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Accessibility and Conservation in Contemporary Cities: A(n) (Im)possible Coupling

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Guest Editor: Glyn Everett, University of the West of England, UK

How to Cite: Pretto, A. 'Accessibility and Conservation in Contemporary Cities: A(n) (Im)possible Coupling.' *Architecture_MPS* 16, 1 (2019): 3.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.amps.2019v16i1.003>.

Submission date: 15 June 2018; Acceptance date: 27 February 2019; Publication date: 1 November 2019

Peer review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access:

Architecture_MPS is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Abstract

Cities are built by and for able-bodied people and are often composed of a range of elements that make them partially (or not) accessible to disabled people. Architectural barriers within and around buildings can limit disabled people's access to structures and services, precluding their full participation in a social life. It is not possible to talk about making further social progress until disabled people are no longer victims of marginalisation caused by our urban architecture. In order to identify some specific problems and possible solutions, a qualitative research study was carried out in a city in northern Italy, involving people with sensory and physical impairments. Findings indicate that cities in general, and the oldest ones in particular, can present an important problem: some historic centres and buildings are not (or cannot be) restored to become more accessible.

This lack of accessibility will increase the exclusion of disabled people by imposing limitations and restrictions, from mobilising around urban centres, to use of pavements, entry into shops or workplaces, through to accessing treatment and health services. Moreover, this research demonstrates that, in many cases, relatively inexpensive and simple measures and arrangements might be enough to help tackle and solve many of these problems. This paper argues that a first, fundamental step in looking to improve access should be to involve disabled people in participatory planning. These users will be the best experts of their own needs and some of the best informed about the attributes and particularities of any alterations or adaptations needed to help them negotiate, manage and plan the areas in which they live.

Keywords: disability; accessibility; built environment; old cities

Introduction

This paper focuses on the problems encountered by disabled people in the historic built environment, considered not merely as an ensemble of places and buildings to visit for cultural interest, but as a setting for everyday life activities.

Disability is still as yet an under-researched field. Due to the breadth and diversity of ways in which minds and bodies can experience impairments, it is by no means simple for us to comprehend the range of difficulties different disabled people might encounter each day with regard to problems of accessibility.¹ Let us think about this from our own experience: how many disabled people do we know that we meet in a day? Probably few, perhaps none. Yet the disabled population is large: it is estimated that over 80 million European citizens are disabled.² According to the World Health Organization, about 15 per cent of the world's population (more than one billion people) live with some form of disability. This rate is increasing, not only because of population ageing but also because chronic diseases progressively spread among people of all ages.³ However, why do we see so few disabled people in our cities? Maybe it is because urban areas and buildings are hardly accessible.

Cities – especially ‘old cities’ – are built by and for able-bodied people, and consist of many elements that hinder accessibility for disabled people.⁴ Urban areas and buildings often have limited accessibility, despite supranational recommendations⁵ and national regulations on the elimination of architectural barriers. These barriers limit disabled people's access to places, buildings, activities and services, impeding full participation in social life.⁶

In order to identify obstacles in the urban environment, qualitative research was conducted in Trento, a city in north-east Italy with features common to many other Western European cities. People with various sensory and physical impairments were involved in the study, and thanks to the experiences of these participants, numerous unsolved problems were identified. In particular, it emerged that historic centres and buildings may often not be managed and/or restored with sufficient focus upon improving accessibility, and do not attempt to incorporate the perspectives of the ‘embodied experts’, disabled people themselves.

Accessibility and Conservation

Accessibility – the possibility for people with any kind of disability, either temporary or permanent, to access autonomously and on an equal basis with others the physical environment, transportation, information and other facilities and services⁷ – is a ‘precondition for participation in society and in the economy’,⁸ and a prerequisite for social inclusion.⁹ For these reasons, accessibility is one of the essential principles identified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),¹⁰ and one of the main areas for action of the European strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth and development.¹¹

Everyone should equally be able to access and make use of the built environment in order to satisfy their needs.¹² Given this, a lack of accessibility symbolises the exclusion of disabled people from social life.¹³ In particular, it is important to highlight the lack of accessibility in places and buildings of historical and cultural interest. These places and buildings are numerous in ‘old cities’, and such great importance is attached to their conservation and protection that it can prevail over the rights of disabled people to enjoy access. The CRPD (in particular Article 30) also recognises the right of disabled people to access ‘as far as possible’ places and monuments of national cultural value.¹⁴ Thus, environmental constraints and conservation can impose themselves upon and restrict the adaptations required or requested for improved accessibility.

