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International Overview of Accessibility Icons and Labels: Between Social Uses and Regulations

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Since the 1970s, a series of international and national sources have supported the principle of accessibility, which slowly has become a statuary norm and a legislative obligation. Each country has implemented accessibility through a singular policy. But in addition to the accessibility of a place or an activity, to inform about what is accessible is very important as well, and has not really taken off. Indeed, for disabled people, the difficulty lies not only with access to places and the use of resources, but also with the visibility of these resources. This means that information concerning accessibility has to be disclosed and provided effectively to disabled people, those involved with them and the relevant institutions. In different countries all over the world, many labels and pictograms have been created for this purpose and give information relating to accessibility. Using a socio-historical approach, we will present and analyze the different types of icons, symbols, pictograms and labels that have been put in place around the world and in France: what are they used for and for whom are they made? We will show that they are pointers which firstly reflect the diversity and range within the target group concerned by accessibility, and secondly the evolution of accessibility as a dynamic and ecological principle.

Keywords: label, pictogram, accessibility, people with a disability

Introduction

The notion of accessibility, which Habermas (1993) first analyzed, specifically refers to the practical exercise of civil and political rights: “the public sphere is the place for free access to political discussion”. German philosopher Hannah Arendt also analyzes this concept by questioning the issue from a socio-political point of view. She highlights the social dimension of public space as becoming “a place of freedom open to the participation of all; an original scene of political and social dynamics; a place is created and permits to see the social bond between citizens”. In a fundamental approach, talking about accessibility also means discussing the citizenship, the social cohesion and social participation of people with disabilities through public policies and the role of organizations. So, first, the inclusion of disabled people within the global society is linked to the problem of accessibility and the lack of efficiency of public signage (written, oral, visual) to consider otherness.

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Living in a society of signs and iconography and in a civilization of images, humans use symbols[1] in daily life as a means of communication and guidance. In this perspective, the pictogram (as source and factor of identification) should be an "iconic visual sign that conveys meaning with elemental simplicity and clarity, beyond cultural, linguistic or cognitive boundaries". Thus a "pictogram should primarily be understood by as many people as possible (regardless of training, cognitive ability or language), (…) the sign should be self-explanatory, it should be recognizable and its meaning must be unique". In this vision, the pictogram as the symbol of an idea (ideogram) is closely linked to accessibility. Indeed, various ranges of visual signage such as icons give information about accessibility. Sometimes, they are standardized with national or international certifications, such as ISO certifications. At other times, they are used as labels which entail a certification process ensuring the respect of technical specification.

This paper builds on the analyses of those different types of visual signs put in place to inform about accessibility. It examines what kind of icons, pictograms and labels exist all around the world and in France, what they are used for and for whom they are made. The methodology combines legislative sources, promotional leaflets and flyers, paper guides, brochures, documentaries, technical specifications produced by states, institutions, service providers, as well as a multi-site field research in Africa, America and Europe.

To begin with, using a socio-historical approach, the paper points out the origin and evolution of the famous "wheelchair pictogram" founded in the late 1960s. Note that since then this symbol has gradually been completed by many others. Then, it shows the development of many icons and pictograms all over the world, dedicated to different types of disabilities. Thirdly, it focuses on the situation in France, based on a strong "labelization" policy that aims to promote accessible requirements. In this way, this study shows that pictograms reflect the diversity and range of the targeted population concerned with accessibility. And to finish, we see that slowly, accessibility is not only linked to disability but it is going to concern everyone as part of a universal design approach. It also asserts the transformation of accessibility from a principle strongly based on the fields of architecture and transport to a systemic and ecological principle illustrated by the target to reach "access to all, for all".

From the Wheelchair Pictogram to Worldwide Implementation of Accessibility

Historically, in the field of disability, the story of pictograms began in the 1970s with the famous pictogram of "total accessibility" represented by a wheelchair. Well known as the International Symbol of Access (ISA), created in 1969, this pictogram shows the "need of a symbol to indicate accessible places" reflecting the necessity to make accessibility visible (Groce, 2002). However, this icon is ambiguous, because it refers both to accessibility and to places especially designated for disabled people. So this sign does not only point out what is accessible, but also serves to identify dedicated and reserved spaces. Accessible parking spaces and toilets are where this sign is most commonly used. In any case, this pictogram continues to spread all over the world and becomes very much used (Ben-Moshe & Powell, 2007). However, its meaning and information value, which are rather imprecise and unclear, can be confusing (Saillant & Fougeyrollas, 2007).

[1] As highlighted by Ila Gupta: "The term symbols are used here to mean both symbols and pictograms. Although these two elements function similarly, they are quite different in origin. Symbols are abstract or geometric forms, which are associated with an idea. Pictograms, by contrast, are based on recognizable objects closely associated with the idea they communicate". "Public Signage System to Combat Problems of Illiteracy and Multilingualism". *The Journal of International Social Research*, volume 1/4 summer 2008, p. 271.

Indeed, the pictogram representing a person in a wheelchair is quite inappropriate to indicate accessibility for different categories of disabilities, each of which require their own set of conditions that will render the environment accessible (see Figure 1). Having been over-used and misused, a French report underlines that "it lost its credibility and real meaning" (Gagneux, 1999). Since then, many other pictograms dealing with accessibility have spread all over the world. Those pictograms are used in different spaces, countries or cities.

Figure 1. International Symbol of Access.

Internationally, despite its flaws (Jones, 2013), the ISA symbol essentially means wheelchair accessibility to buildings, public roads and transportation. This ISA icon, adopted and popularized internationally by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in January 2004[2] aims "to indicate the way into a building and facilities that are accessible to and useable by all persons whose mobility is restricted, including wheelchair users". Today, the icon is visible in 163 ISO members country and in more than 700 international, regional and national organizations. At the start of the third millennium, with the Accessible Icon Project (AIP), a global way of thinking emerged that aimed at changing the perception of a static wheelchair user to a new dynamic icon which "symbolizes the idea that all people with disabilities can be active and engaged in their lived environment" (Hora, Kinkel, Sienty, & Wyman, 2014).

We notice the need and obligation to put in place specific "signs" or indications for people with disabilities. The goal is to aim for universal access for all and access to everything by everyone. On the legislative side, over the last 30 years, in each country (depending on the degree of democratization of societies and the global consideration of human rights), legislations, governments and non-governmental agencies have involved actions led by organizations of persons with disabilities to implement accessibility policies, to produce standards and to promote pictograms. All of these actions are also based on different international charters, laws, conventions, rules and regulations (see for example the various articles of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) and also continental, regional and national legal sources.

