

Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusive Design in Graduate Architecture

Beth TAUKE ^{a,1}, Edward STEINFELD ^a, and Megan BASNAK ^a

^aCenter for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access,
University at Buffalo – State University of New York

Abstract. Inclusive Design is one of the most important design movements of this era; as demographics change throughout the world, it promises to gain increasing significance. Despite this global trend, architecture programs in U.S. universities have been slow to incorporate inclusive design into curricula. The State University of New York at Buffalo is an exception, and has offered a formal Master of Architecture – Inclusive Design since 2006. This paper describes obstacles to starting UD graduate programs, challenges and successes of the Buffalo program, and recommendations for ways to grow additional UD programs in architecture.

Keywords. Inclusive design, universal design, graduate education, architecture

Challenges for Inclusive Design Education

Inclusive processes aimed at enabling all of us to experience the full benefits of products, environments, communications, systems and policies regardless of our age, size, situation, and abilities have been around since the mid-1970s[1] and are more important today given the world's changing demographics. However, the incorporation of universal design has been a 'slow go' in U.S. architectural education and practice. There are several reasons:

- The tradition of architectural education is style and form-based.
- U.S. accrediting bodies for architecture programs have not included universal design in their primary evaluation criteria.
- Inclusive design educators often focus on research topics that lack appeal for creative-minded students.
- Popular media favors aesthetics and lifestyles for the sake of entertainment value, and often disregards realities that call attention to the need for inclusive design.

Knowledge about inclusion and its relationship to design is essential to relevant design work, particularly as we move into a more globalized environment [2]. Formal graduate programs are beginning to emerge in various areas throughout the world. One of the longest established programs is in the School of Architecture and Planning at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

¹ Beth Tauke: Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor, Department of Architecture and Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access, University at Buffalo—State University of New York, Buffalo, New York, United States; E-mail: tauke@buffalo.edu.

Inclusive Design Graduate Research Group at Buffalo (IDGRG)

The Inclusive Design Graduate Research Group focuses on research and design that enables and empowers diverse populations. Focus issues include 1) human diversity, 2) sensory perception, 3) health/safety, and 4) social justice. Students in both the M.Arch.-Inclusive Design (professional) and the M.Sc. Arch. – Inclusive Design (research) degree programs acquire a theoretical and working knowledge of built environments/systems that work for all. The curriculum includes a sequence of required studios, technical courses and intellectual seminars, and culminates in a thesis. Examples of studio projects include a children's museum, a prison, an assisted care facility, a library, public toilets, global informal settlement support, and an architectural office building. Along with a core curriculum, students work with faculty mentors to develop individualized programs of study that reflect their specific interests. Thesis students have researched topics such as stair safety, senior housing standards, and lighting in primary schools, and have designed neighborhood centers, health centers, schools in Iraq, and temporary housing to name just a few. The IDGRG has the highest enrollment of all graduate groups in the School of Architecture and Planning.

IDGRG faculty members are associated with the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDeA), a leading center for research and design activities, and an unparalleled resource for students interested in inclusive practices.

Opportunities for Inclusive Design Program Development

The concept of universal design is beginning to take hold in many sectors of society for several reasons:

- World demographics are changing; we are older than ever before.
- World economies are leveling.
- More societies are valuing human diversity.
- Attitudes about consumption are changing; 'planned obsolescence' is obsolete.
- Mass customization is making it easier to develop UD solutions.
- Digital technologies are augmenting or eliminating static solutions to dynamic conditions. (GPS vs. paper map)
- Governments are seeking new ways to improve life for all.
- Gen Y students are more interested in social issues.

These global transformations and attitude shifts open opportunities for inclusive design education. They are a call for new ways of designing, and are driving a grassroots effort for educational change. The discipline of architecture has started to respond with organizations such as Architecture for Humanity and Design Corps. However, it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that students and professionals are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skill to effectively practice architecture for social justice. Inclusive design education provides students with the evidence base and critical details required to develop processes and work that benefits the broader population. The cultural climate for this is right. The time is now.

References

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