According to Starn,¹⁵ the stress upon conservation principles and procedures in urban planning is the outcome of a modern preoccupation generated by a socio-economic and political crisis, which has created the need to preserve the past and its artefacts so as to emphasise a sense of continuity and tradition. Buildings, monuments and historic city centres, being evidence of our past,¹⁶ are certainly an integral part of our culture and identity,¹⁷ and enhance a sense of place, whether it be local, regional or national.¹⁸ For these reasons, it is seen as the duty of state and local government to identify, protect and conserve such assets for future generations.¹⁹

The paradigm of historical conservation – especially in Western Europe²⁰ – has become central to urban planning, requiring processes and solutions to develop and maintain connections between the history of a place and its present populations and cultures.²¹ Conservation regulations play an important role in urban politics concerning the planning and management of the city, sometimes even at the expense of the heterogeneous social dynamics and forces within the city itself.²² This is a potentially serious limitation of conservation because, in order to administer and plan the urban environment, it is crucial to consider the interests and needs of the people currently living within it.

These interests and needs will be different and may sometimes be conflicting, meaning that planning needs should seek to be the outcome of a negotiation and subdivision of power and control.²³ Although the rights of disabled people are considered crucial in some respects, intervention in restoration and/or adjustment of historical sites and structures often limits (or ignores) these rights, if the authenticity of the historical resource could be threatened.²⁴ In other words, there is a tendency to protect and conserve the historicity and authenticity of a place or a building to the detriment of universal accessibility, thereby excluding disabled people.²⁵ On the contrary, this paper will argue that as irreplaceable as a structure may be, we should seek to try to satisfy the needs of all the people who visit it,²⁶ and especially of those who live or work near or within it every day.²⁷ Historical urban buildings are numerous, and are often large and often located in central areas of cities, commonly becoming seats of public institutions, commercial and recreational activities, and public facilities and services. Such structures are accessed not only for touristic and/or cultural aims; they can be public sites, workspaces and study areas where autonomous access by all peoples needs to be ensured.²⁸

Research Area and Methods

In order to identify obstacles in the historical urban environment, a qualitative research study was conducted in Trento, a city in north-east Italy. Trento is the capital of the Alpine region of Trentino-Alto Adige and of one of its two provinces (Trentino). As a consequence, it is the seat of numerous economic, political and social institutions representing the surrounding territory.

Trento – which currently has about 120,000 inhabitants – was founded by the Romans in the first century BC and, like many other ‘old cities’,²⁹ has been ruled by a succession of empires and has gone through many wars and subsequent transformations of an architectural, economic, political and social nature. In recent decades, various parts of the city have required remarkable efforts of reinterpretation, in particular after important industrial districts fell into disuse.³⁰ Processes of territorialisation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation³¹ have been implemented in different areas of the city. Also, the historical centre has been significantly revitalised and renovated, and has been the subject of critical urban planning projects that have limited the volume of motor traffic.³² This process is similar to ones adopted by other European cities, in which critical efforts have been made in the past few decades to allocate to pedestrians and cyclists areas that were previously dominated by motor traffic.³³

Trento has worked intensively to develop and improve regulations on accessibility. In Italy, accessibility was debated immediately following the Second World War, and the Constitution of the Italian Republic (enacted in 1947) claims not only that all citizens should have equal social dignity, but also that the republic is responsible for removing obstacles that restrict citizens’ freedom and equality and, as a consequence, impede the full development of the human person and effective participation in the political, economic and social organisation of the country. However, the first national generic norms on architectural barriers in public places and transportation were established only at the beginning of the 1970s. In 1989, these regulations were extended to the adjustment and restoration of private buildings.³⁴ Thanks to the possibility to independently legislate,³⁵ the Autonomous Province of Trento enacted its first specific law on architectural barriers in 1981, outlining the ‘Norms for the elimination of marginalising situations which affect people with psychic, physical and sensorial difficulties’. In some respects, this provincial law anticipated the national one of 1989 in providing regulations for civic housing. In order to adapt to the national law of 1989, the provincial law was updated in 1991, when the Autonomous Province of Trento established the existing rules around eliminating barriers, improving accessibility in public and

private buildings and sites, and also enabling interventions to overcome or remove architectural barriers in spaces protected for their environmental, artistic, archaeological, historical and cultural value.³⁶