International Overview of Accessibility Symbols

American Implementation

In the United States of America, the first voluntary standard on accessibility was established in 1961. When it became clear that it would not be followed, an accessibility legislation which concerned all federal buildings was passed in 1968. From that date onwards, the standards were generally followed. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 imposes more stringent standards, whether in the whole of social life or in

[2] With the title "Provision for the disabled or handicapped persons" (ISO 7000:2012, reference number 0100).

the specific field of communication regarding what is accessible: “ADA Standards for Accessible Design”. The law indicates the places and facilities where the different symbols of accessibility should be mentioned with all technical information (characters, sizes, visual contrasts, etc.). Thus, for example, when reading ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Building and Facilities (1991), we have information concerning “Raised and Brailled Characters and Pictorial Symbol Signs” and “Finish and Contrast”. The guide also explains that “facilities and elements required to be identified as accessible shall use the international symbol of accessibility”. For instance, telephones “required to have a volume control shall be identified by a sign containing a depiction of a telephone handset with radiating sound waves and text telephones shall be identified by the international TDD symbol” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. International TDD symbol.

In the same way, “in assembly areas where permanently installed assistive listening systems are required, the availability of such systems shall be identified with signage that includes the international symbol of access for hearing loss” (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. International symbol of access for hearing loss.

In Canada, the Accessibility Resource Centre is the main organization working to promote accessibility in all areas, while ensuring the promotion of good practices and universal design principles. There has been an amplification of these initiatives with a stronger legal arsenal since the 1990s. The resource center interacts with other federal departments on the issue of accessibility. The Fund for Access supports community projects that improve accessibility across Canada. This program includes small- and medium-scale projects. Small projects are used to fund actions to improve the accessibility of existing facilities, such as building renovations for example. Different types of projects, all types of organizations (universities, private sector companies, Aboriginal governments) can be supported by the Fund. In many cities across Canada, work done includes accessible parking meters, ramps, lowered sidewalks and accessibility signage in public places. On the other hand, the Canadian Transportation Agency has set up special signage for airports terminals. This is the case for

priority seating signs which show “a person with a service animal, a person using a wheelchair, and person using crutches, and says ‘Priority seating: must be vacated for persons with disabilities’” (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Priority seating pictogram.

This aggressive policy is also carried out in the area of “Barrier-Free Design” with the standards set by the Canadian Standards Association (CAN/CSA B-651-95): symbols of accessibility should be posted in all public places and should match the different types of disabilities. In Quebec, the RBQ (*Régie du Bâtiment du Québec*) created in 1992, is responsible for the enforcement of standards for buildings without obstacles. The RBQ produces a guide to facilitate understanding of the construction and design standards without obstacles and explains the benefits. As such, there is a tax deduction for renovations or alterations to improve access for people with disabilities. In the Canadian tourism sector, efforts are notable. Kéroul, a non-profit organization, has been offering accessible cultural and touristic activities since 1979, and promoting social participation not only for disabled people (small stature, physical, visual or auditory disabilities) but also for the elderly and people with a functional limitation[3]. For its promoters, accessibility information is both available on a website structured as a data base and in a paper guide named “The Accessible Road”. With this planning tool, tourist can visit 17 regions of Quebec (over 250 accessible attractions) but there are also “more than 1,500 people certified under Kéroul’s Welcoming Ways training program to ensure you are treated hospitably”. The overall goal is to work towards universal accessibility, seeking to implement international standards.

In this perspective, different pictograms have been developed to highlight the various modes of accessibility, for example (see Figures 5-9):

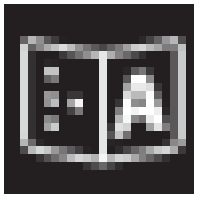

Figure 5. “Menus in Braille and/or large print”.

[3] https://www.larouteaccessible.com.

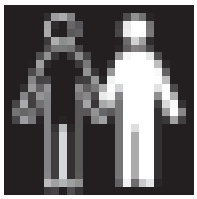

Figure 6. "Tourist and leisure companion sticker. Free entry to the companion of a person with an impairment".

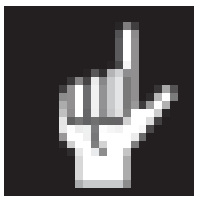

Figure 7. "Quebec sign language".

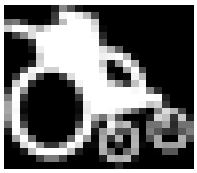

Figure 8. "Wheelchairs available".

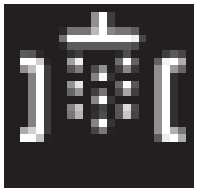

Figure 9. "Adapted shower stalls".

Even if no specific pictogram has been developed, a first Kéroul certification is based on three accessibility criteria "modelled on the *Code de construction du Québec*"[4]:

"Accessible to persons with a physical impairment";

"Partially accessible to persons with a physical impairment";

"Services to persons with a visual impairment".

[4] https://www.keroul.qc.ca/en/criterias.html.

This previous certification evolves, as shown with the icons below, towards 3 levels of motor accessibility (accessible, partially accessible, and non-accessible) and 3 others which inform the availability of equipment specifically adapted for people with visual impairments, people with hearing impairments, and neurodivergent person. According to Kéroul website, around 2,500 sites are certified.

In 2017, Kéroul has developed a pilot project with the city of Victoria in Quebec, leading to a 5 levels of accessibility certification named destination for all. This program starts with a diagnostic of services and equipment (transportation, accommodation, shops, restaurants...) present in a defined area. It continues with an action plan to enhance accessibility, building a global accessible touristic offer. In 2025, 4 other towns in Quebec are engaged in the destination for all process.

As for South and Central America, in Argentina the federal legislative arsenal and the National Accessibility Plan promote accessibility to buildings, public roads, open spaces and residential houses. In Law No. 24.314 entitled "Accessibility for Persons with Reduced Mobility" (April 8, 1994), several articles recommend the use of the international symbols of accessibility and pictograms respecting the IRAM standard (*Instituto de Racionalización de Materiales*). This includes parking (standard IRAM 3722) or sound systems for buildings open to the public (standard IRAM 3723) (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Argentinian pictograms of accessibility.

In Brazil, National Law No. 10.098 of 2004 requires that all public buildings should be accessible (Miranda, Pinto, Olmos, 2014). By Legislative Decree No. 186 of 2008, the Brazilian authorities approved the United Nations Convention of 2006. With the organization of international events (World Football Cup in 2012 and Olympic/Paralympic Games in 2016), Brazil has strengthened its standards and signage of accessibility. Accessibility manuals and guides are produced by the Brazilian Technical Standards (Associação Brasileira de Normas Técnicas—ABNT) and Brazilian Tourism Association Board (Embratur) (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Brazilian pictogram of accessibility.

