, persons with disabilities are rarely employed as trained professionals within accessibility service provision, weakening both the legitimacy and sustainability.

This article analyses a strategic accessibility ecosystem developed within a civil society framework, designed to translate complex regulatory and standards-based requirements into coordinated implementation practice. In contexts where accessibility responsibilities are distributed across multiple institutions and sectors, fragmented execution often limits impact. The CED Accessibility Ecosystem responds by integrating structured assessment, service provision, cultural innovation, tourism implementation, knowledge dissemination, and social economy-based employment within a coherent organizational model. The ecosystem operates within existing legal frameworks while demonstrating how coordinated, standards-aligned implementation can bridge structural gaps.

2. Regulatory and Standards Framework

Accessibility implementation operates within a complex multi-level framework.

At international level, ISO 21542 (2011) establishes technical parameters for accessibility of buildings and external environments, while ISO 21902 (2020) defines requirements for accessible tourism

services. These standards provide a globally recognized reference structure for implementation.

At European level, EN 17210:2021 defines functional accessibility requirements for the built environment, complementing ISO 21542 and supporting harmonization across Member States. Digital accessibility is governed by WCAG 2.1/2.2 and EN 301 549 (ETSI, 2021), while Directive (EU) 2019/882 extends accessibility obligations to products and services, including banking, e-commerce, ticketing, and digital interfaces.

In Romania, Law No. 448/2006 establishes accessibility obligations for public and private entities, Ministry Order 189/2013 approves technical regulation NP 051-2012, which details requirements for adapting civil buildings and urban spaces to the needs of persons with disabilities. Government Emergency Ordinance No. 112/2018 transposes the EU Web Accessibility Directive into national law, and Law No. 232/2022 transposes the European Accessibility Act.

This regulatory architecture demonstrates that accessibility is a structural dimension of infrastructure, services, and digital systems. However, standards alone do not ensure effective implementation. Structured tools, professional capacity, and cross-sector integration are required to translate normative frameworks into operational practice.

3. CEDAccessibility Ecosystem: Structure and Operational Logic

The CED accessibility ecosystem integrates five interdependent layers.



Fig. 1 Logo of the CED Romania Association - Centre of Excellence through Diversity

3.1 Structured Accessibility Assessment: Audara



Fig. 2 Logo Audara app

Audara is a digital assessment tool designed to structure evaluation of accessibility in the built environment and related services. The tool maps national legal criteria (OrderNo. 189/2013; Law No. 448/2006) against international standards (ISO 21542) and European requirements (EN 17210), while integrating experiential expertise of persons with disabilities and Romanian accessibility specialists with international training involved in its development.

Assessment categories include circulation, vertical mobility, sanitary facilities, signage, tactile guidance, lighting, and service interfaces. Rather than functioning as a checklist, the tool enables accessibility

audits, data-driven decision-making, prioritization of interventions, and traceability of accessibility measures.

Alignment with ISO 21902 extends assessment logic to tourism-related services, facilitating cross-sector evaluation. By translating normative frameworks into structured metrics, Audara serves as the technical backbone of the ecosystem.

3.2 Cultural Accessibility: From Pilot to Scaled Model



Fig. 33D tactile models of the Iosefin Water Tower and of the Water Museum, connected to the proprietary [ArtEcho](#) multimedia guide, with text and multilingual audio information, and Romanian Sign Language interpretation. The models were part of the “Feel the City” pilot concept of an accessible and inclusive exhibition organized in Timișoara, Romania, the European Capital of Culture 2023.

The cultural layer evolved through a methodological progression.

“Feel the City” functioned as a pilot initiative introducing multisensory accessibility in urban cultural and heritage contexts. Tactile 3D models of cultural buildings and spaces, multilingual audio description, and accessible digital interfaces enabled spatial

understanding beyond visual interpretation. Co-creation with persons with disabilities ensured experiential validation.



Fig. 4. The logo of "Feel Brâncuși" project, aiming to make accessible Constantin Brâncuși's original artwork in Romania.

Building on this methodology, "Feel Brâncuși" represents thematic scaling. Focused on the sculptural works of Constantin Brâncuși, the project applies validated multisensory interpretation techniques to nationally significant cultural heritage. Tactile reinterpretation of sculptural forms, integrated audio description, and content in sign language extend cultural accessibility beyond symbolic inclusion toward structured multisensory engagement.

The pilot-to-scale trajectory demonstrates methodological learning, refinement, and replicability.

3.3 Accessible Tourism in Practice

Accessible tourism integration is implemented through both CED Romania Association and the specialized tour operator Accessible Romania by Sano Touring.



Fig. 5. The logo of Accessible Romania by Sano Touring, a specialized tour company based in Bucharest.

The strategy combines accessibility audits, professional training, and service design and delivery across the entire tourism value chain, including accommodation providers, cultural institutions, transport interfaces, and digital communication channels. Alignment with ISO 21902 ensures that accessibility is embedded in service quality criteria rather than treated as an add-on or niche market segment.

Training programs for tourism professionals address communication practices, operational procedures, reasonable accommodation, and inclusive visitor experience design. These programs are delivered through tailored consultancy-based interventions as well as through European partnerships.



Fig. 6. The logo of WeNaTour- The European Alliance for Innovation and Sustainability Education in Welfare, Nature and Tourism Erasmus+ Project.

A significant scaling mechanism is the Erasmus+ project WeNaTour- The European Alliance for Innovation and Sustainability Education in Welfare, Nature and Tourism. Within this consortium, accessibility is integrated into structured higher-education and vocational learning modules on sustainable tourism. The operational expertise developed through Accessible Romania by Sano Touring, including

structured audits, destination-level implementation, and inclusive visitor experience design, is directly incorporated into lectures and curriculum content on accessibility and accessible tourism. This ensures that training materials reflect applied field experience rather than purely theoretical frameworks.

Through course design contributions and lectures within the WeNaTour learning activities, the ecosystem extends its implementation knowledge into European educational capacity building, linking accessibility with sustainable tourism development.

3.4 Knowledge Infrastructure: România Accesibilă



Fig. 7. The logo of România Accesibilă accessibility resources platform

The ecosystem is consolidated through the national accessibility resource hub România Accesibilă.

The platform centralizes national and European good practices, research references and professional articles related to accessibility in Romania and Europe. Accessibility-related service providers and inclusive events are listed, facilitating networking and visibility.

An e-learning hub is under development, including short webinars addressing disability awareness and topics connected to physical, informational, and communicational accessibility.

By bridging implementation and knowledge dissemination, the platform functions as a capacity-building interface. It supports

professional awareness, informed decision-making, and transparency of accessibility practices.

3.5 Service Delivery and Inclusive Employment: Accesibilitate 360



Fig. 8. The logo of Accesibilitate 360. The slogan says in Romanian: "We create accessibility. We build inclusion".

Accesibilitate 360 operates as the service-delivery engine of the CED accessibility ecosystem under the Romanian social economy legislation as a protected unit.

Accesibilitate 360 provides built environment audits using the Audara tool; digital accessibility audits based on WCAG and EN 301 549; accessibility training for public institutions and private operators; 3D tactile model printing; and accessibility enhancement of exhibitions through integration with the ArtEcho multimedia guide and tactile models.

A defining characteristic is the direct involvement of persons with disabilities as trained auditors, testers, and trainers. Experiential expertise strengthens the validity of assessments while generating employment within the accessibility sector. This integration of professional service delivery and social economy principles enhances both ethical coherence and sustainability.

4. Cross-Sector Integration and Replicability

The CED accessibility ecosystem integrates built environment, digital accessibility, tourism, cultural heritage, and employment structures within a single framework. Feedback loops connect assessment outcomes to implementation, training, and knowledge dissemination. Cultural pilot initiatives inform tourism integration, while digital audits support communication platforms. Employment through the protected unit sustains service provision.

Replicability depends on three conditions:

- 1. Alignment with national legislation and international standards;**
- 2. Structured assessment tools enabling measurable evaluation;**
- 3. Integration of experiential expertise within professional service delivery.**

The model demonstrates that civil society actors can operationalize complex regulatory frameworks through structured organizational ecosystems capable of integrating assessment, service delivery, and capacity building.

5. Lessons Learned

Implementation revealed several challenges. Accessibility is often misunderstood as charitable gesture rather than structural requirement. Financial planning for accessibility interventions remains limited, and fragmentation between sectors inhibits coordinated action. Sustaining financial viability without compromising methodological rigor remains a continuous strategic challenge.

However, integration of assessment tools, service delivery, and knowledge dissemination enhances credibility. Involvement of persons with disabilities as professionals strengthens legitimacy. Alignment with ISO and European standards facilitates dialogue with institutions and private operators.

6. Conclusion

Accessibility is increasingly embedded within international standards, European regulations, and national legislation. Yet effective implementation requires more than compliance.

The CED accessibility ecosystem demonstrates how accessibility can function as structured organizational practice when assessment, cultural innovation, tourism services, knowledge dissemination, and social economy-based employment are integrated.

By aligning normative frameworks with structured tools and professional capacity, accessibility becomes measurable, economically viable, and replicable. The model contributes to the Design for All discourse by illustrating how cross-sector integration and employment inclusion can transform accessibility from fragmented adjustment into structured, standards-aligned organizational practice.

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Oana Popa – Building Bridges Through Play, Theatre, and Access
Oana Popa is a Romanian actress, puppeteer, director, and cultural activist based in Bucharest, with over 25 years of experience in radio and television. She is the founder of The Play School and president of the Grigore Popa Personal Development Association, where she develops projects for children and communities who often have limited access to culture.

She believes that access to culture is not a privilege, but a right. This belief led to the creation of "Close Your Eyes and You Will See Better", an independent theatre production that opened a new path in Romania: a performance designed for the general public and, at the same time, accessible to multiple types of disabilities. Sign language interpretation, audio description, subtitles, and a welcoming environment for neurodivergent children are not "adaptations," but part of the story itself. The impact did not remain only on stage. Starting in 2025, publicly funded cultural institutions in Romania are required to include at least one accessible performance each year – an important step toward a more open cultural landscape. Beyond the stage, Oana works with children, creates workshops, and

***builds spaces where differences are not corrected, but welcomed.
She doesn't just talk about access. She builds it.***

When Theatre Learns to Welcome Everyone

How a fully accessible performance opened a door to cultural accessibility in Romania

Oana Popa

During a performance, a child stands up from the audience and walks onto the stage.

He is a neuro-divergent child diagnosed with autism.

conventional theatre setting, this would normally be the moment when someone from the staff would gently guide him back to his seat. The unwritten rules of theatre say that the audience should remain quiet, still, and separate from the actors.

But in the performance *Close Your Eyes and You Will See Better*, nobody stops him.

