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Is Disability Really Designed? From Theory to Practices in the Built Environment

The 3rd of December 2022 marked the 30th annual observance of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and this year was celebrated under the theme: Empowering Persons with Disabilities through resourceful, sustainable, and safe environments. The observance aims to promote an understanding of disability issues and to mobilise support for the dignity, rights, and well-being of persons with disabilities. It also seeks to increase awareness of gains to be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life. This observance of the Persons with Disabilities Day saw the light of day in 1992. Despite being three decades since the dawn of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, persons with disabilities continue to remain one of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in many realms of the economy, and the South African built environment industry is no exception. Hence the persistence of this inequality constitutes a major concern to the Council for the Built Environment (CBE), a statutory body charged with, among others, promoting and protecting the interests of the public in the built environment. Worthy of mention is that the ‘interests of the public’ in the built environment is an overarching concept which houses, among others, the interests of Persons with Disabilities. Research has indicated that the persistent exclusion of Persons with Disabilities is attributed to multifarious challenges across theory and practice in the built environment.

Scholars have noted the infiltration of anti-progressive disability theoretical models into universal design and access, which continue to perpetuate the exclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the built environment, among other segments of the economy. The praxis of universal design is imbued with several theoretical lenses that shape how designers in the built environment, among others, should perceive Persons with Disabilities. The medical model of disability forms part of the theoretical lenses that designers in the built environment unwittingly use to exclude Persons with Disabilities. Built environment professionals who believe in this model of disability perceive disability as a medical problem that resides in the individual and thus, it is inherently abnormal and pathological. Therefore, professionals inadvertently deem it necessary to cure, rehabilitate and ameliorate the physical condition to the greatest extent possible instead of adjusting the condition and the environment to the person with the disability. The connotation here is that Persons with

Disabilities are expected to spend time in the role of a patient or learner being helped by trained built environment professionals.

The moral instinct of built environment professionals who inadvertently follow this medical model during the design phase see Persons with Disabilities as a group that is deviating from what is normal. This notion of disassociating disability from normality leads to unintentional usage of terms such as ‘invalid’, ‘cripple’, ‘spastic’, ‘handicapped’ and ‘retarded’ to label Persons with Disabilities. The implication here is that Persons with Disabilities are regarded as being in a fundamentally negative, bad and pitiable condition. This negative conception of disability has contributed to the perpetuation of some offensive and skewed hashtags such as ‘Building for Persons with Disabilities’ instead of ‘Building for Everyone’. This approach to disability reinforces the notion that Persons with Disabilities are not comparable with their able-bodied counterparts. The medical theoretical model of interpreting disability presents the praxis of dualism which tends to inadvertently categorise the able-bodied as somehow better or superior to Persons with Disabilities. Hence the CBE advocates for “Designing with Persons with Disabilities” instead of “Designing for Persons with Disabilities”. Designing with Persons with Disabilities will pave a way for hashtags such as “Building for Everyone”.

The persistence of conceptions that unwittingly identify “able-bodied superiority” and “disable-bodied inferiority” construct unequal power relations and conditions which ultimately inhibit the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the built environment. Considering this far from-ideal situation, the CBE as an overarching statutory body deemed it necessary to establish the Health, Safety, Public Protection and Universal Access Transformation Collaborative Committee (HSPPUA TCC) to, among others, intensify the inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the South African built environment. The HSPPUA TCC has been making significant strides in conscientising the built environment fraternity about the urgent need to factor in universal design and access in the built environment infrastructure value chain. The HSPPUA TCC is currently making these inroads into the built environment industry through its quarterly meetings, to which key stakeholders within the built environment community are invited. The CBE holds that built environment professionals should not design for Persons with Disabilities but design with vulnerable persons to ensure universal access for all and building for everyone.

Developed by:

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About the CBE:

The **Council for the Built Environment (CBE)** is a Schedule 3A Public Entity that reports to the National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure. It is a statutory body established under the Council for the Built Environment Act (No. 43 of 2000) (the CBE Act). The CBE was established for the purpose of instilling good conduct within built environment professions, mobilising transformation in the built environment professions, protecting the interest of the public and advising the South African Government on Built Environment related issues.