In Mexico, there is a National Program for the Accessibility of public buildings. An official standard of accessibility has been approved and a National Program for Development and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities was implemented between 2014 and 2018. The Directorate of Standards (DGN) ensures the implementation of the national standardization system, and the completion of the metrology and conformity assessments metrology.

African Perspective

In Sub-Saharan Africa, implantation of accessibility symbols is low despite the existence of national laws on disability, the signing of the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by almost all African countries and the existence of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa (Article 10 deals with Accessibility). This is due to several reasons. The first reason is economic and political, linked to the cyclical or endemic poverty of inhabitants in these countries and the wide economic disparities between rich and poor in each country. Using the Human Development Index (HDI) to analyze the situation, African countries are mostly rated within the "Low human development" category (UNDP, 2014). Such countries with a low HDI level cannot invest and develop disability programs or policies: "weak State and none efficient actions". Most of the countries ranked at the bottom of the HDI ranking in 2014 (156th to 188th). All this is happening within a context of permanently instable societies since their independence in the 1950s, series of civil wars and economic crises, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1990s (driven by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which bruised people), and widening gaps between rich and poor. From the ancient times to the present, there has been a transition from subsistence societies to societies of institutionalized poverty. In these circumstances, the most vulnerable are left behind. The second reason is more structural: in Africa, the social treatment of disability is primarily community-based and less structured by governments and actions from non-governmental organizations. The social treatment of disabilities is essentially founded on communitarian rehabilitation: sociopathy involves social therapy (F. Laplantine). Ancestral African beliefs portray a global and globalizing society in which every individual act contributes to the totality (linking visible and invisible world): it is a society that does not see any solitary outcome in the acts of individuals. Every activity is meaningful only if it is geared towards the wellbeing of the group, the community. When an impairment is acknowledged, even if it is perceived as a curse, the principle of irrefutable community solidarity is applied by the family, the group and the membership lineage. By this way, there is a lack of global involvement of disability organizations and governments which impacts the social use and implementation of pictograms. However, in major cities, from Dakar to Kinshasa, here and there, in small doses, signage based on the ISA can be found (see Figures 12-13).

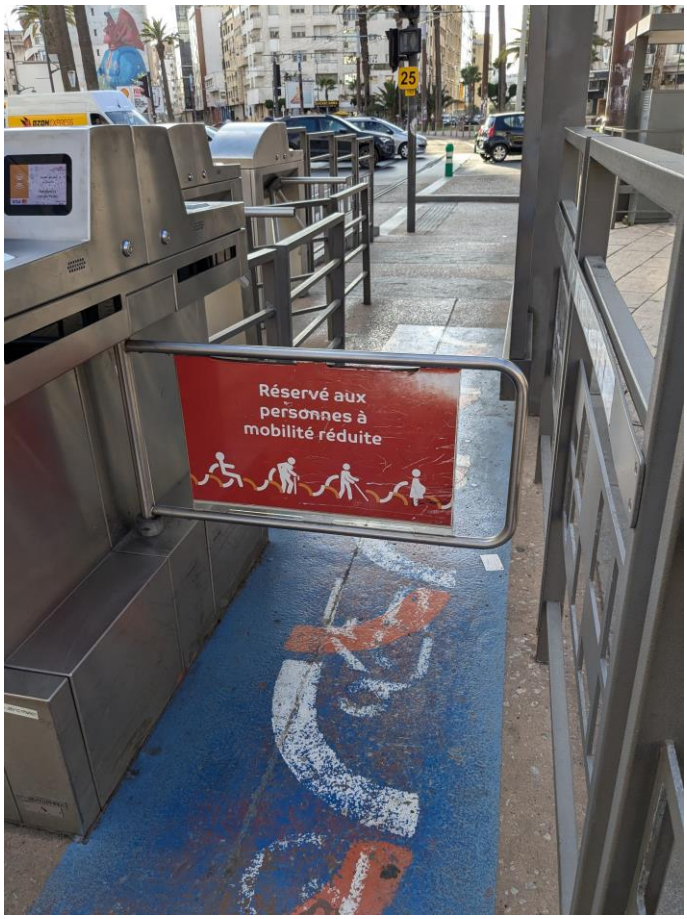

Figure 12. Accessibility pictograms for the tramway in Casablanca, Morocco (Lomo, 2024).

Figure 13. Wheelchair pictogram representing accessibility at a rehabilitation center for children in Dakar, Senegal (Lomo, 2010).

Only South Africa, the second largest economy of the continent, offers an aggressive accessibility policy. This can be explained by the leadership of post-apartheid legislation founded by the constitutional law of 1996 and specifically article 9 defending equality and "global" non-discrimination: "The state may not unfairly

discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex (…) social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability (…), belief, culture, language and birth". Thus, a concrete policy of "barrier-free design" has been developed. This is enforced by strong organizations of disabled people (like the National Council for Persons with Physical Disabilities in South Africa or Disabled People South Africa), the organization of international sporting events (2010 FIFA World Cup, several football CAF Africa Cup of Nations) and the touristic attractions within the country. Last but not least, in South Africa, the positive image of Oscar Pistorius' athletic achievements transformed the perception of people with disabilities. To finish, other African countries are gradually making efforts, such as Ghana, Gambia, Senegal, and Uganda. In Ghana, in 2006, parliament implemented the "Persons with Disability Act" which promotes inclusion and accessibility. In Kampala, the capital, the Uganda National Action on Physical Disability set up a National Accessibility Audit Team in 2010.

Asian Focus

According to UNESCO and the WHO, 60% of disabled people in the world live in the Asia-Pacific region. By the end of 2011, this corresponded to 400 million people. Despite three decades devoted to Disabled Persons (1993-2002, 2003-2012 and 2013-2022)[5], inclusion remains very low. There is a gap between laws and their practical application, but we can highlight positive aspects: most Asian countries have made universal design a principle of action, even if there are still disparities between rural and urban cities. In 2012, 72% of the 36 countries in the Asia-Pacific region had implemented accessibility standards for the built environment and public transportation (ISO, standard 7001)[6]. This implies the use of pictograms and appropriate signage.

