

Whither universal design ?

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Two words I have been hearing a lot of late have been ‘universal design’, which encompasses other phrases such as ‘accessibility’ and ‘barrier-free environments’, which I have been concerned with especially after I started having to use a wheelchair for most activities needing my moving around a bit. The fact that my extended family includes a large number of architects had ensured that I had heard of the ‘National Institute of Design’ at Ahmedabad as being the Mecca for design of various sorts. Also contributing to this knowledge was the fact that a close family friend for several decades had been the late Dashrath Patel, the first director of design education at NID.

I just heard about a fellow wheelchair-user who applied for and was selected for the Graphic Design course ‘under PH category’. Although the institute recognises the existence of such a ‘PH category’, its designers clearly do not seem to have done so. Going by the description one finds in the blog *vishalsaw.blogspot.in* maintained by Vishal, our would-be designer on a wheel-chair, most of the classrooms as well as the rooms in the boys’ hostel are on the 1st, 2nd or 3rd floors; and the main buildings have no elevators. To be fair to our designers, they apparently do have some ramps on the ground floor, but they seem to have decided that nobody in a wheel-chair would need to go any higher!

Before dashing off a ‘fire-and-brimstone’ article to ToI, I thought I should discreetly check with Vishal about his subsequent experiences with NID, and the even better news was the encouraging reception Vishal has been receiving from the administration; they have already built some ramps in the hostel and campus areas; they have commenced building a room in the hostel for people like Vishal; they have identified a place where a new elevator will be built. As is only fitting, NID should lead by example for others to follow.

Not everybody is as lucky as Vishal. In fact, on the same day (June 11th) that I had first heard about Vishal and NID, I also heard about a visually impaired person studying Computer Science in an Engineering College affiliated to Anna University, Chennai, being told by the University officials that *technical professional courses like engineering are not for visually challenged people* and asked to *go out of the college without spoiling the results of the college*.

Let me conclude with this amusing tidbit, that people like Vishal need to pull their weight to make a reality before long: (I hear he has already started in the right direction and is preparing to start an NGO called ‘Give some space’!)

The Guidelines and Space Standards for Barrier Free Built Environment for Disabled and Elderly People prepared by the Central Public Works Department, Ministry of Urban Affairs and Employment, India, 1998, says, among other things, that:

The scope and responsibilities which have been identified in various organisations will include the following:

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

- 1. There should be a conscious attempt of all educationists to develop young architects/planners with an awareness of creating barrier free environment for physically handicapped.*
- 2. A detail design exercise should be carried out in all schools of Architecture in their curricula as an essential subject of architecture education.*

(Note: I have taken the liberty to edit the italicised lines above, merely to conform to the King’s English.)