



# The Importance of Sharing

Views from KS' International Network for Universal Design



KOMMUNESEKTORENS  
ORGANISASJON

The Norwegian Association of Local and  
Regional Authorities

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The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) is the organisation for all local governments in Norway. KS is Norway's largest public employer organisation. All of the country's 356 municipalities and 11 county councils are members, as well as about 500 municipal, intermunicipal and county council undertakings.

# International voices

KS Network for Universal Design was established in 2013, to contribute to an inclusive society by sharing best practices and removing barriers. The network stretches far beyond the Norwegian borders.

We have asked some of our contacts in the Nordic countries, Europe and beyond to comment on the value of international and cross-sectoral cooperation.

# Universal design – we need to do it together

**Universal design is a value-based concept and a tool to include diversity in human abilities as a core parameter in design and planning. The concept can be interpreted as a mindset, a process tool or as a tangible design solution**

**SINCE ORIGINALLY DEFINED**, it has been further developed in various contexts and in a dynamic process. It has been written into the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as a core concept and as such it also serves as a potential lever for securing the pledge to Leave No One Behind (LNOB) in the global effort of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Universal design is a dynamic concept needing to be implemented in a context specific approach. To unleash its potential, it is decisive to work across scale, sector, discipline, and process. Prioritizing interdisciplinary collaboration, exchange of experiences, sharing of examples, development of new methods and investigation of research-based knowledge is all crucial to the process of implementing universal design in planning, design and use of our built environment.

American universal design pioneer and architect Ron Mace initially wanted to challenge the idea of a ‘them and us’, ‘disabled and

abled’ and instead create a concept that could enhance the understanding of all users living with different and changing abilities throughout a lifespan. He reacted to the existing approach of designing solutions in a fragmented and detailed manner, instead of thinking, process, knowledge, collaboration, values, and complexity.

Universal design can be interpreted and implemented in various ways, and requires different skills, types of knowledge and collaboration. And whether implemented in theory, policy or practice, the work needs to be based on a constant sharing of experiences and innovation. We need to share knowledge and inspire each other. There is not one static or set way of interpreting universal design, and hence it is decisive to seek inspiration and knowledge outside of our own professional framework. Collaboration across disciplines, types of knowledge and experiences, geographical settings, different uses and roles in the building sector and knowledge field. We all need to interact, challenge each other, and collaborate.

“There is not one static or set way of interpreting universal design, and hence it is decisive to seek inspiration and knowledge outside of our own professional framework”

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Designing, planning, and building the physical framework for our lives is a complex process with many different actors involved. The process itself is highly interdisciplinary, and requires different skills and types of knowledge, as well as consistent communication and collaboration. Universal design does not fall into one aspect of the build environment, but across the entirety of it. When a student goes to college, she needs to get from her home to the bus stop, access the bus as well as exit it. Then she needs to cross the street and get to the building, locate and enter her classroom, participate in class and take her exams. She needs to take part in study trips, lunch in the canteen and social activities. Securing universal design in this chain of activities spans across different disciplines, policies, and sectors. Her example underlines the complex interdisciplinary relation between planning and design of the built environment and the actual use and experiences of it. The classroom needs to be accessible, as does the pedagogical approach, curricula planning, and the legislation



Camilla Ryhl.

and policies granting her the necessary assistive technology.

Securing an inclusive environment and society through universal design is indeed an interdisciplinary process and task. And we need to do it together

**Camilla Ryhl**

*Architect MAA, PhD, Head of Research and Development, Bevica Foundation in Denmark.*



## FRANCESC ARAGALL

*President and Founder of Design for All Foundation*

A non-profit organisation based in Barcelona, Spain, and working at an international level. The foundation aims to support companies, public institutions and educational organisations to better adjust the design of environments, products and services to human diversity.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

Working with others is crucial. But it is even more crucial to work with the end users.