In Japan, a strong legislative arsenal refers to disabilities and accessibility in different fields: welfare, school, public housing and buildings, transportation, sports and physical activities, etc. In all major Japanese cities (Tokyo, Kyoto, Yokohama, Hiroshima, etc.), the authorities try to implement the principles of main laws, including those of 1994 for buildings and the environment, 2000 for the promotion of public transport and mobility of people with disabilities and 2006 which aims to "build a universal society where all people, including the elderly and disabled live comfortably". For example, both of Tokyo airports (Haneda and Narita) as well as main train stations display adapted signage (visual, auditory, and Braille) (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Pictogram, Priority Seat, Japan (Lomo, 2014).

According to the World Report on Disability 2011[7] (p. 177), India is "creating an environment for all". With the Disabilities Act of 1995, emphasis is put on non-discrimination and on accessibility in daily life. For

[5] Penny Price, Yutaka Takamine, "The Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons 1993-2002: What Have We Learned?". *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2003, pp. 115-127.
[6] ISO 7001—Graphical symbols—Public information symbols.
[7] https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182.

example, Article 44 concerns the transport sector and Article 45 specifies that "Governments and the local authorities shall (…) provide for devising appropriate symbols of disability". This is what the laws on accessibility of the built environment and multisectoral campaigns have been aiming at since the late 1990s[8].

The "design institute in Ahmedabad now offers an elective course on universal design". Despite the fact that India "had outlined provisions for accessibility" and developed barrier-free policy, disabled people are still facing difficulties. For example "accessibility for people with visual impairments remains a problem, with signage standards not commonly followed due to limited information in accessible user-friendly formats"[9]. Since 2015, according to *Economic Times* of Mumbai, a 5-year program "that involves retrofitting buildings, framing accessibility standards for new buildings and transport and auditing private companies" is being developed.

According to Handicap International and the China Statistical Yearbook 2015, the country has over 85 million people living with disabilities[10]. Despite legislation that seems to protect the people[11], "a majority of them live in poverty (National Survey on Disability, 2006): the average annual income of people with disabilities is currently 50% lower than the annual income of other Chinese citizens. (…) In addition, four out of five people who need a mobility aid (wheelchair, crutches, splints, etc.) cannot afford it". We must emphasize that the 2008 law fosters a barrier-free policy that is gradually implemented in the construction of buildings and in transportation: "In public service institutions and public places, information in voice notice, text signs, sign language, or Braille as well as prioritized services and auxiliary aids shall be made available to persons with disabilities" (Article 55)[12].

In the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, the legislation promotes barrier-free environments and the importance of accessibility that "facilitates inclusion and participation, providing people with independence and the means to pursue an active social and economic life"[13]. For institutions defending the interests of people with disabilities, it is important that accessibility respects the dignity of people. That explains why the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) established in 1996 emphasizes the codification process "by providing exact descriptive measurements, size and dimensions to be incorporated into building laws and regulations as well as design manuals and guidelines relating to accessibility". In this perspective, the development of signs and specific services is essential to facilitate the daily lives of persons with disabilities (PWDs) as outlined in the 1995 Disability Discrimination Ordinance. Thus, in public transport there is a major concern for PWDs. In the main stations of the Metropolitan Railway (MTR), human, technological, audio and visual aids (using pictograms)

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[8] Anand Venkatesh, David Maunder and Joanne Sentinella, "Accessibility for All; A Case Study of Pune City in India". Retrieved from http://www.transport-links.org/transport_links/filearea/publications/1_835_PA4059-04.pdf; Ilia Gupta, "Public Signage System to Combat Problem of Illiteracy and Multilingualism". *The Journal of International Social Research*, volume 1/4 Summer 2008, pp. 268-278.

[9] *World Report on Disability* (2011), WHO-World Bank, p. 177.

[10] Handicap International—Info Fédérale—Fiche pays Chine—2015; Xiaoying Zheng, Gong Chen, Xinming Song, Jufen Liu, Lijing Yan, Wei Du, Lihua Pang, Lei Zhang, Jilei Wu, Bingzi Zhang & Jun Zhang, "Twenty-year trends in the prevalence of disability in China". *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2011; 89: 788-797. doi: 10.2471/BLT.11.089730.

[11] Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities "adopted at the 17th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress on December 28th, 1990, and revised at the 2nd Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People's Congress on April 24th, 2008". Read "Chapter 7 Accessible Environment: Articles 52, 53, 54, 55, 56 and 57".

[12] Article 57: "The State shall encourage and support the research and development of accessible auxiliary equipment and transport facilities".

[13] http://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/GraphicsFolder/ShowContent.aspx?ItemID=9054.

have been implemented[14] (see Figures 15-16).

Figure 15. "Wheelchair parking space inside MTR train compartment"[15].

Figure 16. "Bi-directional wide gate at MTR station"[16].

European Perspective

Within the European Union, since the 1959 partial framework agreement of the Council of Europe and the ratification by the European Union in 2010-2011 of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, numerous laws, charters, and directives have been put in place to promote the integration and social participation of PWDs. For example, Article 26 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which came into force in 2009 with the Treaty of Lisbon, recognizes "the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration, and participation in the life of the community".

Figure 17. Pictograms, regional train, Naples, Italy (Lomo, 2024).

In 2010, a European Disability Strategy (2010-2020) adopted by the EU took into account the experience of the Disability Action Plan (2004-2010). Among their prioritized objectives, one objective related to accessibility is to "make goods and services accessible to people with disabilities and promote the market of