The child stays on stage. He looks curiously at the actors and begins to follow the story alongside them. The actors naturally include him in the play, and for a few minutes the boundary between stage and audience disappears.

Because in this performance, children are allowed to move, explore, and enter the story in their own way.

This is how the theatre was imagined from the very beginning. I am Oana Popa, the director and the lead performer of the production, and the project started from a simple question:

What would happen if theatre learned to adapt to children, instead of asking children to adapt to theatre?



The story behind the story

The performance Close Your Eyes and You Will See Better is a stage adaptation inspired by “The Story of the Seed”, written by Romanian author Dumitru Radu Popa.

A context we cannot ignore

Today, nearly one million people with disabilities live in Romania.



A pioneering accessible production

Close Your Eyes and You Will See Better is currently the first and, so far, the only theatre production in Romania designed to be accessible simultaneously for nine different types of disabilities.



What accessibility looks like in practice

The performance includes multiple accessibility elements and allows children to move freely.



The role of Lavinia Chițu

An essential member of the team is Lavinia Chițu.



The team behind the performance

A key presence on stage is Andrei Cristea.



Independent artists and the reality of funding

Like many independent cultural projects in Romania, this performance exists thanks to community support.



Recognition and impact

The performance has received several awards for its artistic and social impact.





Marina Roxana Corneliu

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Marina Roxana Corneliu is a disability rights advocate, researcher, and project manager based in Bucharest, Romania. She is the founder of Better Inclusion and the B-Inclusive Festival, a disability-led cultural initiative currently scaling into an international emancipatory movement. Living with hearing loss and neurodivergence, and as a lifelong caregiver for her mother who lives with semiparalysis, her advocacy is rooted in lived experience and driven by the conviction that vulnerability is not an anomaly, but a universal axis we all traverse.

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 or visit 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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EVALUATION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

SEPTEMBER 28, 2025

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE DISABILITY DIMENSION

Report Summary

Victor KOROLI, Executive Director of INFONET Alliance

The Parliamentary Elections of September 28, 2025 were a crucial moment for the consolidation of participatory democracy in the Republic of Moldova. For the first time, the electoral process was analyzed in depth from the perspective of accessibility for persons with disabilities.

The report brings together the results of five thematic monitoring activities:

- 1. analysis of electoral programs of political competitors;***
- 2. assessment of websites accessibility;***
- 3. monitoring of electoral debates and mass media;***
- 4. observation of polling stations and infrastructure;***
- 5. institutional assessment of parties and candidates;***
- 6. monitoring of election day.***

The collected data show that, although the normative framework

of the Republic of Moldova is aligned with international standards, its practical application remains fragmentary, and real accessibility – limited.

Keywords: monitoring, disability, parliamentary elections, accessibility.

Note:

The report summary represents a generalization of the results of the Project "Free and Inclusive Elections – Precondition for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities and for a Functional Democracy in the Republic of Moldova", implemented by INFONET Alliance and financially supported by the East European Foundation from the resources provided by Sweden. The authors of the separate reports are Vitalie Meșter, Ion Ciobanu, Valerian Tăbîrță, Ion Cibotărică, Ion Bulicanu, Vitalie Cazacu, Ludmila Jalbă, Gheorghe Bosîi, Radu Bobeica. The Project Consultant is Mihaela Gherasim. The extended reports on each aspect monitored in the 2025 Parliamentary Elections on the disability dimension can be consulted at: <https://.md/news/26>

1. The Electoral Observation Mission on the Disability Dimension

Observing the electoral process from the perspective of the inclusion of persons with disabilities is of major importance. It does not merely concern formal respect for the right to vote, but also the real quality of access, respect for diversity, and the capacity of state institutions to ensure equal participation for all citizens.

INFONET Alliance, a member of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, within the framework of the "Access to Vote for All" Campaign, in partnership with approximately 10 non-governmental organizations and initiative groups, monitored the Parliamentary Elections of 28.09.2025 from the perspective of the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

In September 2025, ten observers from as many districts across the country – Edineț, Glodeni, Fălești, the municipalities of Bălți and Chișinău, Florești, Criuleni, Căușeni, Cantemir, and Cahul – participated in a comprehensive electoral process monitoring exercise, including on election day. The primary goal of the activity was to assess how political parties and candidates respect the principles of accessibility and inclusion, with an emphasis on the rights of persons with physical, visual, or intellectual disabilities.

2. Reflecting the Disability Dimension in the Electoral Programs of Electoral Competitors

Monitoring the Parliamentary Elections of September 28, 2025 from the perspective of how the issues of persons with disabilities are

addressed in the electoral programs of competitors, and the degree of accessibility of their online communication platforms, is of great importance. The monitoring tracked how political parties integrate the principles of inclusion and equal opportunities into their electoral discourse and practice, as well as the level of access by persons with disabilities to electoral information.

The analysis included an examination of the websites and Facebook accounts of electoral competitors, a review of the existence and accessibility of electoral programs, and observation of televised debates.

2.1. General Conclusions Regarding the Reflection of the Disability Dimension in Electoral Programs

- Analysis of electoral competitors' websites identified electoral programs for only 17 out of 23 competitors; one electoral competitor submitted their program via e-mail (Figure 1).
- 17 (74%) have an electoral program (published and identified);
- 6 (26%) have no electoral program or it was not found.

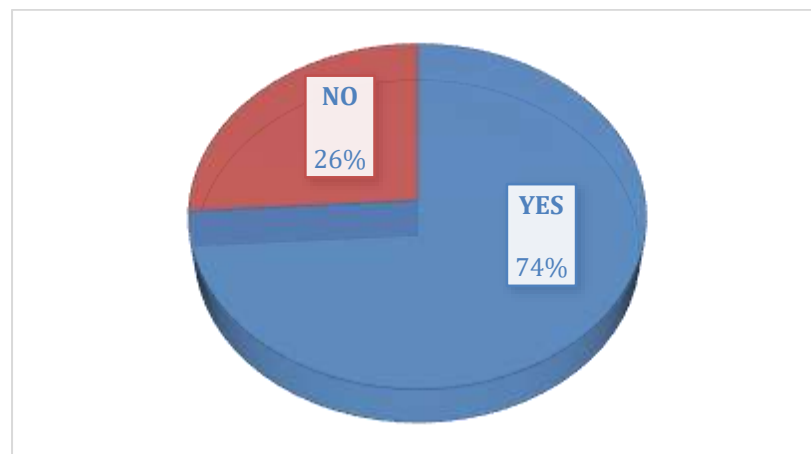


Figure 1. Electoral programs published by electoral competitors in the 2025 Parliamentary Elections

- **11 electoral competitors have electoral platforms that include the disability dimension, while 1 competitor makes only a tangential reference to disability.**
- **One of the identified issues is that political parties often use different names for their electoral program— for example, political program, party vision, popular program – which creates confusion for readers and requires an additional clarification: whether the document relates to the Parliamentary Elections of September 28 or not.**
- **For 6 electoral competitors, the programs are well structured on the disability component, incorporating the social, medical, and rights-based dimensions. A rights-based vision is also present, by creating conditions for persons with disabilities to become active members of society – i.e., to have access to education, employment services, and participation in community life.**
- **For 3 electoral competitors, persons with disabilities are placed in the category of "vulnerable persons," alongside the elderly and low-income families. This approach primarily reflects a social perspective focused on support and protection, without developing medical aspects or a rights-based vision (participation, inclusion, independent living). A positive note: no demeaning language toward persons with disabilities was identified in the electoral programs of this election.**
- **There is a negative trend compared to the 2021 Parliamentary Elections in terms of the percentage of electoral candidates reflecting the disability theme in their programs: 61% of all electoral competitors in 2025, compared to 73% in 2021 (Figure 2).**

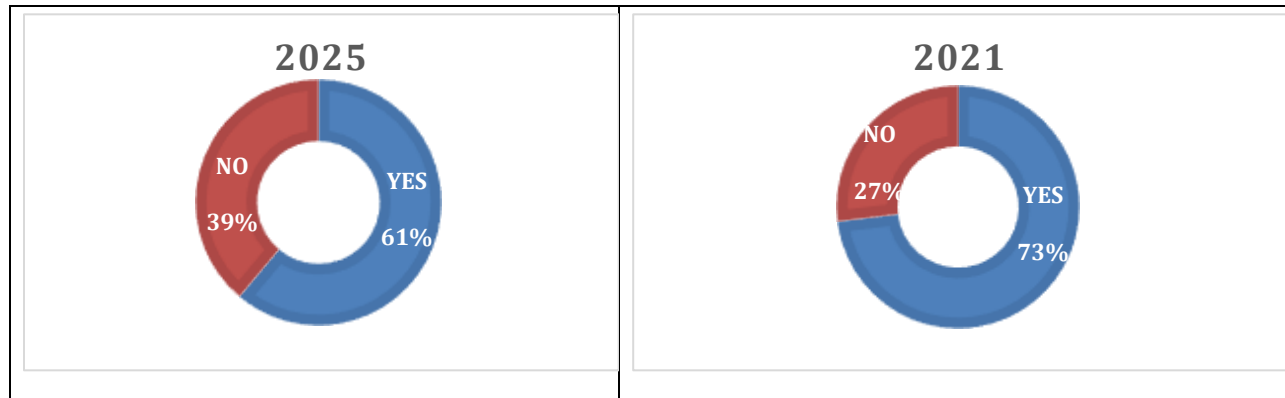


Figure 2. Mentions of the disability dimension in electoral programs (comparative data 2025 vs. 2021)

- **Most electoral competitors do not have chapter summaries on their websites that would allow easy identification of topics of interest to voters, such as the chapter concerning persons with disabilities. Thus, to find information about a party's political proposal, an additional keyword search is required – something not accessible to everyone, or requiring more advanced computer skills. There is also no adaptation of electoral programs in an easy-to-read or easy-to-understand format for persons with intellectual disabilities.**
- **Similarly, no electoral programs translated into sign language or Braille are available.**
- **No electoral competitor mentioned the subject of disability in the electoral debates held on ProTV, N4, CINEMA 1, and Moldova 1.**
- **A generalized approach to social policies is evident in electoral discourse, along with the absence of a coherent vision regarding the inclusion of persons with disabilities.**

- A gap is also observed between institutional efforts to promote accessibility and the way in which political actors actually integrate this dimension into their public communication.

2.2. Specific Conclusions Regarding the Reflection of the Disability Dimension

- Of the 23 electoral candidates, 19 parties, blocs, or candidates have both a website and a Facebook page.
- 3 independent candidates have only a Facebook page.
- 1 candidate has neither a website nor a Facebook page.
- 17 (74%) have an electoral program (published and identified in the analysis).
- 6 (26%) have no electoral program or it was not found.
- 11 (61%) explicitly or tangentially mention disability in their programs (Figure 3).
- 7 (37%) make no mention of disability whatsoever (Figure 3).