Universal design is very complex, therefore it is important to absorb knowledge from different fields and disciplines – from architecture to information design. Equally we need to acknowledge the cultural perspectives within this field, as they may sometimes be a barrier for universal accessibility. Done well, universal design can even change cultural behaviour.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

It is crucial to disseminate information – and in our foundation we do that a lot,

focusing on best practices. However, the key to success is understanding the lingo of your audience and adapting to that. For instance, if I am talking to entrepreneurs and business people, I focus on and use terms such as ‘return on investments’ and ‘financial benefits’ of ensuring accessibility for all. When meeting architects, I never tell them what to do, but show them how universal design is integrated in a design concept.

When it comes to sharing bad examples, I’m reluctant. It irritates me when people speak ill about a project when they do not know the context of the project. In general you can find nice details to learn from in all projects, even the ‘bad’ ones.

### 3 What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?

Except for my university education on

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**“I believe that the concept of human diversity should be taught on a general level – as they do in Japan. Already in third grade, pupils learn about the concept of universal design. Today, 70 percent of the Japanese population know what it is – and I believe that respecting human diversity from the beginning helps a lot.”**

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disability and pedagogy, all my knowledge in the field is informal. When I started working with universal design, there was no education available. Now, universal design has become a field of specialisation – with so many different levels and layers, that no one can master the entire field by him- or herself. Therefore you should put together a complementary team when working with universal design, recognising where your own expertise stops and another one’s starts.

I believe that the concept of human diversity should be taught on a general level – as they do in Japan. Already in third grade, pupils learn about the concept of universal design. Today, 70 percent of the Japanese population know what it is – and I believe that respecting human diversity from the beginning helps a lot.

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#### **What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

The field is very wide and there are so many topics that need to be researched. The ideal would be to go beyond the limitations of specific challenges. Universal means for all, we should not forget that.

Currently we are doing research on Spanish airports, studying the cognitive well-being of travelling, with the perspective of passengers suffering from autism. Actually, the cognitive area is relatively new within universal design – and needs to be examined further. I also think the gender issue is an interesting area of research; how to deal with questions of gender diversity? Once again, the end users are key; you will learn a lot by looking at them.



## LENA MELLBLADH AND HERAWATI ISKANDAR NOWAK

*Accessibility Adviser and Disability Adviser, City of Borås*



The local supply administration must ensure that the City of Borås (Sweden) can offer residents healthy and efficient premises as well as facilities for municipal activities. They are responsible for local resource planning, new construction and remodelling, technical and financial management. The City of Borås won the Access City Award in 2015 for its commitment to making “a Borås accessible for all”.

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**Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

**Lena:** Networks are important for sharing knowledge, listening to others and talking with peers who experience the same challenges. To me it has been interesting to observe how we started out with the term ‘accessibility’ and now are moving more towards universal design. The latter came up when we joined the KS network in Norway.

**Hera:** Working with questions of accessibility is often a lonely job, so being part of a network really matters. Not only for talking about concrete measures, but also to see how others work in their organisation; what methods they use, how they organise their work etc. And also to discuss the different concepts – accessibility is often limited to disabilities, whereas universal design embraces all.

2

**How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

**Lena:** We do this a lot, and we travel both nationally and internationally talking about Borås. When I share our not so successful experiences, I always explain why it didn’t go well. That is particularly important when I am abroad, where countries might not have the same legislation and requirements as we do.

**Hera:** We recognise that some of our solutions are not applicable everywhere, and our organisational structures and laws may differ from other countries. I think, for instance, that a lot of our efforts would not have taken place without our Swedish discrimination laws. Therefore we try to focus on our methods more than concrete examples, because the audience’s societal context may be different to ours.

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**“Working with questions of accessibility is often a lonely job, so being part of a network really matters.”**

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**3 What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

**Lena:** That depends. Hera and I have different and complementary backgrounds and competence. When I talk to entrepreneurs and builders, I need to know their language to gain their respect – and through the years I have acquired the necessary knowledge and competence to do that. And we both have the formal authority to tell other parts of the administration what to do or not.

**Hera:** I think both informal and formal competence are important. I don't have a formal education within universal design, per say. But I have a Master's degree in social work and Human Rights, as well as a PhD in psychology where I did my research on support for parents of children with disability. Through my work I get the informal competence of looking at accessibility and universal design in a more practical way. I see a huge knowledge gap

at the university and college level when it comes to universal design, it should be part of nearly all disciplines' curriculum. And then I mean all aspects of universal design, physical as well as cognitive.