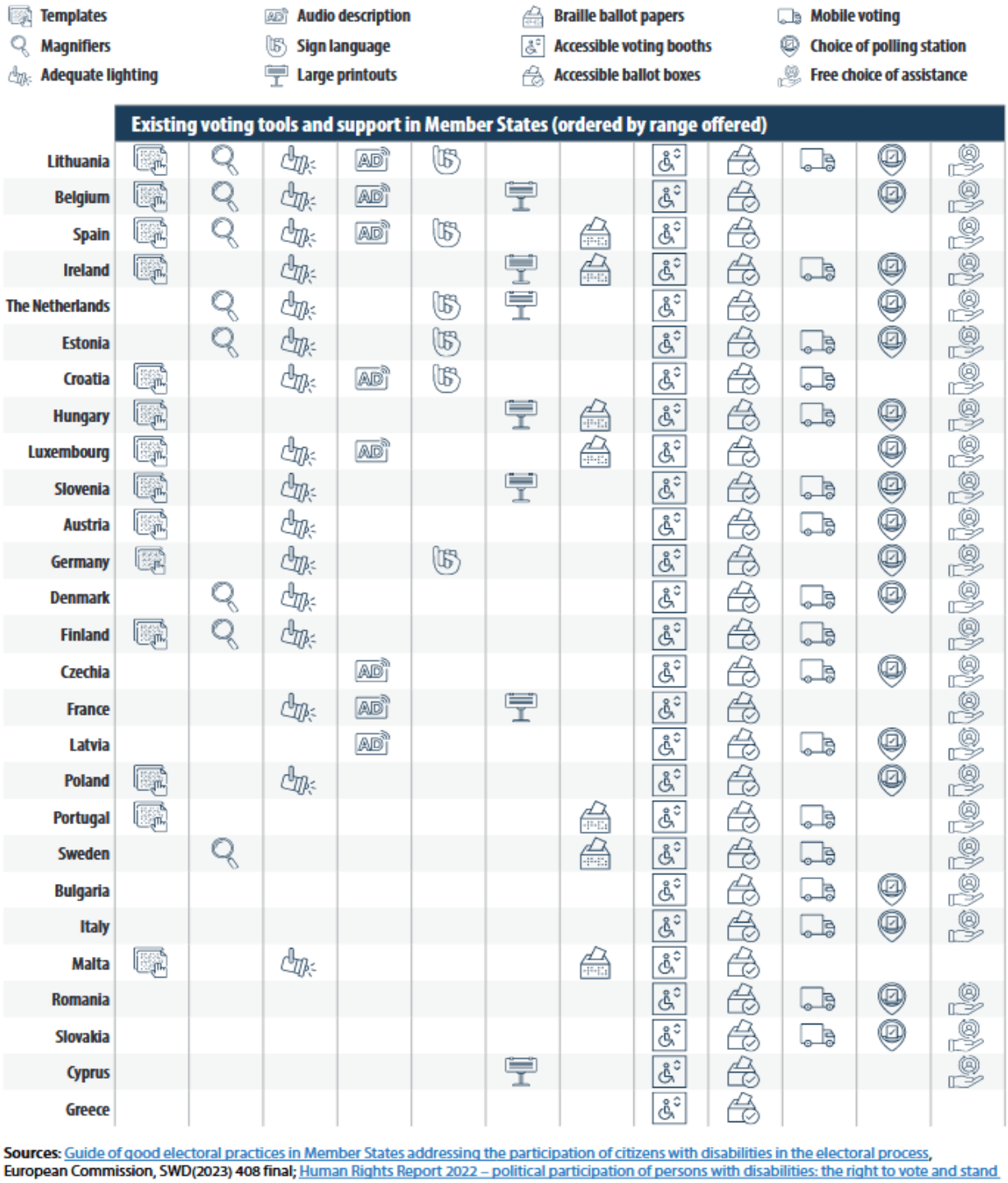
[14] 2005 edition of "A Guide to Public Transport for People with Disabilities", http://www.td.gov.hk/mini_site/people_with_disabilities/.mtr.html.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

assistive devices". Thereafter, in 2011, the European Accessibility Act was created, striving "to improve the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services by removing barriers created by divergent legislation". The European Accessibility Act includes three annexes, one of which focuses on information and services meeting accessibility requirements[17]. This annex specifies that "the service provider shall include the information assessing how the service meets the accessibility requirements in the general terms and conditions, or equivalent document. The information shall describe the applicable requirements and cover, as far as relevant for the assessment, the design and the operation of the service". The ten year Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 built on the results of the previous European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 contributes to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It sets out key initiatives around EU rights, independent living and autonomy, non-discrimination equal opportunities. On the field, in each country, we noticed the implementation of many different pictograms, icons and labels with different technical certifications and public targets (see Figure 17). The main objective of this 2010-2020 "European Union global strategy" is to create a "barrier-free Europe" and to standardize accessibility standards, which vary widely between member states. In terms of awareness-raising, for example, this has resulted in the creation of an annual European award for the most accessible cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants (Access City Award), which each year recognizes initiatives in this area.

This text will be extended in 2019 by the adoption by the European Parliament of an "Accessibility Directive" which refers to non-discrimination, equal opportunities, access to goods/services and "improving the integration of people with reduced mobility", and is intended to strengthen "national measures" and produce a coherent framework at European level. In the section on "user interface and functionality design" for digital aspects (particularly websites), the 2019 Directive calls for the implementation of tools that "allow users to enlarge text, zoom in on a specific pictogram, or increase contrast so that people with visual impairments can perceive the information".

As part of this "European Strategy 2021-2030" for people with disabilities, which highlights the fundamental importance of accessibility as a "catalyst for rights, independence, and equality", one important aspect is participation in political life. This is reflected in this 2023 European Union compilation, which includes various pictograms used in elections in member countries.

[17] Annex to the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States as regards the accessibility requirements for products and services.



Source: https://epthinktank.eu/2024/02/26/people-with-disabilities-and-the-european-elections/table-of-pictograms/.

This table shows that the pictograms used in all countries are those for wheelchairs (to indicate the accessibility of voting booths) and those to indicate that ballot boxes are accessible. In almost all countries (except Malta and Romania), people with disabilities can choose their assistance system. There is little use of pictograms for audio description, magnifying glasses, or large print.

The use of these different pictograms shows the slow implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union adopted on December 7, 2000. In this charter, three articles are essential for understanding the interest shown in people with disabilities: Article 20 on "equality before the law"; Article 21 on "non-discrimination"; and Article 26 on "integration of persons with disabilities". The latter article states: "The Union recognizes and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration, and participation in the life of the community".

And finally, as far as Europe is concerned, despite legal and societal advances in the recognition of disabled people, there are still many obstacles to their freedom of movement and autonomy in Europe. One of the most striking examples is the almost non-existent travel chain for the visually impaired in Europe. As David Le Breton points out in his book *La saveur du monde*, "Sight is the sense most constantly called upon in our relationship with the world (...) Relationships with others, travel, the organization of individual and social life, all activities involve sight as a major instance, making the blind an anomaly and an object of anxiety" (2006, p. 61). These limits and brakes on social participation can be condensed into Ralph W. Smith's (1987) triptych of barriers: intrinsic (lack of knowledge, health-related problems, social inefficiency, physical and psychological dependence, etc.), interactive (communication skills, aptitudes and difficulties, etc.), and environmental (attitudinal brakes, architecture, ecological elements, transport and regulatory aspects, etc.). In France, Spain and Italy, the "chain" of social accessibility in Europe is flawed, and societies are inhospitable to the visually impaired, with an absence of roadway improvements, signage, pavement guides or pictograms. Where they do exist, they are very often inappropriate, designed without the input of disabled people, as stipulated in the 1993 Agenda 22 for Local Authorities and Disability, or the 2006 United Nations Convention.

For instance, the Belgian "*indice passe-partout*", created by the non-profit organization GAMAH in 2003, gives information about the accessibility of public buildings divided into 6 categories, each one represented by a pictogram (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Indice passe-partout.