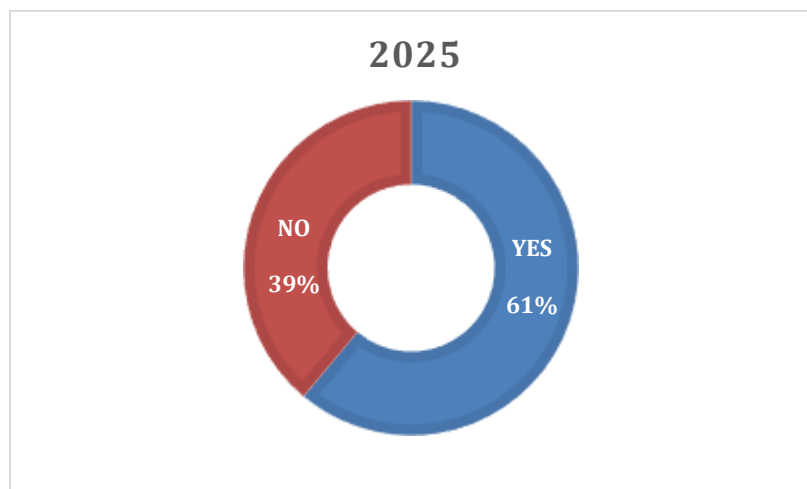


Figure 3. Mention of the disability dimension in the electoral programs of candidates in the Parliamentary Elections of September 28, 2025

- **Of the 11 candidates who explicitly mention disability in their program, 7 directly indicate the integration of persons with disabilities into various fields (education, schooling, social life, the labor market, etc.).**
- **Most electoral competitors have included provisions relating to pensions and benefits for persons with disabilities.**
- **The issue of accessibility (physical access and access to public services) appears in the platforms of 2 electoral candidates.**
- **The issue of deinstitutionalization is present in the platforms of 2 electoral candidates.**
- **Most electoral candidates have included in their program's activities providing assistance to persons with disabilities (subsidies, pensions, etc.).**

2.3. Recommendations Regarding the Reflection of the Disability Dimension in Electoral Programs

- **Electoral competitors are encouraged, in the future, to develop chapter-by-chapter text summaries of their electoral programs.**
- **To ensure the presentation of the electoral program in sign language and audio formats, with a direct link to YouTube, so that persons with hearing disabilities and those who are visually impaired can easily access the electoral offering.**
- **To create an adapted version of the electoral program in an "easy-to-read and easy-to-understand" format.**
- **The title of the electoral program should be clearly formulated, explicitly indicating for which type of elections it has been prepared. Currently, the websites of some electoral**

competitors use terms such as "political program," "popular program," "vision," or "theses," which creates confusion. Readers often discover only at the end that the document refers to elections that have already concluded.

- **De lege ferenda.** After registering in the electoral race, competitors should be required to submit to the Central Electoral Commission, in addition to their statutes, also their electoral programs. This practice would facilitate the identification of documents, especially given that the experience of the September 28, 2025 elections showed that in the case of 6 electoral competitors, programs could not be found.

3. Assessment of the Accessibility of Electoral Competitors' Websites

3.1. General Conclusions about the Website Accessibility Assessment

3.1.1. The Overall Level of WCAG Compliance of Websites is Very Low

The analysis of electoral competitors' websites for the 2025 Parliamentary Elections shows that the overall level of compliance with international web accessibility standards (WCAG) is low. Only a few parties achieved acceptable scores, such as the Party of Action and Solidarity (77%) or the European Social Democratic Party (71%), while the vast majority of websites (10 out of 14) fall below the 50% threshold. This demonstrates the lack of a systematic and consistent approach to digital accessibility. Given that technology is the primary channel of political communication, deficiencies in

information access lead to the indirect exclusion of persons with disabilities from public debates and electoral processes. Most political actors likely treat accessibility as a secondary matter, even though it represents a moral obligation and a key element for ensuring equal opportunities. Without corrective interventions, a significant portion of the electorate will not be able to benefit from equal access to information, which also affects the transparency and credibility of the electoral process.

3.1.2. Common Problems Across Most Websites

It is concerning that most accessibility issues identified recur consistently across almost all analyzed websites. The most frequent deficiencies include: the absence of accessible names for links and buttons, insufficient contrast between text and background, the lack of correct labels on form fields, and poor heading structure. Moreover, the use of ARIA attributes and landmarks is often incorrect, which does not facilitate but rather complicates navigation for screen reader users. Instead of providing a clear semantic structure, many pages transmit contradictory signals to assistive technologies, generating confusion and limiting access to content. This situation demonstrates the lack of technical expertise and accountability on the part of those managing the digital communications of the parties.

3.1.3. Lack of Accessibility-Specific Tools and Use of Inaccessible Documents

Another major conclusion is that none of the analyzed websites offer dedicated web accessibility tools. For example, features such as accessibility widgets or buttons (allowing contrast adjustment, text enlargement, or simplified navigation) – considered best practices

in the digital field – have not been implemented. Moreover, the published content frequently includes PDF-format documents that in many cases are not optimized for screen readers. Although not a widespread practice, some web pages publish essential documents in image format, making them completely inaccessible to persons with visual impairments. Such digital barriers prevent voters from accessing electoral programs, official press releases, or other public interest information. For the electoral process to be truly democratic and participatory, it is necessary for parties and candidates to ensure the publication of materials in a format accessible to all citizens, regardless of their abilities.

3.1.4. Accessibility for Persons with Hearing Disabilities and Those with Intellectual or Psycho-social Disabilities is Almost Entirely Absent

Video and audio content is not accompanied by subtitles or transcripts, and in some cases, there are no visual or textual alternatives to facilitate access for deaf persons. At the same time, texts published by parties are often dense, written in technical or bureaucratic language, difficult to understand for persons with cognitive difficulties. The lack of plain language versions, visual summaries, or a logical page structure leads to the indirect exclusion of large categories of citizens who are unable to access and understand electoral information. This situation contravenes WCAG standards and the principle of equal opportunities, reducing the transparency and trust in the electoral process.

3.2. Recommendations for Improving Website Accessibility

3.2.1. Electoral Competitors are Urged to Ensure the Accessibility of Official Websites

It is recommended that all parties, electoral blocs, and independent candidates ensure their websites comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1), level AA. Currently, the average website accessibility score is only 44%, indicating a low and uneven level of compliance. Adherence to the standards would eliminate recurring identified problems (links and buttons without accessible names, incorrectly structured headings, insufficient contrast, missing landmarks) and would facilitate access by persons with disabilities to electoral information.

3.2.2. Creation and Publication of Accessible Digital Content is Necessary

Electoral documents must be published in accessible formats, avoiding the use of inaccessible images or PDFs. PDF documents must be correctly tagged for screen readers, and visual materials must be accompanied by descriptive alternative text. It is also recommended to integrate accessibility widgets or buttons allowing users to adjust contrast, modify text size, and navigate in a simplified manner.

3.2.3. Greater Attention to Accessibility for Persons with Hearing, Intellectual, or Psycho-social Disabilities is Required

This includes the integration of subtitles, transcripts, and sign language interpretation for audiovisual materials, as well as the drafting of essential documents in plain and easy-to-understand

language, accompanied by visual summaries or infographics. The website must be logically structured, with clear headings, lists, and short paragraphs, to facilitate content navigation by all users.

3.2.4. Training of Technical Teams and Institutionalization of Web Accessibility Must be Treated as a Mandatory Requirement

Political parties must train their communication teams and web developers in digital accessibility. At the same time, the Central Electoral Commission should establish minimum mandatory accessibility requirements for the websites and online materials of electoral competitors. The implementation of a monitoring and reporting mechanism would strengthen transparency, prevent the exclusion of persons with disabilities, and guarantee the equal participation of all citizens in the electoral process.

4. Assessment of the Disability Dimension in the Activities of Electoral Competitors

4.1. Conclusions Regarding the Assessment

The actions proposed by competitors do not ensure the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, in the development of policies and programs – including those that directly concern them – in accordance with the principle "Nothing about us without us" from the Preamble of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This principle presupposes the simultaneous assurance of the following elements of participation: information, consultation, involvement, cooperation, monitoring and evaluation, including the empowerment of persons with disabilities.

The core values promoted through participation are:

- **Involvement of those who are affected by or interested in a particular decision in the decision-making process.**
- **Soliciting the opinions of participants at the stage of designing how they will participate.**
- **Providing the necessary information, including in an accessible and easy-to-understand format, to participants with different types of disability so that they can contribute effectively.**
- **Recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participant-persons with disabilities, including to decision-makers.**
- **Empowering the public, including persons with disabilities, in such a way that their contributions influence the decision.**
- **Communicating how the input of participants has affected the decision.**

4.2. Recommendations

To facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them in the process of developing electoral platforms, electoral competitors are recommended to take into account the following basic principles:

- **Transparency, including timely access by persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them to draft electoral platforms, as well as to all public interest documents relevant to the participation process.**
- **Impartiality, particularly concerning organizations representing the rights of persons with disabilities, as these have the right**

to act independently and to advocate for positions different from those of the authorities.

- **Openness and accessibility, since participation processes must be open and accessible to all, including persons with disabilities, based on an agreed framework for participation.**
- **Accountability and efficiency, whereby the participation of persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them must be result-oriented, in order to have a real impact on content, including making electoral competitors accountable to the public regarding consultation processes and reporting on outcomes.**
- **Non-discrimination, equal treatment and inclusion, in particular equal access for all citizens, including addressing the needs of persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged persons who wish to participate.**
- **The independence of organizations representing the rights of persons with disabilities, including refraining from requiring them to engage in decision-making processes or to advocate specific positions.**

Additionally, it is recommended that a series of additional principles guiding the process of civic participation of persons with disabilities and their representatives be respected, including commitment, recognition of rights and responsibilities, resources, allocation of sufficient time, recognition and feedback, and evaluation.

We encourage political entities to attract persons with disabilities into party activities, to make the spaces in which they operate accessible, and to contribute to informing society about their

activities in a format that is accessible and easy to understand for persons with different types of disability.

Electoral competitors are urged to ensure the accessibility of official websites. It is recommended that all parties, electoral blocs, and independent candidates ensure compliance of their websites with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1), level AA.

Electoral documents must be published in accessible formats, avoiding the use of inaccessible images or PDFs. PDF documents must be correctly tagged for screen readers, and visual materials must be accompanied by descriptive alternative text.

Increased attention must be paid to accessibility for persons with hearing disabilities and for those with intellectual and psycho-social disabilities: the inclusion of subtitles, transcripts, and sign language interpretation for audiovisual materials, as well as the drafting of essential documents in plain and easy-to-understand language, accompanied by visual summaries or infographics.