**4 What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

**Hera:** Research is important, but we need the connection between research and those implementing measures to be strengthened. Open access is key – but in the public sector we don't have that access which means 'new' research is available to us years after it was done. Besides, there is little funding for implementing good measures.

**Lena:** I could be much better at documenting what I do – there I see a huge difference between Hera and me; she is more used to documenting systematically. In the end, this is all about doing it right from the beginning.

**Hera:** Yes, that is true. But often people feel that doing it right from the beginning means making it more difficult. That is not the case, though – and we need to get people to understand that.



## HENRIK EHRLINGTON

*Development Manager for Accessibility and Universal Design,  
City of Gothenburg*

The Property Management Administration is responsible for coordinating the physical accessibility for the entire city of Gothenburg and its 500,000 inhabitants. That implies offering support and knowledge on a structural level to the city's different departments, raising awareness on how to embed universal design-thinking into the everyday activity and planning in the Swedish city.

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### **1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

Cooperation is one of the cornerstones of success for universal design, one cannot work alone within one's own organisation. Everything is connected and everyone must work together to achieve an accessible and functional society.

We work in networks locally, linked to specific projects. Then we have regional and national networks, plus a 'big city' network in Sweden. We've also been invited to the Norwegian KS network, which is very interesting. That gives us inspiration and drive to continue our efforts. On top of all this we have the Access City Award network, after winning the award in 2014, which is also very useful.

### **2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

I believe that it is relevant to share both good and bad examples, but one has to be aware of who the recipient is. Are we talking about specific measures implemented for entering a building safely – or communicating a solution to a school administration on how to increase the accessibility in their buildings? Being aware of where we are in the process is key. Then it is also natural to share the bad experiences – explaining well why it went wrong, otherwise there will be no lesson learned from that experience.



**“Cooperation is one of the cornerstones of success for universal design.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

We need both, and we need to mix them. People who live with a disability have important competence through experience, and combining their knowledge with people possessing the formal competence will help getting a holistic perspective to the field of universal design. 100 percent accessibility for all is difficult, but we must do as much as possible for as many as possible.

In 2018, we received funding from the City to increase the competence on accessibility amongst the City’s employees, and we took them through several disability awareness exercises. It was interesting to see that a vast majority of the participants were very satisfied. They had developed and practiced their new knowledge and attitude toward disability and accessibility.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

I believe that both research and documentation are important, so that we can move beyond the ‘why’ and go directly to the ‘how’ of universal design. This is still a new concept in Sweden, so a lot of research is needed in the field. In Gothenburg, the term ‘universal design’ is widely used in strategies and action plans, but if people don’t know what it actually means, it is difficult to act on it. We need to explain how to implement, and how to make it right from the start. That will minimize the need for future and costly alterations and customisations.



## HELLE NEBELONG

*Landscape Architect and Director at Helle Nebelong*

Helle Nebelong works within health design, with the objective to create environments improving people's quality of life. She is especially passionate about designing spaces for children and how to adapt and improve the city for everyday life. She is based in Denmark, but works on projects both nationally and internationally, and also gives lectures around the world.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

Knowledge is power, but to me knowledge becomes powerful only when it is shared with others. When 1 + 1 equals 3 – therein lies the power of sharing knowledge. Networking around universal design is even more important because the word universal in itself implies the participation of all.

In my work I focus on broad user involvement, taking their perspectives into account from the beginning of a project. No one is to be left behind, and fortunately I see – after 30 years working within universal design – that more and more people understand and appreciate that.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

It is important to share knowledge and best practice – so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time. In addition, I find it particularly relevant to share the bad experiences. Making mistakes is human, but you can learn a lot from it. I once placed a thorny rose bush in a pergola for blind people – not very wise. But by telling people about that, I can help others avoid making the same mistake.

Sharing examples internationally is very inspiring, especially across cultural differences – it can add completely new perspectives to the field.

