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Universal design teaching in architectural education

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Abstract

The social responsibility of the architect is an important tool to enhance accessibility awareness in the society. In this sense, there is a need to develop teaching methods for architecture schools. This paper presents a model for 'universal design' teaching in architecture schools that aims to fulfill the need for aware and responsible architects and for society members who are aware. The paper aims to stimulate debate about universal design teaching in higher education. The paper is anticipated to provide schools and universities with ideas to set up universal design courses and to disseminate the studies in this manner.

1. Introduction

The term 'disability' is in need of a revision and a re-definition. Considering 'diversity' instead of 'disability' may be a good starting point for this revision. Besides, in many other situations like senility, infancy, childhood and pregnancy; social and physical requirements, anthropometrics and strength levels are far more different than the general expectations.

As the effect of physical environment on people is undeniable, physical spaces- when designed for all- have a considerable effect on participation in educational life and workforce. Yet, this requires a modification in 'existing' design understanding towards 'universal' design understanding. The leading tools for this kind of modification in design are; legal regulations and education. When these two areas lack inclusivity, all of the other policy and

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services in other fields become inconclusive. At this point, there is a need to examine approaches and perceptions in the context of 'accessibility, inclusivity and universal design'. Knecht states that (Knecht, 2004); accessibility is a mandate; universal design is a movement. Accessible, adaptable, and visitable environments are covered in the codes, standards, and regulations.

Universal design is a worldwide movement that approaches the design of the environment, products, and communications with the widest range of users in mind. The Kennedy Center Access Office points out that (The John F. Kennedy Center, 2006); accessible design tends to follow the guidelines, which lay out the minimum requirements or standards for making environments accessible. Universal Design looks beyond those minimums to develop environments that are functional and usable by the broadest number of people in the society, whether disabled or not.

In 'universal design' context, architect has an approach that will facilitate the design to consider every user as 'normal'. An architect who internalizes this kind of approach will no longer design the product, and then try to adapt with add-ons, in order to make the design 'accessible'.

The social responsibility of architect appears as an important tool when it comes to create awareness to these issues in the society. Designing the everyday-living environments to be inclusive is one of the fundamental factors for awareness rising in society. However, architects who are aware of their 'social responsibility' are required for this purpose. Sensitivity and awareness of responsibilities cannot be expected to exist in human nature from birth. These qualities can be developed with the right kind of education and approach.

Higher Education institutions are ideal places for rising awareness of professionals and other society members. Universal Design should be taught in all places where the future professionals who will work in shaping the built environment are educated. In The Unesco/Uia Charter for Architectural Education (Unesco/Uia Charter, 2011), it is stated that; it is in the public interest to ensure that architects are able to understand regional characteristics and to give practical expression to the needs, expectations and improvement to the quality of life of individuals, social groups, communities and human settlements. As for the goals; a decent quality of life for all the inhabitants of human settlements and an architecture which is valued as the property and responsibility of everyone are also specified. Also, in the Charter (Unesco/Uia Charter, 2011), it is indicated that among the objectives of architectural education is the awareness of responsibilities toward human, social, cultural, urban, architectural, and environmental values, as well as architectural heritage. According to the charter; architectural education involves the acquisition of understanding of the social context in which built environments are procured, of ergonomic and space requirements and issues of equity and access.

In the conclusion part of the charter it is pointed out that; 'beyond all aesthetic, technical and financial aspects of the professional responsibilities, the major concerns, are the social commitment of the profession, i.e. the awareness of the role and responsibility of the architect in his or her respective society, as well as the improvement of the quality of life through sustainable human settlements.

This paper presents an education model of universal design in architecture that aims to fulfill the need for aware and responsible architects equipped with technical and practical knowledge, and for society members who are aware and sensitive. The model was designed as to reject the medical model and support the social model of disability. As a consequence, access was viewed as an environmental and not a medical issue. The issue was to be seen as one not of disability but of access.

The paper also aims to stimulate debate about universal design and particularly its teaching in higher education. However, with the model presented, the aim is not to define a particular curriculum for an inclusive design course, instead, the aim is to create a framework. The framework is expected to lead to further study, adaptations or alterations of the studies and courses in this field. Another aim of the paper is; to lead a way for universal design courses to be an integrated part of the whole program, not a theoretical add-on course that stands as a result of legal obligation.

2. Universal design and its education in architecture schools

Universal Design is a design philosophy that aims to create an inclusive, sustainable society, where every person can participate to the greatest extent possible (Preiser, Ostroff, 2001). The universal design products benefit the