

# **Architectonics of Urban Space and Urban Citizenship of Persons with Disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

The article focuses on the problems of social inequality materialized in the objects of urban space. The construction of mobility barriers for citizens with disabilities has been considered in a new framework for comparing discourses on environmental accessibility, universal design and an inclusive approach in environmental practices. The data of a sociological study of the urban citizenship of people with disabilities have been presented, their right to a city has been considered in line with social knowledge and architectural practices. The work is based on classical sociological theories, also on the data of independent examinations on the quality of urban space and on a review of specialized periodicals and reports prepared as part of urban forums. The results of the study emphasize the constructive beginning of inclusive design, its role in the reconstruction of urban order, as well as in overcoming social discrimination and exclusion. The article is devoted to the sociological understanding of the relationship between architecture, social policy and disability issues.

**Keywords:** Urban citizenship, people with disabilities, the right to the city, accessible urban environment.

## **1. Introduction**

New trends in the consideration of social problems of people with disabilities are more fully revealed in the field of city sociology and the sociology of architecture, in the logic of inclusive design as a movement for the quality of the urban environment, embodying the declared human and civil rights. The dialogue and alliance of various subjects and scientific schools can not only strengthen the understanding of the model of a modern city and the needs of its residents, but also develop platforms that can meet the needs of various strata of citizens by substantiating a theoretical model of inclusion and specific tools to expand the right to a city of citizens with disabilities. However, the dominant algorithms for constructing urban areas have not sufficiently taken into account the interests of an individual person with his characteristics and personality to this day, and this problem is most acute in connection with

the person's disability and mobility. A variety of projects are presented in the Russian field of urban research, in turn, the social problems of disability are being seriously studied, but studies of urban citizenship and practices of social exclusion of people with disabilities in the context of urbanism are not sufficiently presented. An analysis of the concept of inclusive design, the principles of which are still poorly articulated in the Russian scientific and socio-political discourse, can help explain the fundamental relationships of architecture, social policy and disability issues [Fakhrutdinova, 2020; Agba & Madueme, 2021; Agoha Benedict, Adegboye Oluwaseyi, & Olowookere Elizabeth, 2022).

The central concepts of this article are the architectonics of urban space and disability. Within the designated topics, urban architectonics is of interest in terms of its quality and inclusive properties. The main criterion for the quality of the urban environment is the attitude of citizens to their city and urban citizenship of various population groups. D. Harvey spoke about urban citizenship for the first time, meaning "the rights of immigrants, temporary residents and strangers to participate in local politics, which now more than ever before depends on the movement" [Harvey, 2008: 87]. The term "spatial justice" is used in the works of E. Soja, although it was H. Lefebvre [Lefebvre, 2010; Soja, 2010] who had laid the foundations of the justice discourse of urban space in the concept of the right to the city, as well as D. Harvey, who studied aspects of social justice in urbanism.

Transformations of the socio-political structure and new trends in the development strategies of Russian cities necessitate theoretical reflection and empirical research on disability issues in terms of spatial justice and the right to the city (the right to be active users of the benefits provided by the city). In the logic of spatial justice, we are talking about the satisfaction of citizens with the work of various institutions, objects of urban infrastructure, public spaces, a range of leisure sites and other opportunities to improve the quality of life realized through urban infrastructure, also we consider the possibilities of various city residents to be involved in urban communities and realize themselves in employment and education systems.

The availability of urban resources and infrastructure not only determines the possibilities of social mobility of people with disabilities, but also helps reduce social distances and overcome discriminatory attitudes in society. According to E. Soja [Soja, 2010: 280], the discourse of spatial justice includes the whole spectrum of events taking place in a city aimed at transforming the city and public order to achieve equal citizenship and a more equitable stratification order.