Electoral competitors are recommended to develop chapter-by-chapter text summaries of electoral platforms. They are also suggested to ensure the presentation of the electoral program in sign language and audio formats as well, with a direct link to YouTube, so that persons with hearing disabilities and those who are visually impaired can easily access the electoral offering. They should create an adapted version of the electoral program in an "easy-to-read and easy-to-understand" format. The title of the electoral program should be clearly formulated, explicitly indicating for which election it has been prepared.

After registering in the electoral race, competitors should be required to submit to the Central Electoral Commission, in addition

to their statutes, also their electoral programs. This practice would facilitate the identification of documents, especially given that the experience of the September 28, 2025 elections showed that in the case of 6 electoral competitors, programs could not be found.

5. Assessment of the Accessibility of Electoral Debates and Reflection of the Disability Dimension in Mass Media

- **The overall level of accessibility of televised electoral debates is low, with only formal compliance with the obligation regarding sign language interpretation.**
- **Only 3 television stations included a sign language interpreter, but with windows that were too small and peripherally placed, limiting the real accessibility for persons with hearing impairments.**
- **Most TV stations did not provide sign language interpretation, highlighting a direct violation of legal norms and a structural deficit of specialized human resources.**
- **The disability subject is reflected in the media with moderate frequency, primarily as a social issue.**
- **The tone and language used in press materials are generally correct, non-discriminatory, and professional, with positive accents on inclusion and respect for the rights of persons with disabilities.**
- **In online press and television, the subject is tackled predominantly from a civic angle, while on social networks the tone is more mobilizing and oriented toward raising awareness among young audiences.**

- **Journalists acknowledge the importance of the topic, but consistent coverage is obstructed by commercial considerations, editorial pressures, and limited resources for producing social content.**
- **There is a strong consensus regarding the need for training media professionals – both practicing and future journalists – for a more adequate and professional treatment of the disability subject.**
- **Online accessibility coverage was often incidental, inserted into broader articles about the electoral campaign, without being treated as a central topic, indicating a secondary perception of the theme in the media agenda.**
- **Persons with disabilities were rarely interviewed directly by the media, indicating a lack of authentic representation of their voices in the public sphere.**
- **On social networks, although there were innovative initiatives (TikTok, video explanations), these remained isolated and without editorial support from established newsrooms.**
- **Regional differences were identified: the local press more often addressed concrete issues of access to polling stations, but with limited resources and without in-depth analysis.**
- **There is an evident discrepancy between the well-structured normative framework on accessibility and its actual application, indicating a clear gap between official commitments and media reality.**

5.1. Recommendations for Effective Media Accessibility

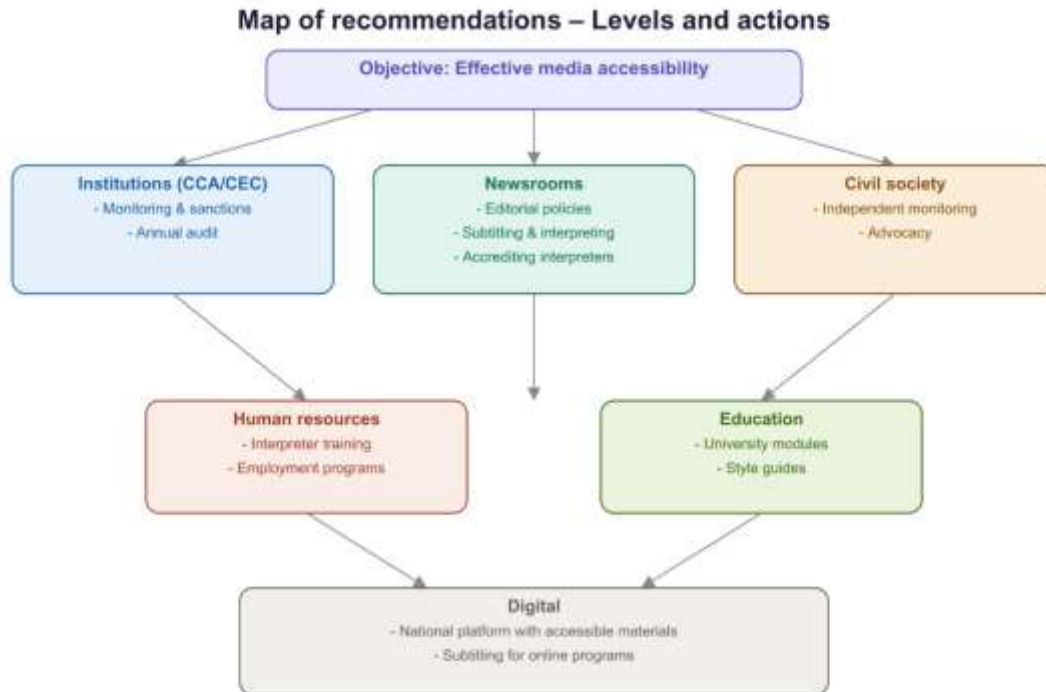


Figure 4. Map of Recommendations

- **All television stations must commit to full compliance with CCA Decision No. 61/2024, ensuring a visibly present sign language interpreter with the appropriate window size and positioning (1/3 of screen) according to standards.**
- **Development and implementation of special training and employment programs for sign language interpreters for broadcasters, as an essential resource for audiovisual accessibility.**
- **Broadcasters must consistently include the disability theme in their programs and editorial content to increase the visibility and social inclusion of persons with disabilities.**

- **Media institutions must develop and implement editorial policies that promote correct, respectful, and stereotype-free language in all materials concerning the disability dimension.**
- **The Central Electoral Commission and the responsible authorities should establish clear mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating, and sanctioning non-compliance with accessibility obligations within and outside the electoral process.**
- **Organization of practical training sessions, thematic workshops, and the development of style guides dedicated to active journalists, to improve the quality of coverage and avoid stereotypes.**
- **Mandatory introduction into journalism faculty curricula of modules on inclusive journalism, the rights of persons with disabilities, and best practices in accessible communication.**
- **Promotion of editorial and social campaigns proving that social topics, including disability, can generate interest, audience, and positive impact in society.**
- **The press in the Republic of Moldova has an essential role in shaping a correct and respectful attitude toward persons with disabilities, grounded in equality of rights, and journalistic efforts in this field must be supported and developed in the medium and long term.**
- **Creation of a permanent consultation mechanism between the CCA, broadcasters, and organizations of persons with disabilities to constantly evaluate the application of accessibility measures.**

- **Establishment of financial incentives or tax reductions for TV stations that fully comply with regulations and consistently introduce the accessibility theme in their programming.**
- **Development and periodic broadcasting of awareness video materials for the general public, explaining the importance of access to information for persons with disabilities.**
- **Encouragement of media content production (documentaries, reports, podcasts) created together with persons with disabilities, to foreground their direct experience.**
- **Creation of a support fund for regional and local television stations that face difficulties in hiring interpreters or in applying technical accessibility standards.**
- **Making subtitling mandatory for all electoral programs broadcast online by television stations, to extend access to persons with hearing impairments who do not follow classical TV.**
- **Implementation of external media accessibility audits, conducted annually by independent organizations, with subsequent publication of results in a national report.**
- **Integration of the accessibility theme into the official civic and electoral campaigns conducted by the CEC, so that information regarding the rights of persons with disabilities becomes a standard part of the electoral process.**
- **Creation of a national online platform with accessible explanatory materials (video with sign language interpreter and subtitles), always available to voters with disabilities.**

5.2. Final Conclusion: Media Accessibility as a Test of Democratic Credibility

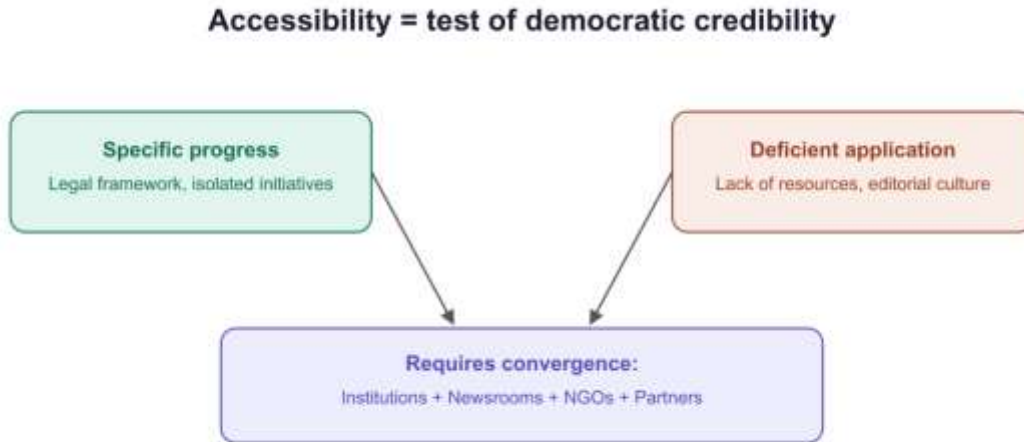


Figure 5. Accessibility = Test of Democratic Credibility

Media accessibility during electoral periods is not a mere technical detail or a bureaucratic formality. It constitutes a test of democratic credibility and alignment with European standards regarding the respect for fundamental rights.

The Parliamentary Elections of September 28, 2025 demonstrated, on the one hand, the existence of a well-structured normative framework, harmonized with international provisions, but on the other hand, also demonstrated the fragility of implementation mechanisms.

Specific progress – a few television stations that introduced sign language interpretation or online portals that addressed the disability theme – is insufficient to compensate for structural deficiencies.

The lack of specialized human resources, the absence of an editorial culture of inclusion, and the perception of accessibility as a peripheral and inconvenient task keep the topic at an insufficient level.

A mature democracy is measured not only by the number of competing parties or by the technical correctness of the electoral process, but also by how it manages to include and represent the vulnerable categories of society.

As long as persons with disabilities cannot follow electoral debates on equal terms and cannot form an informed opinion, the democracy of the Republic of Moldova remains incomplete and vulnerable.

This reality also raises a strategic question: can the Republic of Moldova claim to be consolidating a European and democratic path if it leaves in the shadows the rights of a significant portion of its population?

Beyond the legal aspect, accessibility is a test of trust for citizens and an indicator closely observed by the country's external partners.

Change is possible, however, and depends on:

- the editorial will of newsrooms, which must understand that accessibility does not diminish the quality of programs but enriches it;**
- the firmness of regulatory institutions, which must not be limited to issuing decisions, but must apply sanctions and stimulate good practices;**
- the involvement of civil society, which can maintain public pressure through monitoring and advocacy;**
- the support of international partners, who can offer expertise, resources, and models of success from other European states.**

External pressure from the European Union, the growing interest of journalists in training, and the emergence of innovative initiatives in the digital environment create a unique opportunity for change. If these forces converge, accessibility can move from the status of a formal obligation to a daily, visible, and functional reality.