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

The informal competence, or the competence that each user possesses here and now, is extremely important and has to be taken into account in every project. It's a knowledge that develops in parallel with the world around us, where the evidence-based knowledge lags behind, describing something that has taken place and may already be under further development.

When it comes to more formal education, I think it is vital for city planners, architects and any decision maker working with both the physical and the social environment. But the teaching should be practical. You can obtain knowledge through books and literature, but true understanding of the challenges people with disabilities face, is only obtained through a practical approach.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

I see research and documentation as essential in maintaining knowledge that otherwise would be lost. And in this picture I am the practitioner showing and documenting how theory is applied to practical life.



## YUVAL WAGNER

*Founder and Chair of Access Israel*

Established in 1999, Access Israel is the first non-profit organisation in Israel promoting accessibility and inclusion, striving to make Israel a place where people with various disabilities are integrated into society with dignity, respect, equal rights and maximum independence. Covers many areas, such as promoting legislation and raising awareness, runs accessibility consulting services, a web portal and a complaint centre, and also offers accessibility awareness training to schools and companies – amongst others.

In the last couple of years, Access Israel has focused on making future technologies and digital services accessible for people with disabilities.

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### 1 **Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

We know that the combination of personal experience and learning from each other makes us all do better work. It is wonderful to see how people are growing when being part of Access Israel Global Share international network. Some are learning from others' experience and avoid beginners' barriers, others get ideas, some cooperate and a few are doing business as well.

Furthermore, we know that implementing accessibility for all is complex, and it requires the effort of professionals. Being part of a network may increase that level of professionalism.

And most importantly: More work on accessibility implementation is actually occurring, hence improving the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families.

### 2 **How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

We are true believers in sharing and learning from each other, and in exploring potential solutions together. Of course, sometimes you may want to keep the good ideas to yourself, for business purposes or just to 'have an edge'. But in a non-profit organisation like ours we believe that sharing best practices is making

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everyone better and more professional, providing better knowledge and improving the general perception of human diversity and the need for universal design. In the unique case of accessibility and inclusion we believe there is no place for competition – we are all on the same mission.

It's our obligation to share and help others, and – to quote the UN – make sure to 'Leave no one behind'.

We at Access Israel aim to share our experience and knowledge regarding accessibility so that countries from all over the world can learn and implement – and we do that, amongst others, through our annual, international conference in Israel. Especially important this last year during the COVID-19 pandemics, with the Access Israel Global Share international network on accessibility and inclusion. It pleases us to see that more and more organisations are working together, from more than 83 countries around the world.

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### **What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

Accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities have come a long way since Access Israel was founded, but there is still much to do for Israel to be fully accessible and inclusive. To reach this goal we need to educate both the accessibility consultants and the decision makers that are to implement accessibility in their organisations.

Thus we have two missions; to improve the expertise of accessibility consultants; and secondly we have to make decision makers truly believe in and understand the value, the importance and the advantages of universal design.

Success in both will improve the implementation of universal design in organisations and, as a consequence, the quality of life for people with disabilities will be better, as they no longer feel different.

4

### **What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

We need both research and documentation. Even though we've dealt with issues of inclusive design for years, we are still at the very beginning of the field. Fortunately, more and more companies are seeing the importance of inclusion, but we need to enhance inclusion, accessibility and universal design-thinking when researching and developing new solutions for the future. On the one hand, we have to go back and redesign retroactively using standards of universal designs and inclusive designs. On the other hand, we have to make sure that every future design, product and service will be accessible to all by design.

Just look at the field of autonomous transportation. For us it is obvious that autonomous cars should be available and usable for everyone, but universal and inclusive designs for cars are currently not a must. However, that should have been a design requirement from day one.