Using a biographical interview technique, people with various disabilities were interviewed. The selection of people to interview developed as the research evolved. At the beginning, three major disability organisations were contacted and their presidents interviewed: the Trento section of the Italian Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted, the Trento section of the National Institution of the Deaf, and the Cooperative Handicrea (this group was contacted because they are very well known locally for providing support, assistance and activities for people with physical and mobility impairments). Thanks to the help of these three organisations, a range of people with sensory and physical disabilities and impairments were involved.

In total, 73 people participated: 35 males and 38 females aged between 23 and 69. Among these, 26 were blind or partially sighted, 18 were deaf or hearing impaired, and 29 had various forms of physical disabilities. Regarding occupational background, 6 interviewees were unemployed, 4 were in retirement, 5 were university students and the others had jobs. Finally, all interviewees were resident in Trentino, but not all were from the region. The fact that some of them came from other territorial areas, and that most had travelled for tourism or work, provided the opportunity to compare the accessibility of Trento with other cities.

The research project, conducted between March 2015 and July 2017, was supported by an exhaustive collection of photographs taken in two stages. First, elements and features of the urban environment that might impact accessibility or endanger disabled people were photographed while walking through the city. Second, photographs were taken during the gathering of interviews, such that the situations and difficulties that participants described in their narratives could be identified and verified.

Problems of Accessibility in Historical City Centre and Buildings

Despite the fact that Trento was considered by the interviewees to be a city in which much had been done about accessibility, the conservation of historical sites and structures still tends to prevail over this. Participants revealed numerous difficulties created by the historicity of buildings and places, and consequent features and issues. However, this work focuses on those aspects that were mentioned often and occur not only in Trento, but also in many other cities.

The historical area par excellence is the centre, that is, the 'old city'.³⁷ The historical centre and its buildings acquire an emblematic significance³⁸ thanks to their historical and spatial centrality,³⁹ and there is the tendency to preserve them and/or recreate ad hoc specific features to maintain the sense of constancy over time. For example, the typical sett paving (see Figure 1A,B) is a recurring feature of the historical areas of Trento, similar to other European cities,⁴⁰ but this type of paving can cause great difficulties for disabled people. Participants pointed out that a more regular and/or well-kept surface would be a better solution, because wheelchairs, sticks and other support devices could move more smoothly, without causing discomfort and the risk of catching, tripping and falling:

Setts would not be a problem if they were well maintained, but they become a problem when the paving is uneven or a sett is missing and there is a hole . . . when they are not well maintained, in short . . . the white stick gets stuck in the hole, and I have changed a lot of sticks because day after day, sticks crack. (Blind interviewee)

In New York, there are no setts! Instead, I remember that, for example, when I was in Prague, there were cobbles, and those are extremely dangerous . . . because the wheels of the wheelchair . . . the front wheels get struck . . . but how do they not understand some things? . . . Setts in Trento are a little better because they are flat, but they are not the best solution, especially when they are uneven . . . Concrete and uniform surfaces are much better. (Wheelchair-user)



Figure 1 Photographs of streets without (A) and with (B) pavements in the historic centre of Trento.

According to respondents, sett paving could be kept if it was well-maintained, making it even and without holes. Such maintenance would also contribute to the image of a cared-for city.

Pavements are another problem, since they are not always present in old urban centres, as shown in Figure 1A. Things are easier for many disabled people if streets have pavements. In particular, in many parts of the historical centre of Trento, pavements have been restored and adjusted with dropped kerbs and flat paving different from the street surface (see Figure 1B), which can be very important for blind and visually impaired people. This demonstrates how it is possible to take a reasonable approach to restoration that also contributes to a city's aesthetics.