In conclusion, media accessibility must be viewed not as a concession, but as

a democratic duty and an indicator of state modernization. The Republic of Moldova has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is prepared to treat all its citizens as equal participants in public life. Achieving this would mean not only a victory for persons with disabilities, but also a victory for the entire society, which would thereby confirm the maturation of Moldovan democracy.

6. Conclusions of the Disability Dimension Electoral Observation Mission Regarding the Setup of Party Headquarters and Polling Stations

Monitoring of the campaign and election day shows, consistently and from multiple sources, that the right to vote of persons with disabilities remains predominantly formal rather than effective. Although a few specific initiatives were recorded (e.g., the PAS program in Braille, some live broadcasts, or a functional ramp in a few party offices), the overall picture is one of limited accessibility and inconsistent inclusion.

During the analyzed period (September 2025), only 3 out of 55 party offices were functionally accessible, most events were held in spaces with evident architectural barriers, and electoral materials – offline

and online – were not systematically adapted for persons with visual, hearing, or intellectual disabilities.

On election day, numerous polling stations presented improper ramps, narrow doors, high thresholds, unadapted voting booths, and inaccessible restrooms; assistive equipment was temporarily missing or incorrectly used (for example, the stencil envelope sent with the mobile ballot box), and confidentiality was sometimes compromised in residential centers.

The human dimension confirms the same conclusion: electoral bureau members generally acted in good faith, but lacked sufficient practical training in interacting with persons with disabilities, which led to procedural hesitations and discriminatory language situations. In parallel, the ban on transporting voters, unaccompanied by a public adapted transport mechanism, further limited participation, especially in rural areas.

At the data level, collection is incomplete: other types of disabilities (intellectual, mental, multiple) are not recorded, and the place of voting (at the polling station or via mobile ballot box) is not noted. Furthermore, accessibility is often assessed intuitively by observers without technical expertise, generating inaccurate reporting. Without standardized indicators and a preventive infrastructure assessment, problems are discovered only on election day and cannot be resolved in time.

Overall, the report confirms that persons with disabilities demonstrate civic will and seek ways to participate, but are systematically impeded by physical, informational, organizational, and attitudinal barriers. A few positive examples (including two visible candidacies) show that change is possible, but without a unified approach – encompassing infrastructure adaptation,

accessible communication, practical training of electoral bureau members (EBM), adapted transport mechanisms, and rigorous data collection – equal participation remains an exception rather than a rule.

6.1. Recommendations Regarding Polling Station Setup

- **All polling stations should be set up at ground level or equipped with compliant ramps with a reduced inclination angle, handrails, and non-slip surfaces, to ensure safe access for persons with reduced mobility.**
- **Access doors must be sufficiently wide, without high thresholds or obstacles, to allow wheelchair passage.**
- **Restrooms must be adapted for persons with disabilities: equipped with support bars, wide doors, and sufficient maneuvering space.**
- **Access routes to polling stations must be clearly, visibly, and adequately illuminated, to facilitate orientation for persons with visual impairments and/or reduced mobility.**
- **Each polling station must permanently have at least two stencil envelopes for voters with visual impairments, to guarantee the possibility of independent voting.**
- **Each polling station must have a mobile voting booth adapted for wheelchair users, which can be used by teams with the mobile ballot box without depriving other voters of this right.**
- **A national procedure must be developed regarding the provision of adapted transport for voters with disabilities, particularly from rural areas, to enable them to safely reach polling stations without violating legislation on voter transportation.**

- **The infrastructure of public buildings used as polling stations must be adapted and modernized to meet the minimum accessibility standards provided by law.**
- **A preventive accessibility assessment of all polling stations must be conducted before each election, with sufficient time to remedy identified issues.**
- **Clear national indicators on physical accessibility must be introduced to allow comparison of inclusion levels between districts and localities.**
- **Local public authorities must be involved in the process of adapting electoral infrastructure, including through the allocation of necessary funds for ramp construction, restroom adaptation, and installation of visual and tactile signage.**
- **All accessibility equipment (ramps, mobile booths, stencil envelopes) must be functional, correctly installed, and available throughout the entire election day.**
- **Technical staff and electoral bureau members must be trained on the correct installation and use of accessibility equipment, to prevent situations where these remain unused or incorrectly installed.**
- **The data collection system regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process must be improved by including in electoral bureau reports information about types of disabilities (including intellectual, mental, and multiple) and about the place where the vote was cast – at the polling station or via mobile ballot box – to allow a complete and well-founded analysis of the real degree of accessibility and inclusion.**

- **A rapid reporting mechanism for accessibility problems on election day must be created, to enable immediate intervention and the removal of barriers preventing the participation of voters with disabilities.**
- **All political parties, local authorities, and the Central Electoral Commission must consistently apply the principle of "equal access for all" in the setup and management of the electoral process.**

The right to vote is a fundamental right and a pillar of democracy. For it to be real and not merely theoretical, joint efforts are required from the authorities, political parties, the mass media, and civil society.

At the same time, persons with disabilities play a decisive role: only through their active participation at the polling stations and in electoral processes can the stereotypes and prejudices that still persist be dismantled. The presence of these voters at the polls sends a clear message that they are equal citizens, with full rights, who must be respected and included in all decisions concerning the future of the country.

General Conclusions and Recommendations

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The integrated analysis of the five monitored dimensions – infrastructure, electoral programs, web, mass media, and participation – confirms that the Republic of Moldova has built a solid normative framework, but its real application remains partial, fragmentary, and uneven.

General Findings

Physical accessibility of polling stations is limited: only 5 polling stations among those monitored had fully compliant access ramps. The lack of standardized ramps, accessible restrooms, and visible signage affects real participation.

Digital accessibility is the most deficient dimension – 92% of party websites are inaccessible, meaning that thousands of voters with visual impairments cannot access essential information about electoral programs.

Media coverage remains superficial. The disability theme is rarely presented, often in general terms and with victimization overtones. Public television stations only partially complied with legal obligations regarding sign language interpretation.

Political parties treat inclusion as a marginal issue. Of the 23 analyzed electoral competitors, only 11 explicitly or tangentially included the disability theme, and only 7 treat the integration of persons with disabilities in fields such as education, work, and social life.

Public language about disability has improved compared to previous campaigns – overt slurs have disappeared, but neutral formulations predominate, lacking an active perspective on participation.

The participation of persons with disabilities in voting increased slightly (approximately 55% according to the CEC), but remains below the national average. The main barriers identified are the lack of adapted transport, inaccessible information, and discriminatory attitudes.

Detailed Thematic Conclusions

Physical dimension: CEC Regulation 1187/2023 is well formulated, but without a sanction mechanism. Local public authorities lack dedicated funds for accessibility adaptation of polling stations.

Digital dimension: An accessibility culture is absent. Parties lack IT specialists or consultants specialized in inclusive design. Although the CEC's electoral platform complies with WCAG standards, parties do not follow suit.

Media dimension: The Audiovisual Council (CA) has a regulatory framework (Decision 61/2024), but implementation is chaotic. Commercial media lacks resources for interpretation and subtitling, and public television stations have no dedicated budgets.

Institutional dimension: No political formation includes persons with disabilities in governing bodies. The accessibility theme is absent from statutes, internal regulations, and organizational development plans.

Strategic Conclusion

The Republic of Moldova has advanced legislatively, but not operationally. Without dedicated budgets and clear institutional responsibilities, the rights of persons with disabilities risk remaining merely a declarative objective. The next electoral cycle must be centered on implementation, not just on regulation.

In essence: inclusion is not a gesture of solidarity, but a condition for authentic democracy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendations

- 7. Institutionalization of accessibility: each institution involved in the electoral process (CEC, CA, APL) must have an annual accessibility plan with measurable indicators and a dedicated budget.**
- 8. A National Electoral Accessibility Fund, constituted from budgetary contributions and international donors, transparently managed by the CEC, dedicated to the setup of polling stations, digital adaptation, and personnel training.**
- 9. Annual reporting mechanism: all authorities and parties must present a report on implemented accessibility measures, and the CEC and CA must publish a consolidated report.**

Sectorial Recommendations

For the Central Electoral Commission (CEC)

- To integrate accessibility criteria into all public tenders regarding electoral infrastructure and equipment.**
- To include training modules on interaction with persons with disabilities in the training sessions for electoral bureau members.**
- To ensure the presence of assistive kits (magnifying glasses, voting stencils, audio guides) in all polling stations.**
- To develop a Visual Guide to Polling Station Accessibility, to be transmitted to local public authorities.**

For the Audiovisual Council (CA)

- **To apply sanctions for non-compliance with Decision No. 61/2024.**
- **To create a special budgetary line for audiovisual accessibility.**
- **To publish annually a list of compliant and non-compliant stations.**
- **To support the development of a common national interpretation and subtitling service, available to all broadcasters.**

For the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection

- **To integrate electoral accessibility into the National Inclusion Strategy 2026–2030.**
- **To ensure continuous training of civil servants in the field of disability.**
- **To develop a data collection system regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in elections.**

For Political Parties

- **Introduction of a "disability quota" – minimum 5% of budgetary subsidies for adapting websites, materials, and events.**
- **Adoption of an Internal Accessibility Policy and its inclusion in statutes.**
- **Publication of electoral programs in accessible formats (DOCX, HTML, audio, digital Braille).**
- **Attracting and promoting persons with disabilities in governing bodies.**

For Mass Media

- **Development of an Editorial Guide on Inclusive Communication.**
- **Training of journalists in the field of disability.**
- **Promotion of a discourse based on rights and participation, not on compassion.**

For Civil Society and External Partners

- **Continuation of independent monitoring of electoral cycles.**
- **Launch of an annual accessibility barometer.**
- **Development of pilot projects (e.g., accessible online platforms, materials in simplified language).**
- **Technical support for authorities in applying WCAG 2.1 and CRPD standards.**

Legislative and Public Policy Recommendations

10. **Amending the Electoral Code to introduce mandatory minimum accessibility criteria for the validation of polling stations.**
11. **Adoption of a national framework of standards for accessible design in IT and public infrastructure.**
12. **Inclusion of accessibility indicators in national CRPD implementation reports.**
13. **Creation of a national accessibility coordinator function within the Government of the Republic of Moldova.**

Final Recommendations

- **Revision of the websites of political parties, first and second-level local public authorities, central authorities, state**

institutions and agencies, and their accessibility according to international standards for web accessibility – WCAG.