## PAULA REID

*Project Manager at the Zero Project, working on the international perspective – until December 2020*

The Zero Project was initiated by the Austrian ESSL Foundation in 2008, to support the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and to work for a world without barriers.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

The Zero Project is a network in itself, so to me the importance of networks is obvious. On the one hand, you have the power of peer learning, meeting similar people and organisations. On the other hand, a good network will also give you new insights, taking you beyond your ordinary circles. You meet people who are doing things you didn't know about, challenging you to develop further. There is a huge power in networks.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

Highlighting, sharing and communicating innovative practices and policies that support the rights and lives of persons

with disabilities, are at the core of our activity in the Zero Project. Each year, we organise the international Zero Project Conference where such practices and policies are in the spotlight. In the 2020 Conference, 86 awardees from 54 countries got the opportunity to present their work to a large audience and connect with the worldwide network of the Zero Project. Sharing examples of where things have gone wrong could give valuable learning, provided it happens in a safe environment, but we prefer to focus on the good examples as we see that as being key to ensuring best practice spreads as quickly and effectively as possible.

### 3 What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?

The mix between formal and informal competence is necessary, and we need





**“You meet people who are doing things you didn’t know about, challenging you to develop further. There is a huge power in networks.”**

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both the ground up and the top down approaches to the field. However, I believe that more formal competence is key in codifying the concepts of universal design so they can be applied practically; we need a structure and a model to fully understand what universal design is all about and how and where it can be used.

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#### **What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

Research and documentation of universal design will contribute to making it more robust and concrete, and not just a theoretical concept. We need both an academic and a practical approach to it, and evidence-based documentation is a big part of this. The more evidence, the more compelling, hopefully leading to a larger degree of implementation.



## MICHAEL FEMBEK

*Programme Manager of Essl Foundation and Director of the Zero Project*

The Essl Foundation is an Austrian foundation supporting social innovation, social entrepreneurship and persons with disabilities.

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### **1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

In our foundation we only work in networks, it is at our core. Generally, I think networking is important as a tool of development. If we keep working individually in our silos we won't get much further. If you want to succeed with inclusive employment, for instance, you need to involve several key actors – from government to people with disabilities.

When it comes to the field of universal design, I feel that it is still a rather vague concept. We need to shape and consolidate it, and to achieve that you need people from different sectors.

### **2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

We share only good practices, as focusing on bad ones is not far away from blaming and shaming. We have three reasons for sharing good practices: First, we show that there are good solutions to be found around the world, there is not only one solution that fits all people with disabilities. Second, we see it as our mission to enlighten decision makers in politics and business about good practices, to make it easier for them to implement solutions for accessibility and inclusion. Our goal is to provide innovators and decision makers with a platform for communication. Third, we believe that sharing good practices is all about telling the stories about them in a way that everyone understands – and we constantly develop the language and the formats to do that. For example, this year we've moved into a TV-style of presentations.

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**“We share only good practices, as focusing on bad ones is not far away from blaming and shaming.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

The concept of universal design is still rather vague, yet easy to explain, especially through practical examples. Therefore, we need both informal and formal competence in this field.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

There is a lot of potential in this. Especially when it comes to reaching policy makers that currently lack the knowledge of universal design, accessibility and inclusion. We need to get more research and documentation on the field, which also means getting researchers interested in working on this and taking part in committees and think tanks. Only then, it will become part of regulations of public procurements or of certification systems like ISO.

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## MARIANNE WAITE

*Director of Inclusive Brands, The Valuable 500*

The Valuable 500 is a global CEO community revolutionising disability inclusion through business leadership and opportunity. Their ambition is to fundamentally transform the global business system to create an equal and inclusive society for the 1.3 billion people living in the world with a disability. The organisation is based in London, UK.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

Participating in networks with other professionals or experts is of course something we need to do in order to understand nuanced and more complicated processes around inclusion. But what is more important is to include the perception of people with disabilities. People with first-hand experience in exclusion can give us exceptional insights. So, marrying branding expertise with exceptional insights is in my view the best solution. In our community that is what we strive for, trying to go beyond and break the echo chamber, working with mainstream brands.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

That is really important. At The Valuable 500 we see this from a global perspective, and it is fascinating to observe the different maturity levels around the world. The UK is both advanced and progressive in this field, where the mainstream media are giving people with a disability a voice and a platform. In other parts of the world there is still a lot of fear and stigma around disabilities.

Therefore we need to share examples and inspire change. Best practices are brilliant, but it is just as important to share mistakes. They are a natural part of an innovation process, and we need to celebrate the near-misses. It is nothing to be ashamed of, on the contrary. Learning from failure is how we get better.