When pavements exist and are free from architectural barriers (such as steps or too-steep ramps), they should provide a safe space of transit for disabled people. However, this is often not the case. In Trento in recent decades, as in many other cities, the historical centre and restricted traffic areas have become more and more crowded, being used for commercial and recreational activities and services.⁴¹ As shown in Figure 2A, pavements can be full of bar tables, signs, artists, stalls and much more.⁴² This development makes urban centres more active and vital, but at the same time also more demanding for disabled people:⁴³

I broke at least 7–8 sticks ... Gosh, the pavement has to be clear ... blind and partially sighted people need an empty wall in order to get their bearings ... tables and chairs from bars and coffee shops, planters, bicycles must not be there ... and also public services put garbage cans and benches there ... municipal workers must be stupid. (Visually impaired interviewee)

Moreover, as a consequence of restrictions on traffic⁴⁴ and the creation of shared spaces,⁴⁵ the number of bicycles in city centres has increased considerably. Besides finding bicycles parked in inappropriate areas (Figure 2B), it is not uncommon to see cyclists riding on pavements (Figure 2C). Despite the fact that these practices are forbidden by the traffic code, police and authorities tend to turn a blind eye to these infractions,⁴⁶ without considering the dangers such habits could pose to disabled people:

... And I hear a bell from a bike that is approaching; they ring the bell to make me move away. Are they kidding me? Cyclists have to ride on the road ... I cannot go down the pavement to free their way. (Wheelchair-user)

Bicycles are appreciated in urban centres and definitely preferred to cars, but not by disabled people when they meet with cyclists on pavements or in shared spaces.⁴⁷ Bicycles are rather inaudible and

hardly identifiable at long range. For deaf, blind and visually impaired people, this can pose a serious risk, because they may not have time to recognise and react to the danger. Moreover, cyclists are not always able to identify disabled people, especially if they do not use visible support devices (for example, wheelchairs, guide dogs and white sticks).⁴⁸



Figure 2 Photographs of pavements in the historical centre occupied by (A) the tables and chairs of a bar, (B) badly parked bicycles and (C) cyclists riding on the pavement.

All these issues are amplified in the evenings and at night, when the daylight is replaced by softer artificial light. The conservation of old street posts and lights makes historical centres, streets and buildings more evocative, but this kind of illumination may often be insufficient or inadequate for disabled people:

In the evening, going out with low illumination . . . is difficult . . . going to the cinema or the theatre, for us it isn't right and also dining out at restaurants is not so good, because there are often soft lights . . . in the evening, the deaf prefer to stay at home watching TV, or stay at someone else's home . . . at a friend's house . . . or in well-illuminated places. (Deaf interviewee)

If crossing streets and squares or walking on pavements is felt to be difficult and dangerous, disabled people will be deprived of opportunities to mobilise like able-bodied pedestrians. If they cannot enjoy the historical centre, they will also be deprived of an urban social life. In this way, disabled individuals will become less visible citizens within urban spaces, and risk being excluded from various platforms for social life and interaction.⁴⁹

In addition to the barriers within open spaces that can hinder mobility and access to sites and buildings, there are also obstacles to accessing and moving about within these structures. Issues of accessibility within buildings of historical and cultural interest is explored in literature⁵⁰ considering mainly touristic and cultural activities (such as visiting castles and museums), but attention is less often focused on architectural barriers that disabled people encounter in their everyday lives within such buildings.⁵¹ Trento, like many other cities, has numerous historical buildings and structures devoted to public and private offices and activities. (Figure 3 provides some examples.)



Figure 3 Historic buildings in the centre of Trento: (A) the court, (B) a bank, (C) a jewellery shop, (D) a supermarket, (E) a university department, (F) ex-branch of the urban youth library (a bar from May 2018).