- **Development of electoral programs and materials by electoral competitors in accessible formats for different types of disabilities (sign language, Braille, audio, easy-to-read and easy-to-understand, etc.).**
- **Organization by persons with disabilities and civil society organizations (CSOs) promoting their interests of advocacy actions directed at representatives of political formations/electoral competitors, with the aim of placing disability-related topics on their political agenda (election simulation exercises, "user safari," meetings at party headquarters, voter meetings, public debates in electoral TV programs, etc.).**
- **Assessment of the accessibility of all polling stations based on a common assessment instrument applied by the CEC, by organizations of persons with disabilities, and by organizations active in the disability field, and the inclusion of assessment results on the Accessibility Map.**
- **Training of electoral officials on special needs and the correct provision of necessary support to persons with disabilities during the electoral period, including on election day.**
- **Ensuring the translation into sign language of CEC announcements on election day and the online transmission of announcements on channels dedicated to persons with hearing disabilities.**
- **Media coverage of the accessibility issue as a precondition for the realization of other rights in the buildings where polling stations are located.**

- **Involvement of persons with disabilities as national observers in parliamentary elections.**
- **Implementation of information campaigns/civic and electoral education activities for persons with disabilities, promoting proactive participation in public and political life.**
- **Focusing on qualitative rather than only quantitative indicators, since the aim is to promote changes in perception and mentality, based on respect for the rights and equal participation of persons with disabilities.**
- **Going forward, more active encouragement is needed for the press and electoral competitors to treat the disability theme not merely as part of a general social discourse, but as a distinct priority linked to equal opportunities and the full participation of persons with disabilities in political and social life.**

Final Finding

Inclusion is not a cost, but an investment in democracy. Persons with disabilities must not be treated as passive beneficiaries of policies, but as equal citizens, with the right to decide, to be represented, and to participate fully in public life.



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.

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Architectural Accessibility in Practice

European Case Studies of Inclusive Buildings

Nikola Garovnikov

Mila Glišović

Abstract

Accessibility in the built environment continues to reveal a persistent gap between regulatory ambition and lived experience. This paper presents a narrative synthesis of the Erasmus+ cooperation project *Open Buildings of Europe: Good Practices Collection as Tools for Accessibility Audits (OBLIGE)*, focusing on nine case studies across Austria, Romania, and Türkiye. Through a combination of on-site assessments, user experience validation, and structured evaluation criteria, the study identifies patterns of inclusive design that can be transferred across contexts. The findings show that accessibility is best understood not as a checklist of isolated interventions, but as a continuous spatial and experiential journey. Buildings that perform well integrate step-free access, adequate spatial dimensions, accessible sanitary facilities, multi-sensory information systems, and operational practices such as trained staff and clear communication. The paper situates these findings within a broader human-rights and standardisation framework and argues for a shift from compliance-based approaches toward user-centered , evidence-based design.

Introduction

Across Europe, accessibility is formally recognised as a fundamental right. International frameworks such as Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities define accessibility as a precondition for equal participation in society. At the same time, European standards and policies, including EN 17210 and ISO 21542, provide detailed technical guidance for achieving accessible environments. Yet, despite this regulatory maturity, a gap persists between what standards prescribe and what users encounter in everyday spaces.

The Erasmus+ project *Open Buildings of Europe (OBLIGE)* was developed precisely in response to this gap. Its central premise is simple but critical: accessibility must be understood through real buildings, real users, and real conditions. The project therefore combined systematic fieldwork with methodological development. It documented inclusive design solutions in nine buildings across three countries and translated these findings into a practical audit framework.

The project's most important conceptual contribution lies in reframing accessibility not as a static attribute of a building, but as a dynamic and continuous experience. Accessibility unfolds as a sequence of interactions, beginning with arrival and extending through entry, movement, use of facilities, information access, and safe exit. This perspective shifts attention from isolated design elements to the coherence of the entire user journey.



Figure 1 – All examined locations

Methodological Approach

The analysis presented in this paper is grounded in a mixed-method approach that combines technical evaluation with experiential validation. Each of the nine buildings was assessed through a structured methodology that integrates quantitative measurements, qualitative observations, and user feedback.

The evaluation framework considers multiple dimensions of accessibility, including entrance and egress conditions, internal

circulation, usability of rooms and services, sanitary provision, way finding systems, and emergency preparedness.

Importantly, the methodology does not rely solely on compliance checks. It incorporates user experience surveys involving people with disabilities, as well as expert on-site inspections. This dual perspective ensures that findings reflect both measurable conditions and lived realities. The use of digital audit tools and precise measurement instruments, such as laser devices for spatial verification, further strengthens the reliability of the assessments.

The selection of case studies follows a deliberate logic. Each country contributes three buildings representing different typologies: museum, place of worship, and hotel. This typological balance allows the analysis to move beyond national regulatory differences and focus instead on functional patterns of accessibility.

Accessibility as a User Journey

A central insight emerging from the OBLIGE case studies is that accessibility is best understood as a continuous user journey. This journey begins outside the building, in the surrounding urban context, and extends through all stages of interaction with the space.

The first phase, arrival, often determines whether access is possible at all. Uneven terrain, unclear pathways, or inaccessible transport links can create barriers before the building is even reached. The second phase, entry, focuses on thresholds, door widths, and the presence or absence of steps. Even minor deviations, such as small threshold differences, can significantly affect usability.

Once inside, the journey continues through internal circulation. Corridors, elevators, and transitions between spaces must allow smooth and independent movement. This includes not only sufficient width and turning space, but also the absence of obstacles and clear spatial organisation. The availability and accessibility of sanitary facilities represent another critical point, often determining whether a building can be used comfortably over longer periods.

Equally important is access to information. Wayfinding systems must support orientation for users with different sensory abilities. This requires the integration of visual, tactile, and auditory cues. Finally, the journey concludes with safe egress, where emergency systems must ensure that all users can evacuate the building effectively.

This journey-based perspective reveals that accessibility failures rarely occur in isolation. Instead, they emerge from breaks in continuity. A building may provide accessible entry but fail in internal navigation. It may offer compliant sanitary facilities but lack clear information systems. True accessibility therefore depends on the alignment of all stages of the user experience.

Comparative Insights from European Case Studies

The nine case studies illustrate how accessibility is implemented across different contexts and building types. While each building reflects specific architectural, cultural, and regulatory conditions, several consistent patterns emerge.

Museums often achieve a relatively high level of physical accessibility, particularly in terms of circulation and sanitary provision. However, they frequently face challenges related to spatial constraints, crowding, and sensory accessibility. Historic

interiors, narrow passages, and uneven surfaces can limit maneuverability. At the same time, information systems may not fully address the needs of users with visual or hearing impairments.



Figure 2 – Museums

Places of worship present a different set of challenges. These buildings often carry strong cultural and architectural significance, which can limit the scope of structural modifications. Accessibility interventions must therefore be discreet and carefully integrated. The case studies show that dignified access can be achieved through subtle measures, such as improved contrast at stair edges, tactile cues, and clearly communicated guidance systems.



Figure 3 – Places of worship

Hotels generally demonstrate the highest level of functional accessibility, driven in part by market demand and tourism standards. Step-free entrances, elevators, and accessible rooms are

often present. However, gaps frequently appear in service delivery and communication. Accessibility information may not be clearly communicated to guests, and staff training can vary. This highlights the importance of operational aspects of accessibility, which extend beyond physical design.



Figure 4 – Hotels

Across all typologies, the most successful examples share a common set of features. These include step-free routes, adequate clear widths, accessible sanitary facilities, and multi-sensory wayfinding systems. They are supported by trained staff and clear communication protocols, which ensure that accessibility features are usable in practice.

Good Practices and Recurring Barriers

The case studies reveal a set of transferable good practices that can be applied across different contexts. These practices are not necessarily complex or expensive. Many involve careful attention to detail and a user-centered approach.

Barrier-free entrances, for example, are achieved through level access, ramps with appropriate gradients, and automatic door systems. Internal circulation is supported by wide corridors,

unobstructed pathways, and accessible vertical connections. Sanitary facilities are designed with sufficient space, appropriate fixtures, and clear usability. Wayfinding systems combine visual clarity with tactile and auditory elements.

At the same time, several recurring barriers persist. Inconsistent application of standards is a common issue, particularly in older buildings. Maintenance problems can reduce the effectiveness of existing accessibility features. Perhaps most importantly, the absence of user-centered design thinking leads to solutions that meet formal requirements but fail in practice.

These findings reinforce the idea that accessibility is not achieved through compliance alone. It requires continuous evaluation, adaptation, and engagement with users.

Universal Design and Broader Implications

The OBLIGE findings align closely with the principles of Universal Design. Concepts such as low physical effort, tolerance for error, and adequate space for use are reflected in the most successful case studies.

Universal Design extends accessibility beyond specific user groups. It improves usability for all people, including those with temporary limitations, elderly users, and families with children. It also contributes to sustainability by reducing the need for future modifications and enabling buildings to adapt to changing needs over time.

From this perspective, accessibility becomes not only a technical requirement but a broader design value. It reflects a commitment to inclusivity, dignity, and social participation.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the nine case studies highlights a key shift in understanding accessibility. Rather than treating it as a set of isolated interventions, accessibility must be integrated into the overall design and operation of buildings.

This requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving architects, engineers, facility managers, and users. It also requires a shift in mindset, from compliance-driven design to user-centered design. Buildings that perform well are those where accessibility is considered from the earliest stages of planning and continuously evaluated throughout their lifecycle.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of balancing structural and operational measures. Physical adaptations are essential, but they must be supported by clear communication and trained staff. Accessibility is therefore both a design challenge and a management challenge.

Conclusion

The OBLIGE project provides strong evidence that accessible design is achievable across diverse contexts. The case studies show that practical, transferable solutions already exist. The challenge lies in scaling these solutions and ensuring their consistent application.

Accessibility should be understood as a continuous process rather than a fixed state. It requires ongoing evaluation, user engagement, and adaptation. By focusing on the user journey and integrating physical, sensory, and operational aspects, buildings can move closer to truly inclusive environments.

The transition from standards to practice is not only a technical task. It is a cultural shift toward recognizing accessibility as a core quality of architecture and a fundamental condition for participation in society.

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A Practical Framework for Accessibility Assessment

The Open Buildings Checklist Methodology

Mila Glišović

Nikola Garovnikov

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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Letter from the Chairman's Desk

By Sunil Bhatia PhD

The day a human is born, the struggle to move begins, facing the challenges of inaccessibility. The body has no strength and needs the support of the mother, who carries the child in her arms, on her shoulders, or on her back to help him move from one place to another. Assistance for all acts essential for sustaining life and ensuring accessibility is provided by the parents.

Gradually, the child learns to walk with the support of a walker, making the world accessible step by step. As he grows, he begins to use available resources and experiences to transform inaccessible spaces into accessible ones. He applies both physical and mental strength—jumping across gaps, placing stones, wooden logs, or planks to cross obstacles.

His mental strength leads to the design of ramps, stairs, and various ambulatory devices such as wheelchairs and escalators, all aimed at enhancing mobility and accessibility.