The first three categories concern people with motor impairments such as wheelchair users, wheelchair users with human assistance, and people with difficulty walking or who walk with crutches. Two other categories concern people with visual and hearing impairments, and the last category concerns "vulnerable people" including people with rheumatisms, cardiac problems, asthma, people of small or big stature, people with a mental disability or carrying a heavy load and senior citizens. "*Passe partout*" uses a scale of accessibility to rank each category from zero (not accessible at all) to nine (excellent accessibility). It was abolished in 2010 and was replaced by "*Access-i*" (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Access-i.

Access-i is a new tool created by a federation of 21 associations named "Collectif Accessibilité Wallonie-Bruxelles" (CAWaB) indicating 3 levels of accessibility for buildings and events. The green pictogram indicates places that people can access autonomously, the orange one indicates places that may require temporary human assistance to be accessed, and the grey one symbolizes inaccessibility. In 2014, 20 buildings and 11 events displayed a colored pictogram and were included in the Access-i data base available to people looking for information concerning accessibility. Next to Wallonie, two Flanders accessibility labels exist; the "A label" and the "A+ label" give information about two levels of accessibility (see Figure 20).

Figure 20. "A label" and "A+ label".

The first one indicates buildings "considered to have basic accessibility for visitors with a disability" and where "occasionally, extra effort or a helper may be needed". The second one refers to buildings which "are comfortably and independently accessible for visitors with a disability". It is the same in Switzerland where two icons distinguish "self-autonomy accessibility" from "helped accessibility". The first one is represented by two men, one sitting in a wheelchair and the other standing behind him. The second icon shows a man in a wheelchair (see Figure 21).

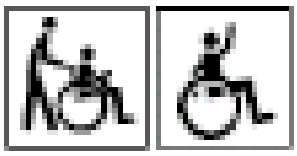


Figure 21. Switzerland icons.

Still in Switzerland, in 2009 *Mobility International Suisse* created the pictogram "*Ferien für alle*" (holidays for all) only used in German-speaking Switzerland, which focuses on tourist activities for disabled people. This label, ending in 2017, was dedicated to catering and hostelling services, travel agencies, tourist information centers and so on.

In northern Europe, the label *God Adgang* (Good Access—The Accessibility Label Scheme) has been used in Denmark since 2004 and in Iceland since 2011. It is granted to one or more than seven categories of accessibility users such as wheelchair users, people with reduced mobility, arm or hand impairments, people

with visual or hearing impairments, people with asthma and allergies, people with learning or reading difficulties. This label does not only concern buildings but also a lot of public places and facilities.

In Germany, the project Tourism for All (2011-2013) gathered the Deutschen Seminar für Tourismus (DSFT) Berlin, user organizations and the tourism industry as well as with the National Coordination Office for Tourism for All to develop "labelling standards for accessible facilities and services, as well as awareness training" in order to "provide reliable Information for travellers with disabilities within Germany across the entire Tourism service chain"[18]. This project relies on an ecological and global perception of accessibility based on the concept of "service chain".

The Eurokey label concerns specific facilities and equipment for disabled people such as toilets, lifts, stair lifts, cloakrooms, etc. It consists of a universal key which opens the equipped facilities in Switzerland and other European countries (Germany, Austria, and Czech Republic) (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. Pro infirmis.

An international quality brand "Village for all" pinpoints the accessibility conditions of tourist structures and facilities for people "with permanent or temporary motor disabilities, sensory limitations, food allergies, elderly people, diabetics, people on dialysis, obese people and families with children".

And to finish, in Luxembourg the label EureWelcome, created in 2010 and supported by the Ministry of Tourism and an organization named Info-Handicap promotes universal design and includes everybody, not only disabled people. The label identifies buildings and equipment that are accessible for all. It asserts that "the quality of accessibility is not only for the comfort of disabled people, but for all visitors in general"[19] (see Figure 23).

Figure 23. Label EureWelcome.

[18] Mapping of skills and training needs to improve accessibility in tourism services in Europe. Case study 19. Barrier-free destinations, Germany. European Commission, March 2014, p. 4.
[19] *LE LABEL EUREWELCOME Approche holistique du tourisme Danielle Breyer*.

The French Case: Towards a National Policy Based on a Labelization Campaign

In France, many trademarks, labels[20] and pictograms have been created and developed since the 1990s; they are linked to local and national initiatives, supported by many organizations, state services, communities and local authorities. Most of those initiatives are based on the creation of accessibility labels, represented by specific pictograms. Those labels aim to inform about accessibility conditions and to guarantee the quality and reliability of information. Indeed, at the end of the 90s, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais province launched a strong certification campaign for accessible tourist equipment supported both by a national organization for people with motor impairments and a regional council. This local label, represented by the wheelchair pictogram has been named "tourism is for all" and given to 120 facilities in 1997 and more than 330 in 1999: "the goal is for everyone to spend more or less time in an attractive area and enjoy accessible accommodations, catering, leisure, natural and cultural discovery services" (Reichhart, 2011).

Meanwhile, other pictograms aim to indicate the level of accessibility of products and services. For example, two pictograms that indicate the level of accessibility were created and used by a tourism operator named Vie Village Famille (VVF)[21] in partnership with the same national organization for people with motor impairments. The first pictogram representing a man in profile sitting in a wheelchair indicates accessibility for an independent wheelchair user and means that accommodations and facilities are completely or partially accessible. The second pictogram, depicting two men, one sitting in a wheelchair and the other standing behind him, indicates accessible accommodations and facilities but only with human assistance. At the same time, in 1992, a French national organization dedicated to people with intellectual impairments[22] created a pictogram[23] which identifies accessible spaces. This pictogram depicts two faces, one profile view in blue and one frontal view in white (see Figure 24). It aims to "indicate spaces, services and products that are accessible or adapted to people with intellectual disabilities or facing spatial-temporal imbalance". In fact, this pictogram is not only meant for people with intellectual impairments but also for "people with mental illness, illiterate or elderly people and others who have social difficulties" (Reichhart, 2011). Reaching and providing accessibility involves two major conditions: human help and assistance and adapted signage. Afterwards, in 2001, this pictogram was included in the French "Tourism and disability mark".

Figure 24. Pictogram "S3A".

[20] According to the French Consumer Code Art. L. 115-27 (L. no. 94-442 of June 8th, 1994), "a label is a certification of a product or a service. It's an activity by which an organization, different from the manufacturer, importer, retailer or service provider, certifies on its demand the conformity of this product or service, controlled and specified in a referential".