**“I believe we are starting to see a disability awareness in the younger generations, they are the new inclusive thinkers. Inclusive design should be part of the education of not only creative professions, but within HR, policy design etc.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

To draw on my own personal experience here, I believe that education will contribute to broadening our minds and removing barriers. I grew up with a sister who has CP, and a grandmother who had Alzheimers – so I know first-hand that disability has long been seen as something that is difficult and uncomfortable. When I learned about inclusive design, it blew my mind. There are so many possibilities to embed inclusive design in all we do, and it is exciting to see new solutions popping up.

I believe we are starting to see a disability awareness in the younger generations, they are the new inclusive thinkers. That leads the way for more non-traditional thinking. Inclusive design should be part of the education of not only creative professions, but within HR, policy design etc.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

First of all, I believe that both research and documentation are underinvested within the field of inclusion, and we should do something about that. Making inclusion parameters obligatory part of different indexes, for instance.

Then, when it comes to potential research topics, I would like to investigate two important aspects:

First to understand fully how we can meet the needs of all people, through a comprehensive report on the regional perspectives on the social side of disabilities. How to remove barriers, with best practices.

Then I would like to see a report on the perception gap between what businesses think they do and what people with disabilities actually experience.



## ANNE KATHRINE FRANDBSEN

*Senior Researcher, Education Coordinator and Deputy Head of the Institute for the Built Environment, University of Aalborg*

The Danish Institute offers a Professional Master in Universal Design, a part time two year-long study for architects, engineers, entrepreneurs, urban planners and others with an interest for universal design and accessibility. The Master's programme was established in 2014.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

The field in itself is cross-disciplinary, and therefore it is essential to arrange for the different disciplines to meet and cooperate. Universal design is a tool for an inclusive society for all. Universality is larger than the concrete construction and design put together, and it is important for all stakeholders to understand what the concept truly means through the entire building chain – from budget-related questions to the users' needs.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

Sharing experiences, good and bad, is important to understand why some things work and others don't. What were the success factors in this project? What are the mechanisms behind failure?

Some years ago an office building was built with the ambition of being the world's most accessible office building, and they did really well – involving all parties, taking many different factors into account. But then, when the same team of partners were to 'repeat the success' in following projects, the results were just not the same. In such cases it is important to evaluate thoroughly in order to identify the key factors of success.

At the institute we emphasize the need for evaluation; too few projects get a proper evaluation.



**“The field in itself is cross-disciplinary, and therefore it is essential to arrange for the different disciplines to meet and cooperate.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

Universal design is a process. It is also a broad and complex field where all factors affect each other. Understanding all this requires a holistic take, and that ability is strengthened through education. Formal competence gives you the ability to move the discussion to the right level. This is about the right for all people to participate in society, as pupils, voters, consumers. It should not be limited to discussing centimetres in hallways and doors.

Then, of course, we still need the experience of the users – these perspectives need to be combined with the formal competence.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

First of all I think it is important to evaluate more, that will give us the wisdom to improve future projects.

Then, I observe in Denmark some basic barriers: ways of thinking and lack of knowledge. We need to understand what this is all about, and have a more theoretical approach to establishing a language and terms for the needs, the users and the processes.

We still need to research more on the physical aspects of sensing, lights and acoustics – and not forget the needs for those with cognitive impairments.

Our ambition is to make Denmark world-leading in competence on universal design. That requires a very broad perspective.



## MARKUS HAAS

*Managing Director and Vice President of “freiraum-europa – the experts for accessibility”, and Vice President Finance EIDD Design for All Europe*

freiraum-europa is a non-profit organisation established in 2003 and based in Austria, campaigning for a life free from barriers. They define themselves as both a lobby group and an aid organisation.

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### 1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?

Different people have different perspectives, and through a network the various knowledge and experience can be exchanged in order to promote good design. Freedom of barriers requires several individual approaches, and one person or one organisation alone cannot cover them all.

At freiraum-europa we participate in a number of networks, both nationally and internationally.

