



Warsaw, September 2005

Dear Sir or Madam,

We are forwarding a letter containing a list of conclusions which were reached during The Second POLIS Workshop "Making Europe accessible for all with enabling policies, concepts and tools". The workshop took place on the 16th of September 2005 in Warsaw (Poland). The 50 participants of the event were representatives of various European institutions and organisations (government, local government, organisations of people with disabilities, other non profit organisations, architects, funds and others).

A hot discussion concerning accessibility issues resulted in the conclusions, which we would like to propose as the starting points of the next European discussions. We hope such discussions will be organised more often to increase the awareness of the problems of some groups of people who cannot fully participate in the social life due to architectural barriers. Access to some services becomes easier due to information and communication technologies development, but accessibility issues will not be fully solved as long as the social awareness of majority of our European society will remain on the low level.

We also would like to draw Your attention to some aspects which may not have been a focus of the decisions You take in Your professional life.

We hope the work we have done is another small step towards increasing the accessibility not only to the buildings but also to people's minds and hearts.

Yours faithfully,

The 2nd POLIS workshop participants

The most important conclusions presented by the participants in the discussion:

- The reason for the inaccessibility of buildings, especially those newly built, are not only the limited financial means (a frequent occurrence in poorer countries), but first of all ignorance.
- In some countries the lack of factual knowledge concerning the problems of disabled persons is evident even among people who are responsible for the accessibility of buildings and urban areas. In Poland, for instance, procedures are developed, there are good plans, but unfortunately they cover some aspects only. The technical requirements are guaranteed by the law, but nobody is held responsible for an inaccessible building, nobody suffers any consequences. For example, the designer must endorse that the building is planned in accordance with the law and all regulations, but unfortunately he often does not check it in the correct way. Then the building is completed, and the commission that signs its acceptance does not always have the appropriate competences in this field, either.



- The needs of the disabled are taken into account to an increasingly higher extent, but in order to introduce even more actions into the society's everyday life adequately to the needs of the impaired people, it is very important to reach a widely meant compromise in every field.
- There are many old (and newer) buildings that are inaccessible to many people and need to be modernised. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to:
 - promote accessibility of buildings to disabled people
 - raise the awareness of problems affecting the disabled people in the society.
- Everyone should bear the responsibility for his or her own "little courtyard". Transferring the responsibility as close as possible to the common citizens and raising their awareness of the problem should contribute to increasing the accessibility.
- The difficulties concerning modernisation of buildings often occur on the part of historians and conservation officers. In this case, it is essential to establish a dialogue concerning the facts and present the best practices, e.g. accessibility solutions implemented in the ancient buildings in Rome. The milieu of historians is becoming more approachable and willing to compromise, although in this case individual, tailored solutions are necessary.
- Education should be started as early as possible, when children are the most sensitive. At this age it is easier to convince them, make them aware of the necessity to create an environment that is accessible to everybody. It is the young people that we should pin our hopes on.
- It is crucial to educate the students of architecture carefully. A very good way to sensitise them to the needs of others is to put them in the situation of people with impaired mobility or sight, for instance. For many years now special classes have been conducted at the Warsaw Technical University, where the students are seated in a wheelchair and given "simple" tasks concerning moving from one place in the university building to another. It is a simple but very effective way (much more effective than hours of memorising technical requirements and standards) to make the future designers of areas we all move in remember about the needs of more than the average citizen.
- Few people who run any sort of business give much consideration to the fact that they lose many potential clients when they do not provide disabled people with the possibility of access to their services. Experience shows that the more accessible the building, the more comfortable it becomes for the fully healthy users, who are consequently much more willing to avail themselves of the building's services.
- Elderly people often have acquired a pension or allowance high enough to be the kind of customers who can considerably increase the capital of company owners. In the ageing societies of Europe this problem may become increasingly visible. This aspect of profits growing with the increase in accessibility seems to be of particular significance in tourist industry and retail sales.
- In case of the poorer societies, unfortunately, elderly people are not too well off, so maybe this is also one of the reasons why there is no big pressure exerted, for example, on the shop owners or banks to ensure that disabled persons have a convenient access to the services they provide.
- It is necessary to fight the attitude of many building owners who claim that since no disabled person has visited their company, shop or office for years, there is no need to modify the building!



- It is advisable to show examples of benefits resulting from adaptation of buildings, e.g.
 - (in Belgium): at a shop where the building's accessibility to disabled people was facilitated, the sales volume has tripled!
 - in some buildings where architectural barriers were eliminated, the owner was exempted from paying the rent for a period of time.
- A lot depends on a good idea and goodwill; for instance, at a school in Italy there was a huge problem with making even as much as a lift accessible to disabled people, whereas in such a building as the Colosseum there is an excellent lift available to everyone. All this is just a matter of exerting pressure on the authorities and promoting the idea of accessibility for all.
- It is sometimes said that changes in accessibility level require a social awareness change; those changes can be sped up by disseminating information concerning the possibility of profits growing with an increase in accessibility.
- Extremely useful solutions are all sorts of databases concerning accessible places, accessibility maps etc. They help to promote accessible places, and at the same time they facilitate the everyday life of disabled people.
- The problem with achieving accessibility "for all" has one of its sources in the differences between individual persons as well as the different limitations that accompany each disability. Guidelines and handbooks should not be too general and should not be limited to selected groups only.
- It is necessary to focus on the law and seek suitable solutions in each individual industry (construction, labour legislation etc.).
- There is no common legal ground for solving the problem in European countries. Europe needs appropriate mechanisms and systems; perhaps some can be suggested by representatives of the construction industry.
- Negative experience should not be multiplied. Unfortunately, construction companies are neither ready for nor enthusiastic about any modernisations of buildings, but one must never give up!

For more information about the workshop and POLIS project please visit the project website: <http://www.polis-ubd.net/>