



Letter to the Editor

On why universal design must be considered the minimum in the field of the built environment

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The notion of universal design had its roots in the early US disability rights movement of the 1960s.¹ Its widely credited ‘father,’ Ron Mace, defined universal design as “the concept of designing all products and the built environment to be aesthetic and usable to the greatest extent possible by everyone, regardless of their age, ability, or status in life.”²

Wheelchair-bound himself because of Polio acquired during childhood, Mace’s own experiences—hindrances to social participation, specifically physical (spatial) barriers that put him at a disadvantage³—led to the establishment in 1989 of the Center for Accessible Housing, at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, US.^{2,3} Currently known as The Center for Universal Design, this change in focus of the institute from accessibility to universal design is representative of a narrative arc that informs much of what spatial designers use today in designing inclusive spaces.

Albeit simplistic—as they say, there are more to it than meets the eye—I’d like to simply narrow in on the attitude that underpins this arc, beginning with the challenges faced by early proponents of accessible design.

As but just one of the many narratives of humanity rising above adversity, we are almost always inclined to highlighting such a triumph

but forget that for everyone story of success, our humanity grounded in empathy is sidelined—as if only through the trauma of experience can we be human.

Not to be dismissive, the knowledge base available to us now has been founded in such documentations of human experiences such as Mace’s, and indeed, there have been great design innovations precisely because of this. One good example of this is the now common access ramps that allow access for all—exemplifying the fundamental notion of accessibility: that what many consider but another flight of steps is, in fact, an insurmountable Everest to some.

Flowing from this ‘reactionary’ narrative, the shift from accessible design to universal design was not as direct as one might think—incidental is more fitting. As Steinfeld and Maisel¹ would emphasize, designs that were intended to be for the exclusive use of the disabled population is slowly being revealed to be useful to all in fact: “The result of the effort to eliminate discrimination, to make the world accessible and usable for all, is that unintended consequences are becoming evident.” The authors’ example of this is how elevators in subway stations primarily meant to give access to the disabled are now used by all ranging from travelers with luggage and those who are simply too tired from a day’s work.¹

Crucially, the learnings derived from these past challenges are essential to educational institutions that in turn play a vital role in paving the way for a generation of ‘woke’ practitioners of the built environment.⁴

Specific to the practice of interior design in the country, the current curriculum has a provision under the course Professional Practice and Ethics that covers the study of B.P. 344 or The Law to Enhance Mobility of Disabled Persons. Beyond education, this is further reinforced in the subject’s inclusion in the Board of Interior Design examination administered by the Philippine Regulatory Commission. In the professional practice, R.A. 10350 or the Philippine Interior Design Act of 2012 and its emphasis on the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs offered by the Philippine Institute of Interior Designers (PIID), ensures that designers are up to date with the advancements in universal design. Although much has been gained in this evolutionary process, it is now imperative that we continue moving forward in a direction that is defined by empathy. Beyond these ideas of ‘reactionary’ and the ‘incidental,’ we must continue to act and push for a truly inclusive design language informed by empathy first and foremost.

Foregrounding the Principles of Universal Design⁵, designers must deepen their ties with various professionals from other fields—with Occupational and Physical Therapy at the forefront—for us to create spaces that are for use by all that accommodate the most vulnerable members of society as a minimum.

Universal design must be considered the baseline in the field of the built environment because we are but at the cusp of its fulfillment, and there is a lot to be done still.

Locally, we need to acknowledge that existing frameworks and systems are long overdue for a revisiting—only after then can we even begin to tackle the bigger problem of raising awareness.

As designers of the built environment were once accountable for discriminatory spatial practices (i.e., physical barriers),¹ we must now ensure that our designs moving forward also *speaks* of inclusivity. That the everyday spaces we live in

serve as a reminder to all that design is not exclusive—with hopes of cultivating a mindset by way of *empathy by design*.

From here, we will see that we have come full circle in this brief history of universal design and arrive at the core of what it really means to live in an inclusive world: social justice.^{1,4} As succinctly stated by Steinfeld and Maisel: “Equality of access to the environment has always been an issue in civil rights.”¹

This is far from a polemic and is, in fact, but a letter that parallels the trajectory of the history of universal design beginning with a personal account of my own: after all, I have a niece diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). It can even be argued that this is but a reaction based on the worry for this family member come the time that she will have to be on her own—only conveniently intersecting with my professional practice.

Given this frame and still consistent with the narratives that continue to drive the improvements to universal design, this piece can be taken as such: a letter imploring future generations of practitioners in the built environment to be more mindful of the impact of our choices—and yes, critically, to be better than I was.

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