### 2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?

Sharing examples – good or bad – is essential. We can learn from mistakes, and develop further. We can copy and

implement directly the good examples. And we know that we don't have to reinvent the wheel – just use what we have and make some adjustments in our socialising and historical areas.

Some people argue that implementing accessibility measures is expensive. But if you manage to plan for barrier-free solutions from the beginning, it is not expensive at all.

### 3 What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?

I think informal competence is important, but there should be a basic formal competence in universities. In particular we need to educate architects. In freiraum-europa we see very often that architects lack the know-how of design for all – they call us for advice when they have projects with accessibility requirements. They know how

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**“Sharing examples – good or bad – is essential. We can learn from mistakes, and develop further. We can copy and implement directly the good examples.”**

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to read and interpret the standards, but these are only theoretical – the architects don't always know how to implement the practical solutions or how to have an integrational approach. The key is to provide abilities for all, and not limit it to wheelchair users, for instance.

4

#### **What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

Anything you do on a certain level needs to be documented. Research is always good, no matter the outcome, just to ascertain what could work – or not. We have our own research and documentation centre, the Michal Ozmin Center for Research in Czieszyn, Poland. Everything we collect there is on Design for All – with a slightly different approach than the concept of universal design.



## VERONIKA EGGER

*President of Design for All in Austria*

A non-profit membership organisation, established in 2016, dedicated to promoting a Design for All approach in all aspects of development and design in Austria. Members are professionals in the fields of architecture, design, planning or facility management as well as companies in trade and industry.

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### **1 Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

The complexity of any design project has increased hugely the last 20 years for several reasons. We have been moving from an analogue to a digital society. This means that any design has to be considered on several technical levels and modes of communication. Also, considering people's ability to engage with the design and to participate is – thankfully – no longer an exception. This adds complexity to the design process. No single profession can reasonably cover all those perspectives, and it is necessary to bring cross-disciplinary knowledge to any project. In our field every project is unique, and there will always be aspects you need to develop specifically.

### **2 How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

It is extremely important to share examples, but also difficult sometimes. Not because of the sharing per se, but being able to tell it in a way that other people can appreciate and learn from is demanding. As a small association we don't have the resources to formally develop and share case studies. We greatly benefit from our national and international network of professionals, where it has proven most helpful to be able to pick up the phone or start a video call to discuss specific issues.



**“It is extremely important to share examples, but also difficult sometimes. As a small association we don’t have the resources to formally develop and share case studies.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

More universal design-thinking into all professions, that should be our goal. Especially for design and architecture, they play a major role in shaping our environment. However, establishing this awareness in education is taking a long time in Austria, creative professions are only slowly becoming aware of how design impacts participation in society. I was fortunate to find a Master’s degree in inclusive environments in the UK, just to get the formal knowledge for my own work as an information designer.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

Documentation should be an integral part of any design project. When it comes to research, I have observed that research calls tend to mention ‘disability’, but not universal design. I feel that the design discourse in Austria is too disability-oriented. Anything that is designed well and universally, works for everyone. This should be our goal: delivering functional, beautiful, desirable design.



## JØRGEN TRYK HANSEN

*Architect, City of Viborg*

The City of Viborg in Denmark participated in a European project for accessibility between 2010 and 2016, where the goal for Viborg was to make a coherent network that provides equal accessibility for all to the cultural heritage in Viborg – all the time conserving the historical and archeological values of the area. In 2018, the City of Viborg received a ‘special mention’ and in 2019 a special award concerning the cultural heritage at the Access City Awards, instituted by the European Commission.

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1

**Why is it important to work with or participate in networks with other professionals in the field of universal design?**

Every place and project are just as unique as the users and the solutions, and visitors have different needs and challenges, just like the cities. Providing accessibility is complex. In the project network, which consisted of cities from Spain, France, Bulgaria and Italy in addition to Viborg, we discussed and inspired one another – which is very useful. You get several ideas on how problems can be solved.

The international network contributed with both practical knowledge and technical solutions. From our national and local networks we got useful input on practical solutions, based on relevant user experience.