The degree of attractiveness of a city is directly related to the factor of population mobility. The Russian experience in creating an accessible environment needs to reflect on the achievements and distortions of the plan being implemented. In this regard, the relevance of considering urban citizenship and mobility of people with disabilities is increasing. One should evaluate the social effects of the implemented social accessibility policy by studying the opinions and assessments of people with disabilities.

## **2. Methods**

Based on the results of our study, the authors will try to get a picture of a city in the context of the situation of people with disabilities. Is the city open for people with disabilities, to what extent are the interests of people with different physical characteristics taken into account in an urbanized space? A questionnaire survey conducted among low-mobility groups of the population of three Russian cities (Nizhny Novgorod, Saratov, Kazan) provided data on

the degree of accessibility of urban infrastructure for people with disabilities and revealed ideas about progressive or destructive changes. A total of 616 people were interviewed (approximately proportionally, i.e., 200 people in each city). In 2019, the array was finally processed, and the data was compared with the results of other Russian researchers. The sample is targeted, respondents who participated in the survey have disabilities, but are able to move independently, and among the main reasons that impede their mobility is a complex of diseases (25%), a violation of the musculoskeletal system (19.32%), age-related changes (19.16%). Kazan and Saratov were selected for research as cities that were among the first pilot regions for developing the formation of an accessible environment at the level of constituent entities of the Russian Federation, and Nizhny Novgorod was presented in the sample to compare the situation with accessibility between participating non-participating cities in the pilot project. At the same time, the choice of megacities for research was carried out on the basis of the classification of large, urbanized zones and their administrative marking as: capital; centers of federal districts; million-plus cities; large cities with a population of less than a million. In our sample, Kazan is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan (a city with a population of more than a million), Nizhny Novgorod is the administrative center of the Volga Federal District (population of more than a million), Saratov is a large city with a population of slightly less than a million. A secondary, but also an important criterion for the selection of pilot regions was the experience of effective cooperation with a number of regional public organizations. To get a picture of a city in the human dimension, it is important to identify what conditions and restrictions the city imposes on a person with limited mobility, what needs of the person the city can satisfy, and what needs of these people are completely frustrated.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Answers to a cluster of questions clarifying how the interests of people with disabilities were taken into account in the city architecture showed that negative answers in Saratov were 6 times higher than positive ones, in Kazan - 1.5 times higher, and in Nizhny Novgorod the excess of negative answers over positive turned out to be insignificant. Respondents in all cities, regardless of the category and nature of disability, age and material status, rarely estimated the degree of comfort of the city for people with disabilities above three points. A positive aspect of the transformation in the field of urban citizenship of people with disabilities is the very fact of the implementation of the federal target program "Accessible Environment", where it is possible to conceptually trace the logic that disability is the result of a destructive interaction between a person and the environment due to its barriers. Although insignificantly, the share of respondents who believed that over the past 20 years cities had become more comfortable for living has prevailed in our survey, although the proportion of opinions suggesting that nothing has changed has also been significant.

**Table 1.** *Assessment of changes*

HOW FAVORABLE FOR LIFE HAS YOUR CITY BECOME IN THE LAST 20 YEARS?	%
It has become much better and more convenient	6,5
It has become a little better	37,3
Almost nothing has changed	27,3
It has become worse	11,2
It has become much worse than before	5
Difficult to answer	12,7

Novgorod residents, and among those who prefer to choose the option of deterioration, there are more Saratov residents. The diagram shows that the statements of the Saratovites are noticeably different from the assessments of residents of two other cities. Residents of Saratov say that in recent years, road transport infrastructure has especially deteriorated. More than half of Saratov citizens with disabilities (64.4%) consider the security situation in the city unsatisfactory. Thus, to conclude that the implementation of targeted measures to create accessibility has been effective is premature. Ramps and point accessibility appeared in cities, but on the whole, this did not change the architectonics of urban space.

For a more detailed analysis, a segment of positive responses on the degree of accessibility of institutions has been considered. The statement “absolutely accessible” has been analyzed, where organizations of different profiles received different ratings in the numbers presented on the diagram.