Even before birth, his journey from the womb presents the greatest challenge of inaccessibility. Nature itself intervenes to make this passage accessible. When the womb opens the path before the expected time, it results in miscarriage or premature delivery. A delay in delivery can also be worrisome. In some cases, when the

mother's pelvic bones are narrow and the child's head gets stuck, it can lead to fatal consequences due to the inability to emerge. In such situations, surgery becomes the only safe solution. The child first brings out the head, followed by the rest of the body, completing the transition into the world.

This phenomenon is not limited to humans; every animal instinctively prepares to emerge from the womb at the right time. No living being chooses premature death or risks survival. The instinct for survival is learned within the womb and is evident in all living beings, including plants and animals. Another early instinct is thumb-sucking, which prepares the child to feed by suckling breast milk—an early exercise in ensuring accessibility to nourishment.

Once born, the child encounters two types of inaccessibility: natural and man-made. Natural barriers, such as rivers, are initially challenged through physical strength—jumping or wading—but fear of drowning or physical limitations lead to innovations like boats. Mountains are climbed; dense forests are navigated by pushing aside branches or following paths created by natural events like forest fires. Over time, tools such as the axe were designed to clear pathways.

Man-made inaccessibility at the horizontal level was first addressed by steps and later improved with ramps. Vertical challenges were initially managed by tying knots in ropes to prevent slipping, which later evolved into ladders and staircases. With technological advancement, escalators have provided a more efficient solution to vertical accessibility.

In the animal and plant kingdoms, inaccessibility is largely natural, not man-made. Birds that can fly face fewer barriers compared to

non-flying animals. Plants, being stationary, do not encounter issues of movement-related accessibility. Inaccessibility becomes significant only when mobility is involved.

Humans strive for accessibility to improve their lives, yet they also create inaccessibility for protection. Houses, doors, windows, and ventilators are designed to balance openness and security. Windows allow air when safe and are closed during danger. Ventilators near the roof provide light and air while restricting entry to harmful elements. Locks and latches ensure accessibility for the owner while preventing unwanted access.

The design of boats and ships overcomes the inaccessibility posed by water currents, depth, and width. In modern times, traffic jams create temporary inaccessibility, addressed by widening roads, introducing lanes, constructing flyovers, and installing traffic signals.

There are stages in life—infancy, disability, old age, and ultimately death—when human strength diminishes. Assistive tools help to some extent, but when strength reaches zero, solutions change entirely. A deceased person is carried in a coffin on the shoulders of others to reach the final destination. Ropes are used to lower the coffin into the ground, where the concepts of accessibility and inaccessibility lose their meaning.

Accessibility is possible as long as a person has the strength to move. When strength fades, the entire world becomes inaccessible. As a child, one depends on the mother; in old age, one depends on assistive technologies and others. I often say from every platform that the best assistive technology is one's family. No tool can replace the care provided with genuine emotion.

A lifeless body may be considered of no utility to society, yet it is carried with dignity by others to its final resting place.

I am thankful that, in such a short time, the Guest Editor has managed this special issue of April 2026 (Vol. 21, No. 4). Cristina Căluianu, co-founder of Asociația CED România – Centrul de Excelență prin Diversitate, and founder and director of Accessible Romania by Sano Touring, a tour operator specializing in accessible tourism, has shown remarkable sincerity and dedication. Her commitment to accessibility is clearly reflected in this issue.

Enjoy Reading.

With Regards

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Adj.Prof Mark Watson

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New Books



Sunil Bhatia

Design for All. Volume-II Drivers of Design



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Sunil Bhatia

Design for All

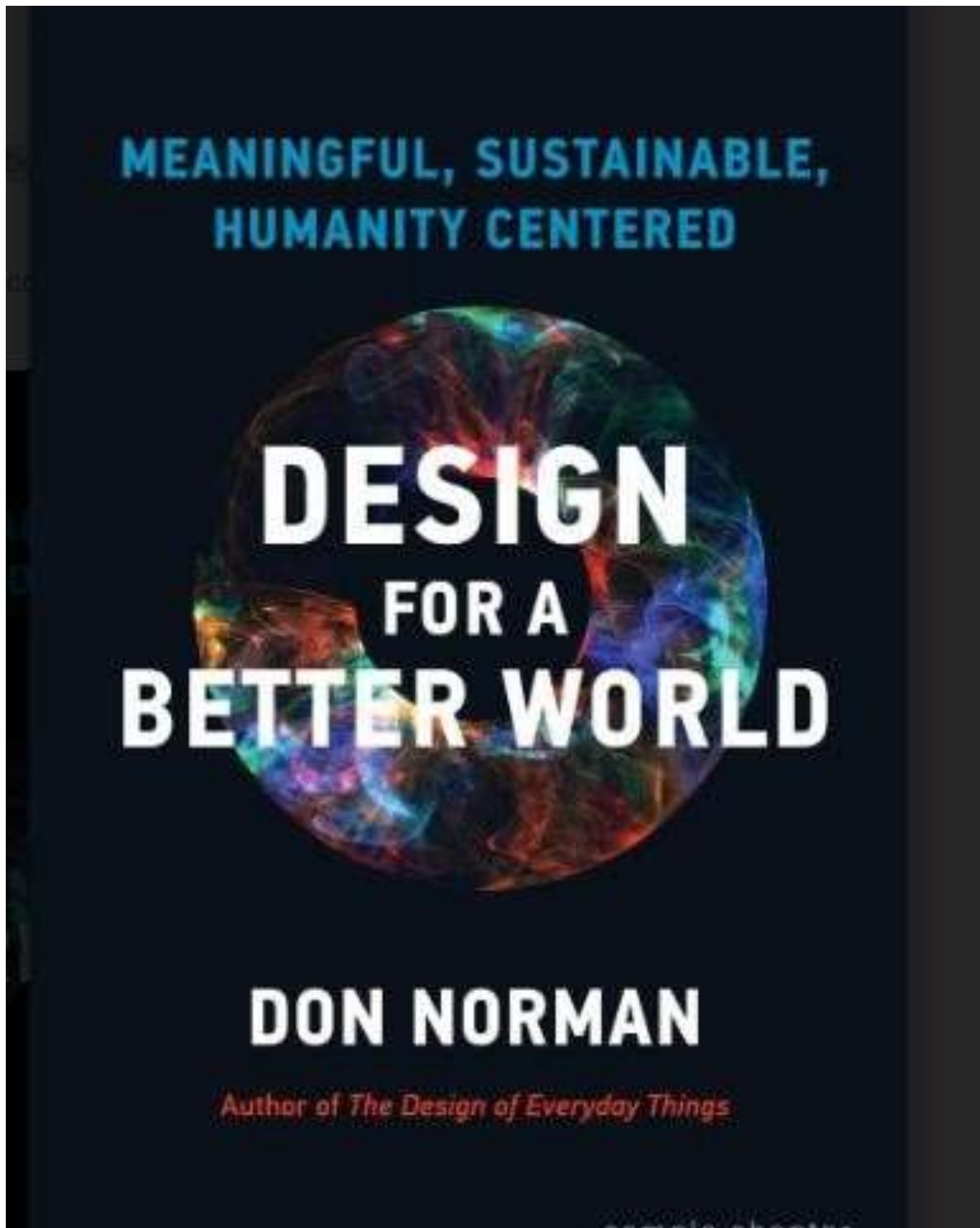
Drivers of Design

Expression of gratitude to unknown, unsung, unacknowledged, unlearned and countless millions of humans who have contributed immensely in making our society worth living. Their design of comb, kite, fireworks, glass, mirror even thread concept have revolutionized the thought process of human minds and prepared blueprint of future. Modern people may take for granted but its beyond imagination the hardships and how these innovative ideas could strike their minds. Discovery of fire was possible because of its presence in nature but management of fire through man made designs was a significant attempt of thinking beyond survival and no

doubt this contributed in establishing our supremacy over other living beings. Somewhere in journey of progress we lost the legacy of ancestors in shaping minds of future generations and completely ignored their philosophy and established a society that was beyond their imagination. I picked up such drivers that have contributed in our progress and continue guiding but we failed to recognize its role and functions. Even fears, confusion in designing products was marvellous attempt and design of ladder and many more helped in sustainable, inclusive growth.

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it is available on www.morebooks.de one of the largest online bookstores. Here's the link to it: <https://www.morebooks.de/store/gb/book/design-for-all/isbn/978-613-9-83306-1>





News

1. Inclusive By Design: Rethinking Private And Public Spaces

By investing in inclusive spaces, facility executives can improve employee satisfaction and increase long-term building value.

Jennifer Treter

The role of design in commercial interiors has changed. Today, it's no longer enough for an office or public-facing workplace to look modern and reflect a brand. The most successful environments are the ones that work for everyone who enters them: employees, visitors, vendors, and clients alike.

That shift is driven by a reality facilities leaders understand well: commercial spaces now serve a wider range of users than ever before. The workforce spans multiple generations. Neurodiversity is increasingly understood and supported. The number of people with diverse mobility, sensory, and cognitive abilities is growing. And the modern office is no longer a closed ecosystem; it's a hybrid hub with constant movement between public and private zones.

Universal design offers a practical framework for responding to these needs. It is not simply a trend, and it is not synonymous with ADA compliance. Universal design is a proactive approach to creating environments that are accessible to and usable by people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds without the need for specialized adaptation.

As facilities teams face pressure to improve occupancy, employee satisfaction, and long-term building value, inclusive design is no longer a “nice-to-have.” It’s a competitive advantage, a retention strategy, and increasingly, a baseline expectation.

Universal Design: Beyond Minimum Compliance

Most building owners and facility executives are familiar with ADA requirements and other accessibility codes. These standards are essential and legally required, but they are not the finish line.

ADA compliance tends to focus on accommodating specific conditions or addressing a defined list of barriers. With universal design, this focus starts earlier and goes further. It asks a different question: How can we design spaces so that more people can use them easily, comfortably, and independently from the start?

In a commercial office environment, this difference shows up in everything from the wayfinding system to the furniture selection to how meeting rooms are reserved. Universal design is not about creating “special” spaces. It is about designing one environment that works well for many types of people, reducing the need for separate accommodations later.

This approach also aligns with the long-term goals of facilities professionals. Inclusive design improves usability, reduces operational friction, and supports flexible occupancy—all while enhancing the experience of everyone, not only those with visible disabilities.

Inclusive Design In Offices: Workspaces And Public Zones

Office interiors offer a powerful opportunity for universal design because people engage with them in many different ways. Employees, visitors, clients, and vendors each navigate the environment with their own goals, expectations, and levels of familiarity – and inclusive design considers this full spectrum of experiences.



