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**Access for All; the deconstruction of traditional concepts.
Bas Treffers, vice-president European Disability Forum (EDF).**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today I would invite you to ‘undo’ yourself from what you are used to do when considering a new order from a purchaser for a building or infrastructure. Or to release your ideas about average man when thinking about a new design you have to prepare. Or to leave your prejudices at home about the existence of two kinds of mankind; non-disabled and disabled people. And to acknowledge that all you want to know, can be found anywhere, but that the things you ignore, never will be found/invented. This should be the beginning of deconstruction which has nothing to do with destruction, but the start of a constructive future for all.

But first of all, I would like to thank the organisers for giving me the opportunity to speak at this important event gathering the European construction industry as well as many other stakeholders with an interest in and a perspective on construction. I am representing European Disability Forum, the representative voice of the disability movement in Europe.

Also today, I would like to invite you to develop a new mindset together with me as I am speaking. I will speak about the importance of buildings as the physical frame for the lives we live as human beings and the prerequisite for the realisation of the full potential of all people including disabled people. And I will speak about how this requires that the construction process becomes truly open and transparent as well as inclusive of people’s needs.

The construction of buildings is in its nature a creative process. It presupposes reflection and the ability to synthesise elements and factors of all kinds into a harmonious whole. When new buildings are constructed nowadays, it is very often necessary to partly or fully demolish existing buildings. In the same way, it is necessary to break down traditional concepts to create new concepts bearing in mind that elements from one’s former mindset potentially have an important role to play for one’s new way of thinking. Hence, the title of this presentation: “Access for All – The Deconstruction of Traditional Concepts”. When we want to develop ideas about buildings that facilitate access for all people irrespective of their physical, sensory or intellectual capabilities, we are indeed going into the process described. We are not inventing “the house” again; we are rather combining our ideas about the parts and functions of a building in a completely new way and thereby developing brand new concepts while we are at the same time braking down old fashioned and outdated ones.

Why is it important to develop new concepts?

The population of the modern Europe of today is diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, physical, sensory and intellectual capabilities etc. However, the buildings in Europe do not reflect this fact.

The key to the understanding of these issues is the so-called social definition of disability. Within this framework, a disability is defined as a functional limitation constructed by the interaction between a person including his or her capabilities and the person’s surroundings.

This definition helps us to understand that a person is only disabled to the extent that the environment in which the person finds him- or herself does not meet the needs of the person.

And this is indeed true for buildings. A wheelchair user's horizontal and vertical mobility in a building is only reduced to the extent that the dimensions of the building do not allow him or her to get around easily, or if an accessible lift is not installed.

In the same way, the ability to move around in a building experienced by a person with an intellectual disability is in many ways determined by the character of the layout of the building. Does it have a simple structure? Is it easy to find points where available persons could give a hand if needed? Is the signing in the building intuitive and easy to understand? Etc.

In the case of a blind person, tactile markings on the floor, lifts with audio signals as well as bottoms marked with Braille, recognisable patterns in the layout of a building and many other things are important features that can allow the person to get around independently.

If a building does not allow for access and use by disabled people, it implies functional limitations for this group. This means that the building is in effect excluding. A disabled person will not be able to work, to live or to participate in social and cultural activities in such a building. This means in turn that disabled people can not fulfil their human potential as citizens, employees, friends, family members, persons with creative skills etc.

For this very reason, the accessibility of buildings is not only a question of being nice to disabled people or complying with what might be considered as annoying standards. It is a question of ensuring that disabled people's right to have the same opportunities as everybody else is not infringed upon.

By creating buildings that are open to everybody, we break down barriers in our societies and facilitate participation and human development for all people.

In a Europe where the population is ageing at a speed that is hard to grasp, this becomes even more essential. In 2040, 15% of the population will be 75 years or older. And since older people often experience reduced mobility and other kinds of functional limitations, we are also talking about older people's right to be a part of society.

All in all, this means that the group of people who every day experience barriers in the form of built structures is not just a small minority with very specific needs. It is a large segment of the population that can not be ignored. And basically, this is a human rights issue. Having said this, there are also very good economic, commercial, social and cultural reasons to ensure that European buildings are accessible for everybody. After all, disabled people make up at least 10% of the European population, and there is no reason why we should not be able to contribute to the economic development in Europe by working in accessible buildings, purchasing goods in accessible shops, go to accessible cinemas, etc., etc.

The drivers behind the process

At the political level, these issues are slowly but steadily climbing up the agenda, not only because the disability movement is pushing hard, but also because it makes sense from a societal point of view. We often tend to think that the Lisbon agenda is only about

competitiveness and economic growth and forget that it includes very important objectives about social inclusion as well. And even more problematic, we tend to forget that an essential component in improving competitiveness indeed is to meet societal needs. If societal needs are strong enough, this will eventually have an effect on the market place, whether it takes a political intervention or not, one example being the whole issue of a greener economy. Hence, accessibility can not be ignored by the European construction sector.