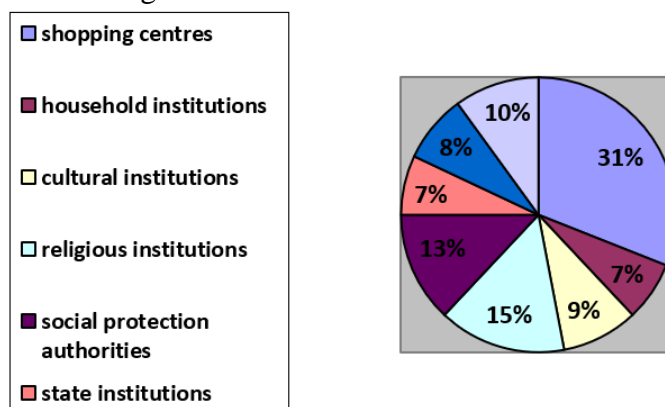


Diagram 1: The degree of accessibility of urban facilities (71 respondents out of 616 chose the rating “absolutely available”)

It turned out that the leading position is occupied by shopping centers, the construction of which has been unfolded on a large scale in Russian megacities. As a rule, in the construction of modern shopping centers, a wide range of accessibility is initially provided, including compliance with the necessary and prescribed by the building rules international standards of universal design. Social services and religious institutions are relatively accessible, but government, medical, and educational institutions turned out to be outsiders. Reflecting on the possibilities of their urban citizenship and greater independence in using the city’s infrastructure, most often respondents from three cities spoke of the need to purchase modern rehabilitation facilities (including personal transportation), the importance of improving public transport, the need for a qualitative transformation of the urban environment, streets and public spaces. Almost all respondents associate the improvement of their position and quality of life with the disappearance of urban infrastructure barriers that impede mobility: 45.2% of respondents said that they would become more mobile and more likely to move around the city, 30% would find new areas of activity and feel greater independence. In the first stratum of the leading cities when calculating the human potential index, Kazan was found with an HPI (5.427), while Saratov and Nizhny Novgorod were included in the top ten only, with HPI values of 5.160 and 4, 932, respectively. However, it should be noted that, based on indicators of income level, employment and education status, our respondents belong to the category of urbanites, which was included into the group of not quite “urbanites” in the aforementioned survey by the authors, and the main property of this group is passivity. Representatives of this cohort have relatively low incomes: more than half have an income of up to 25 thousand rubles, 27% - from 25 thousand to 50 thousand rubles per month per person [The Struggle for the Citizen., 2015: 41]. With a high degree of probability, the status of urban citizenship of people

with disabilities can change with improving the quality of urban infrastructure and increasing accessibility, which, in turn, can affect the material status of citizens, as well as lead to an increase in the level of trust in surrounding people and social institutions. Sixty-one percent of respondents in our sample in three cities reported that they had to abandon their plans because of the barriers and aggressiveness of the urban environment: 30.2% of all respondents were less likely to leave home because of fear of barriers in the city; 25.4% of respondents reduced communication and interaction with friends and acquaintances; some (12.8%) had to dramatically change their life strategies, refrain from getting higher education or a profession, they were forced to change their job and refuse an official medical examination to confirm a disability group.

Along with official and research indicators of the quality of Russian megacities, today there is an independent rating of accessibility for cities, created jointly with the Union of Volunteers of Russia, where the best and worst regions for the quality of life of people with disabilities were named. Only in 18 regions of Russia, urban infrastructure comprehensively takes into account the basic needs of citizens with disabilities. The five leaders included: Moscow, Krasnodar Krai, the Republic of Tatarstan, the Chechen Republic and the Belgorod Region. The Nizhny Novgorod region occupies the 15th position, the Saratov region - the 64th position, which correlates with the data obtained in the framework of our study (Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Saratov).

