Universal Design to solve Exclusion Problems

In parallel with developments in the US, the past decade has seen the evolution of UD, Universal Design, from being a topic of marginal interest to it shifting nearer to the hub of European policy. The evolution falls into two distinct but overlapping phases.

The first phase, largely orchestrated by the European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD) focussed on generating awareness. Integral to the initial part of the first phase was asking difficult questions and establishing definitions. One such question centred on the difference between UD and design-for-all. Few of the real movers were seriously convinced that there was a difference to quibble about. In a sense this debate about terms and definitions continues to date as new professions, sectors, and policy makers encounter them for the first time.

The overlap between the two phases represents the move away from disability related to largely mainstream issues in design. This is best exemplified by two major policy initiatives by the European Commission – e Europe and e Accessibility which impact across the board to all the citizens of Europe. Both focus on maximising citizenship and choice through extant and new electronic networks covering all aspects of daily living. Slightly behind such developments is the implementation of the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunity and the Amsterdam Treaty which cover non-discrimination and physical accessibility.

The second and more significant recent phase is the use of standards and standardisation organisations to effectuate UD in targeted areas such as health and safety, transport, telecommunications, services, housing, etc[1]. This recent focus on standardisation will ensure that the concept of de jure compliance will be built into all aspects of provision and service delivery – including that of the design professions. It could become the most effective way to implement UD to bring about change to benefit the maximum number of European citizens, including older persons.

References

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