[21] The non-profit organization called *Villages Vacances Familles* was created in 1959 and changed its name for *Belambra* in 2008.

[22] Named *Union Nationale des Amis et Parents d'Enfants Inadaptés* (UNAPEI).

[23] Named *Symbole d'Accueil, d'Accompagnement et d'Accessibilité* (S3A).

Another pictogram named “Promenade Confort” (see Figure 25) created by the general council of Savoie proposes to “optimize and facilitate the attendance of strolling zones, which are meant to be open and adapted to everyone (people with special needs or not)”. According to the specification, it embraces families, elderly people, people with baby strollers, and people with reduced mobility requiring assistance. This icon incorporates the idea of “user comfort”.

Figure 25. Comfort stroll.

Many other labels appeared in the field of sport, supported by adapted and mainstream sport federations. As the result of an agreement signed between various sport federations, those labels support accessible conditions focused on organization and progress of sport activities, but also on qualification and skills of the human support. Thus, an agreement signed between the French Handisport Federation and the French Sailing Federation led to a sailing accessibility label entitled “Handi voile”. This label meant for people with motor impairments tries to encourage the practice of sailing among people with disabilities. It is the same for horseback riding; an agreement was signed in 1997 between the French Adapted Sport Federation, the French Handisport Federation, and the French Horseback Riding Federation, giving rise to a label entitled “Centre Handiquestre”. The signatories committed to guaranteeing the adaptation and accessibility of equipment, the quality of the material used and the skills and qualifications of human support. Afterwards, a federal label was created in 2009-2010 in order to promote an accessible horseback riding center which welcomes disabled people.

Meanwhile, the French Handisport Federation developed a certification policy for the outdoors based on the label “*Espace Loisir Handisport*”. Created in 1998, this label concerns outdoor centers that provide quality equipment and services for people with motor impairments. More specifically, this label targets centers which propose high quality hospitality in terms of accommodation and skills of human support for at least 3 outdoors activities. In 2001, the label was completed by guidelines which describe the main recommendations concerning 36 outdoor activities. This label guarantees 3 different levels of accessibility, each represented by a pictogram with one, two or three stars, as shown below (see Figure 26). Nowadays, according to the French Handisport Federation, only two centers—an outdoor center and a mountain refuge—bear the label.

Figure 26. Label “Espace Loisir Handisport”.

For their part, the French Adapted Sport Federation also developed a label and "brings its expertise on sport and mental impairment to help leisure centers better welcome people with mental impairments". This label is meant for social and fair tourism organizations, for touristic accommodations, sport centers providing accessibility for people with mental impairments. We can also mention the French Hiking Federation, that offers adapted walking activities to people with limited physical abilities, entitled Rando Santé® (healthy hiking).

And to finish, we will introduce the Handiplage label (see Figure 27), aimed at identifying levels of accessibility for beaches, water holes and water points (lakes, etc.) for disabled people. Supported by a French organization named Handiplage[24], the label is awarded for "facilities, architectural arrangements and services on the beach and around". The label indicates 4 levels of accessibility: "facilities, security, service, personal support, proximity of shops and environment". In concrete terms, this means that labeled sites include adapted restrooms, a shady area, an adapted path on the sandy beach and provide adapted material such as sea wheelchairs to enable mobility on the sand and in the sea. In 2014, the Handiplage website listed 57 labeled beaches and lakes.

Figure 27. The Handiplage label.

However, the proliferation of pictograms and labels doesn't facilitate the visibility and standardization of accessible conditions (Gagneux, 1999). All those actions are isolated, sporadic and are neither coordinated nor centralized. Boosted by the French State Secretariat for Tourism, the implementation of a national accessibility policy was given to the "Tourism and Disabilities Association". In 2001, a national labelization campaign started. Accessible facilities could then be identified by the mark awarded for at least two out of four categories of disability, each represented by a specific pictogram (intellectual, motor, hearing, and visual impairments)[25]: the "Tourism & Disability" mark (see Figure 28). This label tries to increase visibility and provide more accurate information concerning accessibility to each type of impairment. According to the Tourism and Disabilities Association's statistics, on September 3, 2015, 5,350 facilities were labeled[26], mostly accommodations (2,995).

[24] "Plage" means beach in French.
[25] For a couple of years, this "Tourism & Disability" label is only awarded for at least two impairment categories.
[26] And 1,095 facilities were labeled for 4 categories of impairment, representing 25% of all the labeled facilities.

Figure 28. The national "Tourism & Disability" mark.

Lately, accessibility has not been restricted to an activity or a facility anymore, and refers to a wide defined space where all resources are accessible. In light of this, the label "Destination for all" was created (see Figure 29). It reflects the new concept of an "adapted area"; i.e., it manages to create and promote accessible spaces structured as "small islands where disabled people find an environment and resources adapted to their needs". Bordeaux, in the south west of France, received this label in June 2014 for both motor and intellectual impairments. It is the only city to have been labeled as such to date.

Figure 29. The label "Destination for all".

Moreover, the 2005 French law "on equal rights and opportunities, participation and citizenship of people with disabilities" which seeks to promote an inclusive society, shows its limits in the formulation of things because it does not provide specific guidelines concerning the form of pictograms; everything remains vague. Thus, in Article 41 which is a recovery of Article L. 111-7 of the Code of Construction and Housing, we read: "to facilitate accessibility, there is a need to resort to new communication technologies and adapted signage". In Article 65 (which confirms Article L. 241-3 of the Code of Social Action and Family), the issue of signage is referred to through the allocation of the disability card and the rights it grants to its holders: "This card provides access to priority seating in public transportation, in public spaces and waiting rooms, as well as in institutions and in public events, both for the card holder and the person accompanying him/her. It also gives priority in queues. This provision must be portrayed by a bright, clear display in the places in which this right is exercised".

Each institution that is open to the public will create a pictogram at will. For example, the national railway company (SNCF) will set up its own signage, taking different forms of disabling situations (motor, visual, auditory, mental, pregnancy) (see Figure 30). This signage identifies populations to be prioritized (while

reminding all users of the law) and indicates the existence of trained staff to support them. It should be noted that these pictograms can be found in many public buildings, such as airports (see Figure 31).

Figure 30. SNCF (French railway) signage, Paris (east railway station, Lomo, 2015).

Figure 31. Paris Charles De Gaulle Airport, accessibility pictograms used in France representing different types of disability, in the area reserved for people requiring assistance (Lomo, December 2023).