## **4. Summary**

The picture of urban citizenship of people with disabilities presented by the results of the study convinces of the presence of significant problems with the right of people to the city, it illustrates the degree of accessibility of vital urban infrastructure. The obvious reason for this situation is the lack of inclusive design logic in the Russian socio-political and cognitive field, and the creation of accessibility is understood as additional equipment for the disabled ones, especially for people with musculoskeletal disorders, however, the needs of people with mental disabilities are almost never taken into account, insufficient attention is paid to them.

In Russian legislation, the norms defining the foundations of the legal regulation of accessibility are contained in Articles 14, 15 of the Federal Law “On Social Protection of People with Disabilities in the Russian Federation”. The logic of universal design was preceded to a greater extent by the concepts of functional sense and rationalism in architecture, including design for disabled people, developed in the narrow circles of the expert community. Inclusive design seeks to change the “expertise” that underpins the production of artificial environments by encouraging designers to rethink their relationships with those for whom they work. The concepts of inclusive and universal design have more in common than differences and are often used as synonyms. However, it should be noted that the category of universal design is more logical to use when discussing applied tasks, since the principles of universal design are based on the fact that environmental change is a matter of development and implementation of technical and design solutions. Inclusive design involves much more than a technical response to the needs of people or simply refinement of existing urban development solutions, taking into account the needs of people with functional peculiarities. Advocates of the concept of inclusion in design, R. Imrie and P. Hall state that “there is no reason to believe that technical devices alone will significantly change the lives of people with disabilities” [Imrie R., Hall P. Inclusive design ... 2001: 19]. Classical social theories, which are associated with the concept of inclusive design, are represented, first of all, by neo-Marxist sociology, which criticizes the unfair structure of society and social exclusion.

It is obvious that an inclusive approach in design as a further development of the principles of universal design sets a clear understanding of the goal and implementation strategy of accessibility, while a thinking model tied to understanding accessibility as an improvement of the environment for people with disabilities substantially narrows the vision of desired prospects. A one-sided understanding of accessibility is quite possible, the weak inclusion logic in the design of urban spaces has led to negative assessments given by citizens with disabilities. Citizens, who do not have a disability, sometimes see in the created compensatory projects for accessibility not a signal for respect and inclusion of people with disabilities, but an object of “stigma”.

## 5. Conclusions

The concept of inclusive design is gaining significant cognitive and practical value. Inclusion in the design of objects and forms of urban space leads to the formation of an urban environment for the convenience, comfort and solidarity of citizens. The picture of urban citizenship of people with disabilities presented by the study results convinces of the presence of significant problems with the right to the city, illustrates the degree of inaccessibility of vital urban infrastructure. The status of the administrative or cultural capital of a megalopolis affects the improvement of the characteristics of urban citizenship, however, small cities, if properly governed and having an effective master plan for the development of an urbanized area, can become comfortable and barrier-free. In this sense, Kazan turned out to be in the best position, and, on the contrary, the situation in the city of Saratov demonstrates the failed urban management strategies, despite the status of the pilot region for the implementation of the “Accessible Environment” program.

The comfort of Russian cities is an issue that is concerning both ordinary citizens and experts from professional communities more and more today. Currently, experts call convenience for life a key driver in urban evolution plans [Fakhrutdinova, Terentyeva, 2020]. The development of cities in the logic of inclusive design and the expansion of the right of different groups of citizens to the city acquires a powerful interdisciplinary base, which is confirmed by the need to develop new codes of urbanism taking into account the individual needs of citizens. The study made it possible to outline the prospects for further study of Russian megacities and urban citizenship of people with disabilities in an interdisciplinary context: the architectonics of the city, the phenomenology of urban life and the sociology of disability. On the one hand, this approach tears the issue of disability out of the area of medical expert knowledge; on the other hand, it allows deeper and more detailed consideration of the needs and social worlds of citizens for favorable prospects for the development of Russian megacities in the field of inclusion.

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