In an ageing Europe where the awareness of the rights of disabled people is improved day by day, the construction industry as a whole will sooner or later have to face the reality. Some companies are already following this path.

Recent political developments

on international, European and local level have a potential impact for what we are discussing here.

A Convention on the rights of people with disabilities will be adopted by the general assembly of the United Nations before the end of the year. This convention includes provisions on accessibility for disabled people. I find it worth quoting at length some passages from article 9 which deals with the issue:

“To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to, inter alia:

Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities and workplaces;

States Parties shall also take appropriate measures to:

- Develop, promulgate and monitor the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public;
- Ensure that private entities that offer facilities and services which are open or provided to the public take into account all aspects of accessibility for persons with disabilities;
- Provide training for stakeholders on accessibility issues facing persons with disabilities;
- Provide in buildings and other facilities open to the public signage in Braille and in easy to read and understand forms;
- Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public;

The Convention is expected to be ratified by all European countries and the European Commission within few years. This has the potential to change the status regarding accessibility for disabled people in Europe drastically.

Moreover, an international standard on accessibility to buildings is being finalised these days under the auspices of ISO.

On EU level, we already have directives on public procurement in place which allow for the inclusion of accessibility criteria in public tenders, in the technical specifications as well as to some extent in the selection and performance criteria. European Disability Forum has been involved in a project called “Build for All”. The project partners including stakeholders from the construction industry have written a manual on how to work with accessibility to buildings as an integral part of public tenders. The manual was launched last week at an official event in the European Parliament.

The recently adopted package on the European Structural Funds includes horizontal objectives about accessibility and non-discrimination. This means that it will be obligatory to take accessibility into consideration in projects funded by the European Structural Funds in the coming programming period. This provision is also mandatory for big infrastructure projects and construction projects in general. European Disability Forum has played a key role in ensuring that these provisions became part of the Structural Funds regulation and affiliated guidelines.

Accessibility for disabled people is also taken into consideration in the 7th Framework Programme for research which is expected to be adopted by the European institutions before the end of the year. The Cooperation programme is of particular interest in this respect. Thanks to pressure from the European Disability movement and support from the European Parliament, accessibility is dealt with under priorities as health care, transport as well as information and communication technology. I guess that this could be of interest for stakeholders working with research and construction in general and ECTP in particular.

Finally, relevant legislation has been imposed in many EU Member States. This is a trend that is foreseen to spread further. We are talking about general legislation on the rights of disabled people. However, we are also talking about building codes containing mandatory accessibility provisions and legislation that obliges public authorities to ensure that public infrastructure and buildings are accessible for disabled people. The effects of these measures are gradually beginning to be visible on the local level.

It is my sincere conviction that all these instruments will turn out to have a substantial effect over the coming decades. ECTP is aimed at the same period, namely 2030, the Lisbon Strategy!! However, without the support of the European construction industry, progress will be limited. The realisation of the vision about accessibility for everybody requires fundamental changes in the way construction projects are carried out.

What can be done to let things happen?

Which actions can be taken to facilitate the development towards accessibility for disabled people, in particular by the construction sector? First of all, it is essential to comply with existing legislation and standards. However, it is also very important to be open to the fact

that there can be accessibility needs which are not dealt with in existing legislation and standards.

This leads me to a very important point: the consultation of users. It is an essential as well as basic requirement that users are consulted right from the beginning and throughout the construction process. It is impossible for non-disabled persons to know about all the specific needs that people with different disabilities have. We do not blame you for that, but we insist on being asked before decisions that will have an impact on our lives are taken. Nothing about us without us. And as I have tried to illustrate, the way buildings are constructed has obvious consequences for us as disabled people.

In most cases, a formal consultation process with clearly defined milestones and transparent decision procedures will be preferable. It creates an environment where representatives of disabled people can be involved as equal partners in the decision-making process.

European Disability Forum sees an urgent need for research that explores how users can be involved in a fruitful dialogue with other stakeholders before, during and after a construction project. A common language needs to be developed. Furthermore, training programmes that can give users the necessary tools to participate in the consultation process is a must.

In addition, it is highly recommendable to promote the use of instruments as accessibility audits. The result of such audits can give us the basis for further steps in the field. They should be carried out on both European, national and local level as well as in individual buildings. Such audits in themselves would also lead to the raising of the whole question of cost assessment. What does it cost to improve accessibility?

And of course, this question can not be ignored; also disabled people's organisations acknowledge this. Having said this, it is absolutely necessary to emphasise that it does not have to be more expensive to ensure accessibility when new buildings are constructed. However, it is urgent that steps to improve the accessibility of existing buildings are taken. And research into how this can be done in the best and most cost effective way is really needed.

European Disability Forum sincerely expects to see many pilot projects in the near future. In the long term perspective, we see no alternative to the systematic application of accessibility criteria and consultation of disabled people in all construction projects.

In conclusion:

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Thank you very much for your attention.

Bas Treffers,
Nov. 2006.