Disabled people – including the participants in this research project – access these buildings as users, customers, workers and students. Interviewees talked about many problems experienced within these historical buildings:

I don't have any problems in my office, but when we have meetings in the big hall, I have trouble with my hearing aids. I can't hear a thing because the ceiling is too high and there is an echo ... I mean, there are no frescoes or things like that, and they could have built a dropped ceiling ... doing so, you could save money on heating costs. (Hearing-impaired interviewee)

Yesterday, I saw a lovely shirt in a shop in the city centre, but I couldn't get in because there was a step ... almost every old building in the centre has steps, and I cannot get in. (Wheelchair-user)

The door is too heavy. I do not have enough strength in my arms and hands to open it, and I have to wait for someone to open it for me to go in or out ... I asked if it was possible to put a button to open it automatically, but they told me that it was not possible because it is a historic building. (Interviewee with rheumatoid arthritis)

These extracts depict just a sample of the numerous problems that disabled people can face in historical buildings, and their unheard requests for improved access. Bathrooms that are too small or

otherwise inaccessible; stairs, steps, lack of ramps, or ramps that are too steep; the absence of lifts, or lifts that are too narrow or without audio-support; soft illumination in rooms, corridors and stairs; ceilings that are too high; doorways that are too narrow; doors that are too heavy or with high handles; lack of technological support devices – these represent something of the range of problems that disabled people can face daily.

Conservation – as important as it is – can perpetuate a lack of accessibility. Is it actually impossible to make these historical spaces and buildings accessible? As claimed by the interviewees, it seems that, in many cases, leaving things as they are is the easiest option, and there are no actual motivations linked to conservation.

With regard to accessibility to historical sites exclusively for cultural purposes, participants accepted, with heavy heart, that barriers (such as those mentioned above) existed to accessing such spaces and buildings, and they did not expect interventions to be made that would be too impactful. But their opinion of historical sites and structures where everyday life activities took place was different. If market stalls, or the tables and chairs of bars, did not threaten the authenticity and historicity of an old square, why should it not be possible to ensure free routes of transit for disabled people? If an old building is devoted to commercial activities (such as clothing stores or ice-cream parlours), why cannot their entrances be fitted with access ramps? Could access not be improved while also preserving the historicity of a building?

Conclusions

The participants' experiences suggest that these problems often depend on the fact that planners and city administrators assess and interpret accessibility merely in compliance with norms and regulations,⁵² which – unfortunately – accept a set of derogations when sites and buildings are considered of cultural and historical interest. The conservationist intent of the United Nations that restricts the right of disabled people to access 'as far as possible' places and monuments of national value⁵³ seems to support – in spite of regulations – the maintenance of a lack of accessibility with regard to historic cities.

A suggestion that comes from this research study, and that could help administrators, urban planners, architects and other figures involved, is to carefully evaluate the intended designated use of historical components of the city. If a magnificent sixteenth-century building is converted into a school or a bank, or for another public purpose, it should be necessary to adjust it to make it accessible and to not limit access for disabled people.⁵⁴ However, it is not realistic to expect these experts, in spite of their preparation and vision, to fully understand the needs of the wide array of types of disability.⁵⁵ The solution to this issue has been known for decades: participatory planning – an ensemble of bottom-up processes in which different communities and groups of stakeholders get involved to identify problems, interests and needs, negotiate divergent and conflicting requirements, and seek to find adequate and balanced solutions.⁵⁶ Participatory planning is even more efficient and effective when marginalised groups of people are included – such as disabled people – who can often be excluded from the decision-making processes of local administrations.⁵⁷ The participation of these groups is crucial, because they can inform and instruct the technical know-how. These users will be the best experts, on the one hand, of their needs and, on the other hand, of the attributes and particularities of alterations that may be required to help them manage and plan their access to, and use of, historical buildings and spaces.⁵⁸

Declarations and Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests with this work.

Notes

¹ Pretto, *Prigionieri di una diagnosi*.

² EDF, 'Nothing About Us Without Us'.

³ WHO, 'World Report on Disability'.

⁴ Hahn, 'Disability and the Urban Environment'.

⁵ UN, 'Disability, Accessibility and Sustainable Urban Development'.

⁶ Pretto, *Prigionieri di una diagnosi*.