Conclusions: From Disability to Accessibility

Accessibility shows the evolution of people's perceptions of disabled people, and includes different categories within the field of disability. In fact, we can see that accessibility refers to many types of populations with specific characteristics. For a long time, accessibility was usually and strongly linked to people with motor impairments using wheelchairs. Thus, the pictogram which represents disability and accessibility all over the world shows a man sitting in a wheelchair. Today, the wheelchair pictogram still exists and is evolving, while many other pictograms representing other types of disabilities have appeared: for the most part, worldwide pictograms specifically refer to visual, hearing and mental impairments. Other pictograms show people with a mental illness, people facing cognitive and comprehension difficulties, or people using crutches. In this way,

pictograms reveal the construction of a disability typology which changes according to country and culture. Gradually, a new stage has slowly begun: accessibility embraces "everybody", not only people with disabilities and special needs. This new perception refers to the concept and principle of design for all (DFA) or universal design. The idea is to design "products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Mace, Hardie, & Place, 1991). Today, accessibility is slowly trending towards more quality issues, comfort, and ease of access and use.

However, accessibility also shows the evolution of perceptions of what constitutes the environment. Currently, the environment refers to the social, cultural, economic, political, and physical conditions in which a person lives, while accessibility refers to the architecture including buildings and transportation that need to be transformed. For the most part, the accessible environment indicates ramps, elevators, wide doors, flat floors without steps. But accessibility also includes technological and material innovations: wheelchairs, real-time captioning, assistive listening devices (headsets and neck loops), arm and leg prosthetics, and so on. So the environment can also be technological. Less frequently, accessibility refers to human help and assistance. But, in fact, human interventions are mostly used, and, they are paramount to concretizing accessibility: social work is based on them, but to welcome and to help people with special needs in daily activities, human help is usually needed. Therefore, the environment cannot just come down to architectural arrangements, but must include technological and human factors as well.

Accessibility must be considered as a global and dynamic concept and process. Over time, it has come to include different types of impairments; some places are accessible to blind people or to deaf people, other places are accessible to people in wheelchairs or people with cognitive impairments: accessibility seems segmented according to the type of disability. In practice, this means that some places can be accessible to wheelchair users but not to blind users. Accessibility is not a "total fact" but looks more like a segmented process determined by the transformation of society to different varying degrees of disability.

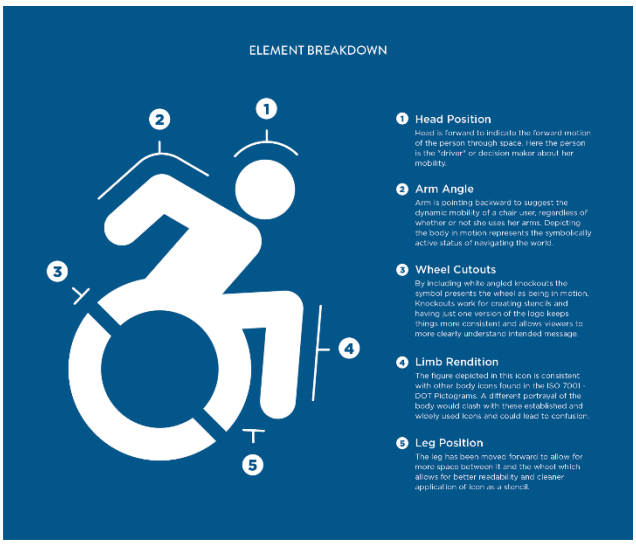
We are also transitioning from binary accessibility—a place is accessible or not—to gradual accessibility, implying a scale of accessibility. Usually, accessibility is used in a binary way to show places and activities which are accessible, in contrast with other places and activities which are not. In practice, accessibility cannot be used in such a binary way. Some labels ('Passe-Partout' and the French 'Espace Loisir Handisport' label) and pictograms point out different degrees of accessibility according to the type and level of impairment: so places and activities can be completely, partially or not accessible at all.

We must highlight the transition from the "isolated" or "singled out" accessibility of a specific place to a "global and systemic accessibility" spread to a whole geographic area. This results in a more dynamic perception of people with disabilities who are considered as moving and living in their environment: they walk on the road, they take the bus or the tube, go to public parks, enter and exit buildings, go to restaurants for lunch or dinner and to bars for drinks. The French mark "*destination pour tous*" ("destination for all") is the perfect illustration of this systemic accessibility. The idea of "everyday life commute chain" may arise as a result of this perception. So accessibility appears as a chain composed of many links. The challenge is to match accessibility facilitators with the type and degree of impairment in a continuous way, without breaking this chain: people must be able to go everywhere and do everything like everybody in this area, whatever their impairment.

Another important point concerns the communication policy of accessibility: the functionality of the pictogram and the importance of giving appropriate information to the greatest number of people, not just professionals. Yet this also highlights the difficulty of information campaigns which range from

communication for all (general, and often effective), to targeted communication (for use by disabled people and their professionals or family caregivers). Thus, as a "pictorial representation" and "condensed piece of information", the pictogram is not an end in itself: it matches the accessibility of the information given, the activity and the target audience.

To finish, pictograms and labels reflect the social perception of accessibility and disability, thereby confirming that accessibility and disability are both socio-cultural productions and processes. Therefore, a critical reading of the standardization efforts internationally conducted by ISO should be carried out. As Jones (2013) pointed out: "Disability is representative of the culture in which it appears (…). Therefore, the ISA ought not be taken for granted. One way the ISA works its semiotic impositions is through othering. (…) This semiotic imposition of 'otherness' as reflective of a wider, ableist, Western culture that promotes its ideologies through mythologies later articulated through ableist language (…)". It is therefore important to adapt the symbols and pictograms to socio-cultural contexts, structures and people who use them. Thus, even if there are standardization efforts, there is no absolute reference[27]; there is no harmonization of accessibility pictograms all over the word. Each country, city or organization promotes and supports its own pictograms. For example, most open and public areas, equipment and services such as buildings, airports, railway stations, museums, parks, etc., have their own specific icons to inform about accessibility. Therefore this lack of harmonization and standardization looks like a cloud in the horizon, even a brake on the development of human mobility, exchange and tourism in a global world. Perhaps, to facilitate the link between accessibility and the citizenship of people with disabilities, it would be necessary to promote the adoption in all countries of the Accessible Icon Project (AIP) pictogram (see Figures 32 & 33).



Figures 32 & 33. Accessible Icon Project, http://accessibleicon.org.

[27] If we take the French case, the standards defined by the French Agency for Standardization (AFNOR), in fact, consist only on rules concerning the content and give some recommendations. But these rules do not constitute any obligations: the representation of the content is left to the free choice (flexibility) of the designer and its art.

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