(Photo: Adobe Stock / Plaassc)

Employee areas such as workstations, private offices, meeting rooms, collaboration zones, cafés, and wellness rooms are environments where people spend long periods of time. Inclusive

design in these spaces supports sustained productivity, comfort, autonomy, and well-being.

Spaces that welcome or serve visitors—reception areas, lobbies, restrooms, waiting areas, and shared amenities—must also be designed inclusively, with attention to clarity, dignity, safety, and intuitive navigation. Because these areas are often used by people unfamiliar with the building, their design plays a key role in creating an immediate sense of ease and belonging.

A universally designed office also recognizes that everyone’s abilities and needs can shift over time. An employee recovering from surgery, a pregnant visitor, a vendor carrying equipment, a client with hearing loss, or a neurodivergent staff member sensitive to noise may encounter the space differently on any given day. Universal design anticipates this natural variability and ensures that the environment works well for everyone, no matter how they arrive.

Applying The Principles Of Universal Design

The principles of universal design provide a strong foundation for planning inclusive commercial interiors. Their greatest value comes from applying them to the everyday decisions that shape office environments.

Equitable Use: A universally designed interior is useful and accessible to people with diverse abilities. In an office setting, equitable use begins at the building entry and continues through every major user touchpoint. That includes step-free primary access, reception desks with seated and standing-height

transaction surfaces, and meeting spaces that support participation for all.

Flexibility in Use: Flexibility is essential in offices, especially as hybrid work reshapes how spaces are used. Universal design supports multiple ways of working; quiet focus, collaboration, private calls, and informal meetings without privileging one mode over another. Adjustable-height work surfaces, varied seating options, and meeting rooms that support different communication needs all contribute to flexibility.

Simple and Intuitive Use: Commercial interiors should be easy to understand, regardless of a person’s experience, language proficiency, or cognitive ability. Even visually striking workplaces can be confusing if they rely too heavily on subtle branding cues or unconventional layouts. Intuitive design is supported by clear circulation, logical placement of amenities, consistent signage, and user-friendly room reservation systems.

Perceptible Information: Information should be communicated effectively to users with different sensory abilities. This includes people with low vision, blindness, hearing loss, sensory processing differences, or people with diverse communication needs.

High-contrast signage, tactile and Braille indicators, and clear lighting strategies all improve accessibility. Strong wayfinding systems use multiple cues; color, typography, symbols, and spatial landmarks to help users orient themselves without relying on one sensory channel.

Tolerance for Error: This principle is often overlooked, but it is critical for safety. Tolerance for error means designing spaces

that minimize hazards and reduce the consequences of accidental actions. In an office environment, this can mean slip-resistant flooring, well-lit stairs, clear transitions between flooring materials, and furniture layouts that reduce tripping hazards in high-traffic areas.

Low Physical Effort: Commercial interiors should be usable comfortably with minimal fatigue. This benefits people with mobility limitations, chronic pain, limited strength, or temporary injuries, but it also supports the everyday needs of the workforce. Doors that open with minimal force, accessible controls, ergonomic furniture, and amenity zones that don't require reaching or bending all reduce unnecessary strain.

Size and Space for Approach and Use: Offices and public spaces must accommodate a range of body sizes, mobility devices, and movement patterns. This includes adequate clearances for wheelchair turning, accessible routes through furniture layouts, and meeting rooms where accessible seating is not isolated or treated as an afterthought. Inclusion is not only about access; it is also about experience and participation.



(Photo: Adobe Stock / Piai)

Practical Strategies For Facilities Teams

Universal design becomes real through planning decisions. For facility executives and building owners, some of the most impactful inclusive design strategies include:

Entry and arrival: Clear, step-free paths, weather-protected drop-off zones, and intuitive lobby layouts.

Reception and security: Transaction surfaces for seated and standing users, and queuing zones that don't block circulation.

Acoustics: Quieter work zones, sound-absorbing materials, and meeting rooms designed for speech clarity.

Lighting: Consistent, glare-controlled lighting and reduced harsh contrast between zones.

Restrooms: Layouts that support caregivers, mobility devices, and privacy needs beyond minimum code.

Workplace choice: A range of work settings, including quiet rooms, phone booths, and collaboration areas.

Technology: Accessible, intuitive AV and room scheduling tools that don't create barriers.

The Business Case For Inclusive Commercial Interiors

Inclusive design is often framed as an ethical imperative, and it is. But for facilities professionals, it is also a measurable value driver.

Universally designed offices can reduce the need for individual accommodations, minimize workplace injuries, improve employee

satisfaction, and support talent retention. They also strengthen the visitor experience, which is increasingly important as offices become client-facing destinations.

From a real estate perspective, inclusive spaces broaden market appeal. They attract tenants who prioritize employee experience and they support longer tenancy because spaces are more adaptable and resilient over time.

Most importantly, universal design creates environments where people feel they belong. That sense of belonging is not abstract. It influences how people work, how they collaborate, and how likely they are to stay.

In an era where workplaces must compete for talent and tenants alike, inclusive design is one of the most practical investments a facilities team can make.

About Jennifer Treter



Treter has held a senior leadership position with Hendrick for over 20 years, and as Managing Principal is responsible for driving operational initiatives and acting as a key link between the design team and clients. A graduate of Auburn with a Bachelor of Interior Design, Treter is affiliated with NCIDQ, CoreNet Global, Metro Atlanta Chamber, and is a LEED Accredited Professional.

(Courtesy: Facility Executive)

2.

New Forest National Park Boasts Accessible Visits

The New Forest National Park has developed a collection of resources and facilities under the banner of Accessible Visits. The offerings include a series of Miles Without Stiles trails that begin from car parks with designated accessible parking bays and nearby easy-access toilets.

Beyond walking routes, the park supports inclusive cycling through providers such as Pedall and Cyclexperience, which offer specialized cycles, including tandems and electric bikes. New Forest Sailability at Blashford Lakes and Lymington, on the other hand, provides boat access for people of different abilities. Visitors can also reach the area via Brockenhurst station, which features lift access to all platforms and accessible toilets, or through seasonal open-top bus services that accommodate wheelchairs.

The goal of New Forest National Park's Accessible Visits is to allow visitors with mobility challenges to enjoy woodland and heathland scenery without encountering barriers.



Image Credit: New Forest National Park

Trend Themes

- 1. Universal-design Trails - An expanding inventory of low-gradient, surfaced routes and accessible trailheads enables rethinking trail infrastructure and wayfinding for persons with diverse mobility needs.**
- 2. Inclusive Outdoor Mobility - Specialized cycles, electric-assist options and adaptive watercraft highlight shifting demand toward multimodal mobility solutions tailored to varied physical abilities.**
- 3. Integrated Accessible Transport - Seamless links between accessible rail, parking, toilets and seasonal bus services point to opportunities for end-to-end accessible journey platforms.**

Industry Implications

- 1. Outdoor Recreation - Parks and activity providers are positioned to offer differentiated accessible experiences that expand market reach beyond traditional able-bodied visitors.**
- 2. Mobility Equipment Manufacturing - Design and production of adaptive cycles, electric-assist drives and modular watercraft reflect a move toward scalable, inclusive mobility hardware.**
- 3. Tourism and Hospitality - Accommodation, guide services and transport operators are becoming focal points for curated accessible tourism offerings that demand standardized accessibility credentials and integrated booking systems.**

(courtesy: TrendHunter)



Programme and Events



Spark Student Design Awards: Any current University-level (or above) student, in any design category. (All entries in this competition must be student work, not professional work. Entries may be submitted from any time period of the student's study—could be a piece from last year).



Best of KBIS Awards Now Open for 2026 Entries



Best of KBIS Awards Now Open for 2026 Entries.jpg

The Kitchen and Bath Industry Show (KBIS) has opened applications for the premier awards program, Best of KBIS, that will spotlight industry excellence in 2026.



CRAFTING FURNITURE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES, HISTORIES AND FUTURES

Furniture occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of craft, design, architecture, and everyday life.

In regions across South and Southeast Asia and the wider Global South, furniture-making has long mediated relationships between local material cultures, artisanal knowledge systems, colonial and postcolonial histories, and global markets.

Yet contemporary furniture design from these contexts remains underrepresented within dominant design history narratives, museum collections, and critical discourse

DESIGN HISTORY SOCIETY

CALL FOR PAPERS DEADLINE: MONDAY 9TH MARCH 2026

ATLANTA

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2026 AWARDS ENTRIES OPEN

2026 AUSTRALIAN GOOD DESIGN AWARDS: ENTRIES NOW OPEN

The 2026 Australian Good Design Awards officially open for entries, inviting the nation's most forward-thinking designers, architects, engineers, strategists and business leaders to submit projects that exemplify this year's theme: *Design that Leads.*





UD26

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Save the Date! The 8th International Universal Design Conference is coming to Ireland



When? 4–6 November 2026
Where? Galway City, Ireland
Contact UD26@nda.ie



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 **CALL FOR ABSTRACTS:**



Transition Design Conference 2026 Weaving Regenerative Futures July 08-11 Mexico City

4 THEMATIC TRACKS

- TRACK 1.** Projects and proposals for long-term systemic transitions.
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- TRACK 3.** Education for long-term systemic change
- TRACK 4.** Mindsets and attitudes for the transition

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News - 26/12/2025

Call for Papers on Accessibility and Inclusion for Themed Issue of "Tourism Review"

Call for Papers on Accessibility and Inclusion for Themed Issue of "Tourism Review"

<https://www.accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.news.2446>

Ivor Ambrose, Managing Director

ENAT - European Network for Accessible Tourism a.s.b.l.

ART
OF
RESEARCH
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The ninth **Art of Research** conference will be held during **26-27 November 2026** at Aalto University, Espoo, Finland.

Faculty of Fine Arts
University of Lisbon
17-19 June 2026

Call for papers
12 January 2026

Deadline for Short Paper
and Pictorial

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More information

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Brand new! Call for Papers: Crafting Furniture in the Global South: Contemporary Practices, Histories and Futures

This symposium, co-convened by [Dr. Rukmini Chaturvedi](#) and the DHS, invites proposals that critically examine contemporary furniture design through the lens of craft, with particular attention to practices, objects, and discourses emerging from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the broader Global South. It seeks to foreground furniture as a site where questions of authorship, labour, material knowledge, identity, modernity, and global circulation are negotiated and contested.

Find out more: <https://lnkd.in/eYQmwFSj>



A yellow rectangular poster with white text. The text reads "2026 DESIGN WRITING PRIZE" in large, bold, white, sans-serif font. Below it, in a smaller font, "NOW OPEN FOR ENTRIES". At the bottom right, "Deadline: Sunday 10th May". At the bottom left, the "DESIGN HISTORY SOCIETY" logo is displayed in white, stacked text. There are two black circular shapes on the left and right sides of the poster, partially overlapping the yellow background.

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