- ⁷ UN, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'; EC, *Communication from the Commission*.
- ⁸ EC, *Communication from the Commission*, 5.
- ⁹ EC, *Communication from the Commission*, 5; UN, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'.
- ¹⁰ UN, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'.
- ¹¹ EC, *Communication from the Commission*.
- ¹² Dischinger and Filho, 'Can Tactile Tiles Create Accessible Urban Spaces?'
- ¹³ Casey et al., 'Is Seeing Perceiving?'
- ¹⁴ UN, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities'.
- ¹⁵ Starn, 'Authenticity and Historic Preservation'.
- ¹⁶ Gubert, 'Il contributo della sociologia all'analisi e alla pianificazione dei centri storici'.
- ¹⁷ Sen et al., 'We Can Protect our Past?'
- ¹⁸ Graham et al., 'Literature Review: Historic Environment, Sense of Place, and Social Capital'; Rowntree, 'Creating a Sense of Place'.
- ¹⁹ UNESCO, 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage'.
- ²⁰ Starn, 'Authenticity and Historic Preservation'.
- ²¹ Briney, 'The Importance of Historic Preservation'.
- ²² Sen et al., 'We Can Protect Our Past?'
- ²³ Kaufman, *Place, Race, and Story*.
- ²⁴ PAT, 'Dispensa Informativa'.
- ²⁵ Gleeson, 'Disability and the Open City'; Historic England, 'Access to Historic Landscapes'.
- ²⁶ Sen and Mayfield, 'Accessible Tourism'.
- ²⁷ MiBAC, 'Linee guida per il superamento delle barriere architettoniche nei luoghi di interesse culturale'.
- ²⁸ Historic England, 'Access to Historic Landscapes'.
- ²⁹ Salvati and Morelli, 'Unveiling Urban Sprawl in the Mediterranean Region'.
- ³⁰ Franceschini and Ulrici, 'Una città che sta cambiando'.
- ³¹ Rickards et al., 'Urban Studies after the Age of the City'.
- ³² Franceschini and Ulrici, 'Una città che sta cambiando'.
- ³³ Demerath and Levinger, 'The Social Qualities of Being on Foot'.
- ³⁴ MiBAC, 'Linee guida per il superamento delle barriere'.
- ³⁵ 'Special Statute for Trentino-Alto Adige'.
- ³⁶ PAT, 'Dispensa Informativa'; Barbaro, 'Abbattimento barriere architettoniche'.
- ³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
- ³⁸ Stoiculescu, 'Modelling the Cognitive Map of the City Centre'.
- ³⁹ Gubert, 'Il contributo della sociologia'.
- ⁴⁰ Blake, *Introduction to Landscape Design and Construction*.
- ⁴¹ Lid and Solvang, '(Dis)ability and the Experience of Accessibility in the Urban Environment'.
- ⁴² Gehl, *Life between Buildings*.
- ⁴³ Lid and Solvang, '(Dis)ability and the Experience of Accessibility in the Urban Environment'.
- ⁴⁴ Demerath and Levinger, *The Social Qualities of Being on Foot*.
- ⁴⁵ Parkin and Smithies, 'Accounting for the Needs of Blind and Visually Impaired People in Public Realm Design'.
- ⁴⁶ Parkin and Smithies, 'Accounting for the Needs of Blind and Visually Impaired People in Public Realm Design'.
- ⁴⁷ Rob Methorst et al., 'Shared Space'; Sharp and Savill, 'The Pedestrian Environment'.
- ⁴⁸ Parkin and Smithies, 'Accounting for the Needs of Blind and Visually Impaired People in Public Realm Design'.
- ⁴⁹ Lid and Solvang, '(Dis)ability and the Experience of Accessibility in the Urban Environment'.
- ⁵⁰ Sen and Mayfield, 'Accessible Tourism'; Mace et al., *Accessible Environments*.
- ⁵¹ MiBAC, 'Linee guida per il superamento delle barriere'.
- ⁵² Bickenbach and Cieza, 'The Prospects for Universal Disability Law and Social Policy'.
- ⁵³ UN, 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', 22.

⁵⁴ Bickenbach and Cieza, 'The Prospects for Universal Disability Law and Social Policy'.

⁵⁵ Wiman, *The Disability Dimension in Development Action*.

⁵⁶ Lefevre et al., *CPPE*; Hague et al., *Participatory Planning for Sustainable Communities*; Cilliers and Timmermans, 'The Importance of Creative Participatory Planning in the Public Place-Making Process'.

⁵⁷ Arnstein, 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation'; Kakumba, 'Local Government Citizen Participation and Rural Development'.

⁵⁸ Wiman, *The Disability Dimension in Development Action*.

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