2

**How important is it to share good (and bad) examples regionally, nationally and internationally?**

Mutual inspiration is alpha and omega in projects like these. We have some common challenges, but we may solve them differently – and sharing practical examples on how things have been done, is extremely useful. Long lasting and complex projects demand stamina and perseverance, qualities that can be strengthened by enthusiastic and inspirational tales from other, similar projects.

Showcasing the bad examples (and in our case also solutions we chose not to realise) may also be useful, as we often get good comments on what we could have done to improve the results.



**“We still lack the knowledge and the resources to fully grasp the scope of universal design.”**

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**3**

**What is the importance of both informal and formal competence and/or education within universal design?**

The formal competence of universal design is ameliorating, but it is a large and complex field, and we are not there yet. We still lack the knowledge and the resources to fully grasp the scope of universal design. When I studied architecture, accessibility was not in focus. That is why networks are so important, where we can meet and work with users and others with good knowledge.

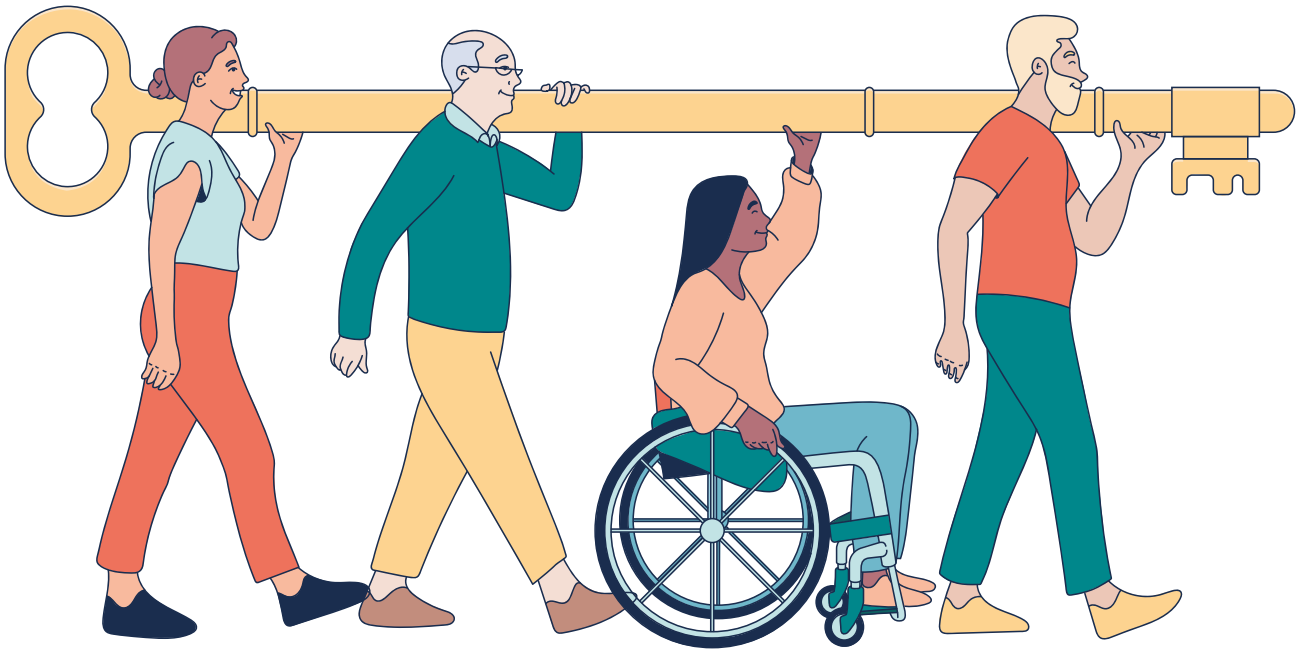
good and bad experiences.

Research is essential, as universal design and accessibility is a very complex field. We need some ‘burning souls’ who want to see the entire picture and have the stamina to go through with it. It doesn’t get there by itself.

**4**

**What is the significance of research on and documentation of universal design?**

Documentation is very important. In the Viborg project we have made an effort to disseminate the knowledge that we have acquired through the project, telling the whole story and communicating both





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