

# How to make the environment truly barrier-free for people with disabilities?

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**Country:** Serbia

**Region:** South East Europe

**Languages available:** English (full report available in Albanian)

Making the Outdoors Accessible in Novi Sad, Serbia: An In-depth Analysis of How to Make the Outdoors Truly Barrier-free

## Description of the practice and the process involved

In 2000, a **city board for the reduction of architectural barriers** has been established in Novi Sad with several local DPOs as members. From 2002-2003 on, the **municipality agreed to support** the board and began implementing changes in the city. They chose to begin with the **area around the Serbian National Theatre** as this was one of the parts of the city identified as a **community priority** by DPOs. An additional reason for this priority was that this is one of the **oldest theatres** in former Yugoslavia and as such **totally inaccessible** to people with disabilities despite the fact that it was renovated in 1981. In 2003, the Institute for Urban Construction, the main body responsible for public spaces, **accepted the project and agreed to cover the costs from the city budget**. The project mainly consisted of **building a ramp for the entrance and adding a parking garage behind the theatre**.

## Some of the difficulties encountered

The problem, however, was that, **despite demonstrated willingness** on the part of the local authorities to do something, they **did not make an effort to consult DPOs** during either the planning or implementation process. The DPOs did not have a chance to give their input or to point out what was wrong and the project was finished before they could intervene.

Consequently, the **changes made around the theatre were inappropriate or insufficient**. For instance, the ramp at the entrance of the theatre **cannot be used in bad weather conditions**.

From the accessibility audit, it was made clear that the **lack of accessible outdoor space is due to the inappropriate regulations as well as a lack**

of knowledge on accessibility standards and no multidisciplinary and systematic approach to these issues.

## What are the main points that require attention?

Following this project, a traffic engineer involved in the initiative carried out an accessibility **audit of the outdoor area to detect what remains to be done to fully remove barriers**. His assessment broke the outdoor area into five elements:

### 1. The walkways (sidewalks and pathways) to the theatre

The walkways leading to the theatre are generally **not wide enough** and they face **obstructions by various types of urban furniture** such as bus stations, billboards and kiosks. These are **placed chaotically** making the pathways even **smaller and often dangerous** for blind or visually impaired persons. For wheelchair users, blind or visually impaired, elderly persons and people who use other assistive devices, **movement in such outdoors is limited**.

In addition, the existing pathways to the theatre have **many curbs and steps**. The differences in height along these walkways make movement of a large number of public space users more difficult.

### 2. The crossroads

The greatest problem with the crossroads is that the **kerbs are not cut and cannot be traversed by wheelchair users**.

In addition to this, the islands do not have cut kerbs so a wheelchair user **cannot access them and must wait at the traffic light on the street level**.

Because the **islands are a great obstacle**, many people in wheelchairs go **around them** on the road, **risking their safety**. If wheelchair users choose to go around the traffic islands they must have excellent manoeuvring skills and great speed.

Around the area near the theatre, there are **no acoustic signalizations** for people with visual impairments and **no textured pathways** indicating pedestrian crossings.

Finally, at pedestrian crossings, **the light switches too for people with difficulty in moving to cross the street**.

### 3. The parking area

The parking garage near the theatre was not planned keeping in mind the movement of people in wheelchairs, parents or carers with children in prams, or others using assistive devices. There are **no accessible entrances** to the garage and the **connection to the theatre is completely inaccessible**.

There are parking spaces for people with disabilities marked in yellow but their **dimensions are too narrow**, making it almost impossible for wheelchair users to manoeuvre around.

### 4. Access to public phones

Wheelchair users, children and people of different heights **cannot reach the phone in the phone booths** around the theatre. Furthermore, there is **no**

**Braille or tactile signalisations available** on the phone for people with visual impairments and **no adaptable volume** on the phone for people with hearing impairments.

### **5. The entrance to the theatre**

The ramp built outside of the entrance is 32 metres long with an 8% slope. The problem is that in some places, **the ramp is in fact steeper than 8%**. The **ramp's length and narrowness and a relatively steep slope in places** make it difficult to use without assistance.

## **How could it be improved?**

In conclusion, this assessment clearly points to the **barriers that still persist in the outdoor environment**.

According to local disability advocates, the main challenge with projects like this is the **lack of awareness of the need to consult with various DPOs**, to begin with. **Involving them in the process of planning and construction** would be the next step. This is particularly important for **local development projects** where there is a real opportunity to work in partnership to implement proper accessibility standards.

Among the key gains ensuing from this initiative is the **thorough diagnostic audit that was conducted afterwards** to professionally assess the work of the city board on the removal of architectural barriers.

More importantly, this type of assessment can be used as **a tool for future projects capitalising on lessons learned**, with more in detailed explanation the elements that need to be considered when removing barriers in the outdoors. It shows the importance of a continuity of movement for creating an unbreakable chain of movement.

## **Background and context**



**Full project report:** [Free Movement of People with Disabilities in South East Europe: An inaccessible right?](#) (DMI SEE, 2006)

**Criteria for the good practices:** see page 23 of the full report.

**Recommendations from the good practices:** see pages 91 – 93 of the full report

**Links to further resources:**

[Full text on article 9 – Accessibility](#)

[Full text on article 19 – Living independently and being](#)

[included in the community](#)

[Full text on article 20 – Personal mobility](#)

[Full text on article 26 – Habilitation and rehabilitation](#)

[Full text on article 30 – Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport](#)